

PLANET stories

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20c



BLACK SILENCE

by Emmett
McDowell

BENEATH THE RED WORLD'S CRUST

A GRIPPING NOVEL OF A STRANGE UNDERGROUND

by ERIK FENNEL

also GARSON - WALTON - GILMOUR

PLANET STORIES



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PS's Feature Flash

ERIK FENNEL first hit us with the highly original *Atavism*, in the Spring Issue, but he's given us further honeys—such as *Beneath the Red World's Cross*, in this issue—and you'd better keep an eye on him.

During a childhood spent running barefoot around Hawaii I developed prehensile toes, and ever since have had to listen to cracks about Darwin's theory being reversible. My wife, Eve, and our dachsbund, Liliith, hold long and earnest conversations about my shortcomings. The dog insists I must have been an anti-social problem child.

I wasn't. But, oh, I was an inventive little devil! Once I built a gadget intended to scare birds out of the garden, a propeller that swung little metal weights against a large Chinese gong. It was dead calm the afternoon I finished it, so disgustedly I set it under my father's bedroom window and forgot it. The trade winds started at 2:47 A.M. Ouch!

My kid sister kept invading my room so I wired a Model "T" spark coil to the doorknob. Mother touched it first. Ouch again! Then there was a cute little deal involving molten lead and cold water. Double-ouch! The explosion was just short of atomic and I still carry the scars.

Somehow I survived to tramp around half a dozen universities, studying co-eds, engineering, co-eds, journalism, and co-eds, and to fly a termite-riddled Heath Parasol that needed no running lights because the No. 4 cylinder glowed red hot all the time.

I worked here and there as a truckdriver,

newspaper reporter, bootlegger's assistant, cameraman, payroll gun-guard, teletype operator, gas pumper, machinist, and did my share of riding the rods.

Got into structural steel work and loved it, as I seem to have been born without a normal fear of heights. It promised a short life expectancy, but good money and indescribable thrills. I followed the red iron from hell to breakfast, six hundred feet above ground and four hundred feet below, and would be at it yet except that one day there was a very nasty mess. When I got out of the hospital I had a retread job in my skull and no stereoptic vision. End of chapter. 4-F. Readjustment.

I've had the writing bug ever since I can remember—that's why my wife accuses me of arrested development—and I started reading science-fiction in the old *Science and Invention* days.

We've spent the last four years in a house trailer. Eve is developing a frustration complex because she can't rearrange the built-in furniture without using an axe, and I'm still trying to devise a portable basement for my workshop. Perhaps, if I can acquire a couple of used oil wells and cut them into short lengths—

At present I am engaged in some deep auto-hypnotic research into the permutations of the Theory of the Perversity of Inanimate Objects, but if a few more editors will be as astute as Mr. Payne and recognize the sterling merit of my deathless prose I may be able to become a credit to some community or other.

Nichevo.

—ERIK FENNEL.





His sentence ended in a bellow of terror

BENEATH THE RED WORLD'S CRUST

By Erik Fennel

The ancient leviathan heaved mightily in the vast buried cavern, pumping water upward as it had been told. Only hunted Nick Tinker knew that more than just water was coming to the dust-dry surface!

THE HOT, HIGH WHINE scorched past his face and the slug splatted into the eroded grey wall beside him. He should have died then, but his instinctive recoil at feeling something sticky and moist beneath his feet saved him.

Nick Tinker let himself crumple and fall, a trick which during the War days back on Earth had fooled more than one sniper. His left hand slid under his padded jacket toward his gun, but the movement looked as though he were clutching his

chest. His right arm landed outstretched, and he let that hand clutch convulsively at the air. Then he lay very still beneath the unwinking Martian stars while the thin, chilling night wind whispered through the deserted, sand-drifted streets.

The Gravinol was gradually leaving his brain, leaving him feeling fully alive for the first time since he had entered the Special Corps back on Earth at the age of seventeen. He wasn't sure he liked being so completely alive, for it was all he could do to keep his body from cringing under

the expectation of another, better-aimed bullet. The stoic fatalism was gone.

He lay motionless, but his trained senses were busily sorting the eerie impressions of this undead Martian city, picking out a sensation of—someone watching. The feeling localized itself on an oval opening in the hulking black building across the wide street. His gun hand moved imperceptibly and his jacket tore and smoldered as he fired. The recoil slide of the heavy automatic thumped a bruise against his ribs, and even as the explosive bullet flared against the window's edge he was on his feet, zigzagging across the street in a stooping rush to flatten himself against the wall.

He watched the greenish light of a glow-plate seeping from the window, hoping for a glimpse of the sniper's silhouette. The window had been dark before, but his bullet had evidently damaged the screen-creature that covered the window. He knew the screen-creatures well, the living, amorphous and deadly remnants of a Martian civilization that still guarded almost every opening in this abandoned city, rendering it so hazardous for unwary Earthmen.

His groping hands found the narrow entrance to the building and he ducked in. Someone had been there before him, and recently, for the door-creature inside the alcove hung in tattered shreds. One of its torn, limp folds touched his hand as he passed, and with a sudden resurgence of alien life it contracted around his wrist. It tried to unleash its deadly shock, but it was weak and Nick felt only a faint tingle.

He jerked free and went up the inside ramp at a fast but quiet run, his finger ready on the trigger as he neared the top.

Then Nick stopped dead as he saw his target. The girl looked hardly more than a child. Her tattered blouse was pulled aside and she was mopping blindly at a bleeding gash low on one shoulder. The back of her other hand scrubbed at her closed eyes. Her face, framed in uncombed coppery hair, was peppered with grey freckles of rock dust thrown by Nick's explosive bullet.

His boots gritting in the dust, warned her, for she whirled, opening red-rimmed,

watering eyes and snatching up a heavy rifle.

It would have been an easy shot, but Nick did not fire.

HER RIFLE spat once into its silencer as he dived across the room and they went to the floor together. For a minute he was fully occupied in avoiding her teeth and fingernails and shrewdly placed kicks as she fought with the desperation of terror, but at last he got a grip on her hair and clipped her once on the point of the chin.

He spat out a mouthful of acrid dust and tore the remains of her blouse into strips. There was haste and no gentleness in the way he tied her hands and feet. The exertion left him panting in the thin Martian air, so he took a breath of oxygen from his pocket sniffer bottle. Then, wanting to talk to the girl at once, he held the nose-piece to her face.

He knew when she recovered consciousness, for her head twisted suddenly and her teeth sank into his hand. He slapped her face hard, and she lay staring up at him with hatred and terror.

"You're Susan Jones," he declared.

"Murderer!" she spat, her face twisted with loathing.

He followed her glance to his uniform and laughed mirthlessly. "I'm outlawed," he snorted. "The Mec is after me just as hot as they're after you. I disobeyed orders."

She looked at him unbelievably, suspecting some sort of trap. She knew from experience the ruthless resourcefulness of the Martian Exploitation Company.

"You couldn't disobey," she said incredulously. "You couldn't."

"Like hell," he snapped. "I've had no Gravinol for six weeks. Now, where's your father?"

His temper flared as her lips set in a stubborn line. He had no time to lose.

"I'll make you talk, damn you!"

The rush of treads and whine of brakes from the street interrupted him, sending him to the window with gun ready. The screen-creature, still alive with the almost unkillable vitality of those alien things, had dragged itself together to cover the opening again. Nick was careful not to touch it. He peered out, knowing that to the

men climbing from the armored half-track the window would appear dark. The screen-creatures passed light in one direction only. As quietly as possible he closed the sliding panel at the top of the ramp and pushed in the locking plug.

"Remember, get the old man alive. Stun him if necessary, but alive. That's orders from The Man himself." Nick recognized Colonel Hammer's voice. The search must be tightening if the commandant himself took charge of a patrol. They were after Professor Jones and his daughter, but Nick knew that he too would be shot on sight. This time he was with the hunted instead of the hunters.

The girl's face went white as he drew his sheath knife. Then she stared uncomprehendingly as the blade slit her bonds instead of her throat.

"Over the roofs," he whispered. "Which way out?"

She pointed, still uncertain of his intentions.

A big man in a uniform like Nick's own lay sprawled on the floor of the adjoining room, a black circle between his eyes. Nick spared him just one glance. And then he understood the sticky-moist splotch he had encountered in the street. The man with the straggly beard had caused it, bleeding his life away through the gaping rent in his chest.

The girl ignored Nick's ready pistol and ran to the low couch on which the old man reclined. "Dad!" she called softly, shaking his shoulder. "Dad!"

Nick pulled her away and shook his head. Jackson Jones, the first man to reach Mars, was dead.

"Shoot that panel down!" someone yelled from the ramp. "He's in there!"

"Wanna get took by the back-blast?" another voice complained. "Stand back."

"Which way?" Nick asked quietly.

The girl darted to a window and Nick caught his breath as she reached toward the guarding screen-creature. Then he stared for, instead of killing her with its strange powers, the rubbery, no-color, living stuff flowed back into grooves in the edge of the stone. Susan gave one last backward glance at her father's body and scrambled through.

Nick followed nervously and sprawled beside her on a narrow roof ledge. She

touched the screen-creature again and it closed with a silent, oily motion.

"It felt my thoughts," she whispered.

He dragged her to her feet and they ran through the dim starlight, climbing across the uneven roofs, leaping the chasms between buildings in the darkness. Excited yells as the patrol broke through the panel and found the two bodies speeded them onward. The girl held her own, keeping the fast pace Nick set, although a few times he had to help her swing her slender body from a lower roof to a higher one.

"Down!" he barked suddenly. A jet of orange light flung itself upward and outward behind them as someone turned a flame gun on the window through which they had escaped.

"There she is!"

An automatic roared a long burst. From a roof in the opposite direction from where they crouched behind a projecting cornice a *cajora* screamed as it tumbled, astonishingly like a woman in agony.

"You got her, Fred!" someone yelled triumphantly. "Nice shooting!"

Susan shivered, not entirely from the cold.

"What now?" she asked.

"Hide."

THE PAUSE had given Nick time to get his bearings. Searchlights from a dozen cars were lancing through the city, and he knew they had to get under cover before flares flooded the roofs with brilliance. He found the hole in which he had hidden during the day, a spot of deeper blackness beneath an overhanging ledge, and motioned Susan inside.

Instead of following immediately he belly-crawled to the edge of the flat roof. Two armored cars were approaching, still hidden from each other by the curving street, but he could see them both.

Anger at his pursuers burned fiercely inside him, anger and the deep-seated prejudice against purely defensive action that was a legacy from the Special Corps days on Earth.

Smiling grimly, he unslung the rifle he had taken from the girl and sent a single bullet ricocheting harmlessly off the turret of each car.

Then he followed Susan. Even through the massive stone walls of the building

they could hear the whistling roar of two proton cannon—firing at each other. Colonel Hammer would be displeased with the survivors, Nick reflected with grim amusement.

They paused just inside the black hole to let their labored breathing return to normal. It seemed to go right through the building, between inner and outer shells.

"We'd better climb down and hope it goes deep enough," he said at last. The Martian Exploitation Company had a little gadget, outgrowth of the last War on Earth, which could detect the presence of living creatures through a hundred feet of solid rock.

"This passage will join the tunnels," the girl said with quiet confidence. "We can dodge their detectors."

"What tunnels? You been here?" he asked sharply, trying to see her face in the blackness.

"No, but a *vora* made this."

Nick didn't understand, but there was no time for hesitation. They climbed down, into an underworld of blackness and silence. He went first, searching out niches in the almost vertical shaft with his toes, lowering his body, reaching overhead to guide Susan's feet. Once one of them dislodged a sliver of rock that bounced and clicked into the depths for what seemed like minutes. His mind was seething with questions but the treacherous shaft required his full attention.

Only the light gravity of Mars made the climb possible, and even then his muscles were stiff and aching when at last his feet touched a solid floor and they sprawled in what the echoes of their heavy breathing told them was a roughly horizontal tunnel. He estimated they had come at least a mile straight downward, perhaps more.

For a long time they lay without moving in the powder-fine sand that had penetrated even here.

"We've got to steal a ship," he voiced the thought uppermost in his mind. Already he had accepted this girl as a partner in his venture, for she too was a fugitive from the tyranny of the Martian Exploitation Company.

Her body jerked suddenly at his words, and then he had to fumble for her in the darkness and shake her with brutal in-

sistence until her hysterical laughter stopped.

"Just steal a ship!" she gasped finally, her voice still unsteady. "Dad and I tried for a year, ever since the Exploiters came and wrecked our *Trailblazer*. And now they've killed him!" She began to sob, but this time in sadness rather than hysteria.

Nick was frantic for the missing fragments of the puzzle, but he knew it would be useless to question her now. She began to shiver in the chill, so he removed his torn jacket and slipped it around her naked shoulders. After a while she sobbed herself to sleep, too exhausted and grief-stricken to care any more what happened to her.

Nick dozed too, but the dregs of Gravinol still in his system denied him the release of complete forgetfulness. In disconnected, nightmarish flashes his mind reviewed the chain of events that had made him a hunted outlaw upon an alien planet.

There was a bittersweetness to his thoughts of Earth, a nostalgic homesickness for the planet of great cities and green foliage and free-flowing water it had been before the War—and might some day be again.

And then the War itself. The boyish, unthinking enthusiasm with which he had enlisted in the Special Corps. The new drug, Gravinol, touted by the laboratories of the great Harmon Enterprises as the discovery that would win the War. Twisting, writhing rocket fights high above the atmosphere, pilots of the Corps immersed in hypnotic, Gravinol-induced blind loyalty to the Cause, immune to fatigue and pain and fear.

City after city crumbling to atomic dust. Rocket bases blasted out of existence and no more targets worth bombing. Complex weapons giving way to more primitive ones as industrial systems broke down. The Special Corps transferred from air to ground duty. Crumbling battle lines, disintegration of organized warfare into deadly confusion in which friend and foe were indistinguishable.

PEACE. Peace without victory, without decision. Peace of destruction. Battles dying into scattered skirmishes that eventually died of their own inertia.

Disillusion and disgust. But it was peace.

Realization that Gravinol, hurriedly released upon the world without proper testing, was incompatible with any civilized system and at the same time incurably habit forming. Gravinol outlawed by the reviving New Governments. The few hundred survivors of the Special Corps, Nick among them, roaming the face of Earth in a desperate, frustrating search for the few grams still in existence, ready to commit any crime to ease their torment, clinging with fanatical, drug-inculcated loyalty to a Cause that had died with the War's end, looking endlessly for a new Cause to which to fasten their drug-inflamed energies, shunned and avoided and feared and hated by those persons not in the grip of Gravinol.

The whispered rumor that had led him to that office, miraculously untouched amid the ruins of Chicago. Listening to the young man with the cold eyes—he had never learned his name—as he told of the Jones Drive and the double Cause of protecting Earth and making Mars a fit new world for human colonization.

"And this," the man had said, casually rolling a tiny red pellet of Gravinol across the broad desk into Nick's clutching fingers. "All you want."

Central Camp, the Martian Exploitation Company's base on the red desert, and indoctrination under the thought machines. Plenty of Gravinol, to be had for the asking, and the companionship of other old members of the Corps. Flashing out in a wonderfully responsive fighter rocket to strafe and destroy a skulking Martie or two. Months without unhappiness, without a single emotional response not conditioned by the Gravinol and the thought machines.

Then one night the glow of a spaceship landing far to the East, and Colonel Hammer's orders.

"That ship is not authorized by Headquarters. Bomb it! And you, Tinker, photograph the results. The Man wants proof."

Silvery hull against red sand. Small derrick drilling for the water Nick knew they would never find, for even the Exploiters had failed. A few tents. Men and women and half a dozen children waving excited greetings. Ship and tents

obscured as the bombs detonated. And when the dust cleared—nothing.

Liquidation of the potential independent colony had made no impression at the time, but now in this tunnel far beneath the surface Nick clenched his fists and bit his lip as he thought of the callous brutality of it.

THEN, weeks afterward, that card game quarrel with Jake Alaimo. Patrol the next day, and rockets failing far out over the bleak and deadly desert. Fuel gauges showing full but tanks empty, radio dead, and Alaimo's note on the mechanic's service card.

Starting the impossibly long walk back to base. Eyes tortured by the harsh sunlight. Thirst. Beginnings of the gnawing craving for Gravinol.

Memories of the tortures he had endured brought Nick wide awake in the tunnel, all his muscles tightening momentarily as though to begin the twitching spasm typical of denied Gravinol addiction.

He seemed to remember collapsing in the shadow of a rocky outcropping, and as he had fainted he had known he was dying. He had been so near dead that his eyes remained vacantly open, and in his unconsciousness he had seen—he thought—strange creatures that were tall and green and somehow *thin* in consistency. Like Marties. And there had been darkness and coolness after the blazing heat of the desert. Yes, and even wetness, wetness on arid Mars where all water was tanked in from Earth. He couldn't remember, but something had happened.

Days later a patrol had found him by chance, and back at Central Camp the medical staff had been skillful. But they were human and had therefore overlooked the obvious fact that he had gone three weeks without Gravinol. And for some reason he himself could not understand he had remained silent, battling the recurrent temptation as he recovered. Something—perhaps bodily dehydration, perhaps heat, perhaps the actinic rays of the sun that had turned his skin almost to leather—something out there on the desert had enabled him to evade the death that usually followed deprivation of Gravinol.

One day when he was stronger and the recurring craving had all his nerves screaming, he had called Jake Alaimo out for a barehanded duel and snapped his neck with an edgewise chop of his palm. But when Colonel Hammer had congratulated him he had only felt annoyance. He was beginning to think for himself once more.

II

A SOUND IN THE TUNNEL broke into his reverie, bringing him instantly to the alert. Soft padding footsteps. He drew his gun and aimed at the sound.

"Don't!" Susan's hand dragged his gun down. "It won't hurt us."

"Huh?" Indoctrination had taught that everything that moved upon Mars was hostile, to be killed on sight. The impulse was still strong.

"It's a *cajora*. The Martians keep them as pets," she insisted.

Nick's scalp crawled as the big animal glided through the darkness and its coarse fur made sandpaper sounds against Susan's legs. He had seen the six-legged beasts on the surface, large as Earth tigers.

"*Mel nikko twa Klev,*" Susan said soothingly. "*Mel nikko twa Klev?*"

The creature purred.

Nick kept his gun ready and swung toward the girl. She could feel him tense with suspicion. Indoctrination had impressed upon Nick's mind the story that Jackson Jones and his daughter had turned traitor to Earth, siding in with the dangerous and degenerate Martians.

"What'd you say?" he asked.

"That's Martian." Her answer was matter-of-fact. "I asked him where Klev is."

"Martian?" Nick was astonished. "Have they a real language? Then they're really intelligent?" He had suspected but hadn't known.

"Of course," she whispered. "Ssh! You're disturbing the *cajora*."

"What's Klev? What do you want?"

"He's a Martian. My friend," she answered, and talked to the *cajora* again as though it were a dog or cat.

"I think he understands," she said after

a little. "Keep your hand on him and follow."

Nick was hesitant, but the only alternative was to remain in the pitch black, musty tunnel.

For hours they shuffled blindly along, their hands meeting in the loose fur of the beast's neck. The tunnel sloped downward, turning right and left so that within minutes Nick was hopelessly lost. Time and again his outstretched fingers, trailing along the wall, encountered the emptiness of side tunnels and branchings, but the *cajora* moved purposefully ahead. Several times Nick tried to talk, to ask the questions which were perplexing him, but each time the girl silenced him.

"You'll distract the *cajora*," she warned.

The animal stopped short as they rounded a turn and saw a glimmer of light ahead.

"They don't like light," she explained. "We'll have to go on alone."

The light came from a cross tunnel, from patches of some glowing substance in the hard, smooth walls. The tunnel was roughly circular in section, large enough for Nick to walk upright despite his height.

He whistled in amazement.

"Who built these?" he asked, for they had come several miles in darkness and now the lighted tunnel stretched away into the distance, a major engineering project.

"The Martians."

"How?"

"With their *voras*."

He wanted to ask her to explain, but she was examining some markings on the walls, combinations of triangles and curved lines that were obviously writing. She seemed to understand them, and Nick began to understand now how she and her father had evaded the Mec patrols so long. The leaders of the Martian Exploitation Company did not even suspect the existence of this extensive underground labyrinth.

"We're a long way from Klev's home," the girl declared. "The faster we get there the better."

"Why? What's the danger? The Mecs won't follow us down here?"

"Martians."

"Huh? I thought you were friends with them."

She shook her head sadly.

"Only a few now. The rest have grown to hate us. Come on."

They had covered several more miles when they were stopped. Susan's faint gasp sent Nick's hand automatically to his holster and he looked up to see three Martians emerging from a side tunnel just ahead.

He stared. They were the first living Martians he had seen at really close range, and the bodies of those hunted down by the patrols had always been as crumpled and collapsed as spiders caught in the flame of a blowtorch.

THEY were slightly taller than humans, with great glowing eyes in their bulging heads and thin, many-fingered arms that reached almost to the knee joints of their stubby legs. Their noses were almost flat and their mouths too small, and their heads were topped by erect crests of skinlike material. Two of them were a dull greenish color, but the third, evidently the leader, had a marked bluish tinge to his face. All three wore shapeless brown clothing.

The three made no threatening move at first, but training and the habit of self-preservation were still strong in Nick. He raised his gun.

Before he could fire something uncoiled itself from the shoulders of the leading Martian and flapped down the tunnel like an ugly, distorted bat. It knocked him off balance as it struck his head and shoulders and clung there, heavy and warm and *alive*. Numbness raced through his body wherever it touched. His muscles refused to respond when he tried to squeeze the trigger and his struggles only brought part of the thing around his throat in a powerful, strangling grip.

Susan called out something in the same language she had used to the *cajora* and took the pistol from his helpless fingers. But to his dismay she did not raise it.

The Martian made a chirping, almost inaudible sound and the thing relaxed its throttling grasp. Feeling began to return to Nick's arms. He could feel tiny pulsations running through the boneless, rub-

bery mass that still clung tightly to his shoulders.

Susan had made no move to help him. Now she cringed back at the look on his face, a look that spelled murder. He reached for her, but instantly his arms fell limp and numb again as the Martian chirped.

"You sold me out to these—these," he gritted. "You slimy little doublecrosser!"

One of the Martians interrupted, directing a sharp, chirping question at Sue.

She looked down at the jacket she wore, Nick's uniform jacket, and shook her head negatively.

The Martian made an angry gesture, and under Nick's baleful stare she unfastened the garment and dropped it. Equipment in the pockets clanked against the stone floor. The girl blushed beneath the dirt that covered her face.

The blue-complexioned Martian scooped up the discarded jacket with one long arm, and meekly Susan extended the pistol as he spoke again. The Martian held it against his waist, and immediately what Nick had assumed to be part of his clothing formed a pouch around it. The clothing was *alive* too, he realized.

The three aliens watched them through bulging eyes and conferred in a series of chirps and clicks.

"What are they saying?" Nick demanded, a bit confused by the turn events were taking. They weren't treating the girl in too friendly a fashion.

"That you're an Exploiter, and because of that damned jacket that I joined the Exploiters too. If only we could have reached Klev first!"

She broke into the Martians' discussion. "*Mel nikko ne cho ke twa Klev.*"

The Martians focused their attention on her, their voices taking on a note of uncertainty. She spoke to the bluish one at length, and at last he shook his head dubiously, making sweeping gestures to indicate movement.

"We'd better go," Susan said dully.

"Just where do you stand with these things?" Nick asked anxiously as they walked. It was the most urgent question of the moment.

"I don't quite know any more." Her voice betrayed her uncertainty. "They liked Dad and me at first, and when we

came back from Earth the second time many of them even came out into the sunlight to meet us. But then the Exploiters came. It was only because they blasted the *Trailblazer* and opened fire on Dad and me too that the Martians didn't kill us right then."

"Then they weren't hostile at first? Weren't they plotting a war on Earth?"

"Of course not." Her tone was scathing. "They were just friendly and sick and dispirited and dying. They couldn't even live on Earth."

"Then why did your father organize the Mec?"

Susan halted in mid-stride and her stinging two-handed slaps left angry marks across his face.

"Say anything like that again and I'll scratch your eyes out!" she spat.

"But your father—"

"He did not!" she snapped. "What he told Gerald Harmon was—"

"Harmon?"

One of the Martians clucked impatiently, and motioned them to move along.

Nick recognized the name. Gerald Harmon was the ruler of Earth's greatest industrial combine, Harmon Enterprises. From his factories had come the War's most deadly weapons, and Gravinol had been developed in his laboratories. A finger in every pie and a profit for every finger had always been the Harmon method.

"Harmon told Dad he'd send out colonists as soon as things could be arranged in an orderly manner and another ship built, and he persuaded Dad to keep it secret that we had reached Mars on our first flight. Harmon had backed Dad's work, so Dad trusted him in spite of everything people said. And people were right. When his first ship came . . . that cold-blooded murderer—"

She sobbed, unable to continue.

ANOTHER piece of the puzzle clicked into place in Nick's brain. During the last months of the War when governments were merely hunted groups of men blasted out of one underground shelter after another, when armies went on killing because there was no one to tell them to stop, when work and comfort and productive effort and all the normalities of life had vanished in the dust of ruined

cities, the great masses of people who wished only to live out their lives in peace had at last learned their lesson. At last it had been thoroughly beaten into their skulls that wars were the inevitable price of over-organization, of allowing a few individuals—whether politicians or industrialists or the priests of hatred-creeds made little difference—to assume unlimited power over the fates of others. The people had learned, and they were bitterly determined it should not happen again. It was because of this lesson that the unthinkingly obedient survivors of the Special Corps had been so cordially hated and feared. The age of the overlords, of the few exploiters and many exploited, was to be finished.

On Earth.

Harmon had seen the trend. And he had been shrewd enough to combine the possibilities of the secret Jones Drive and the Gravinol-addicted survivors of the Corps for the foundation of a new and more completely dominated empire as his domain on Earth crumbled.

On Mars.

And perhaps, some day when he had gathered sufficient power, once again on Earth.

Often around the barracks of Central Camp the Mecs had speculated on the identity of The Man, the mysterious and unapproachable top link in the chain of command. Now Nick Tinker knew the whole story.

"My God!" he said.

Susan's shoulders sagged. "We're through, and the Martians are finished too. And sooner or later he'll manage to wreck the New Governments also."

"Damn it, we're still alive!" Nick exploded. "There's still a chance."

She smiled weakly and brushed at her tears.

Twice they passed side tunnels, and at a third opening turned in at a Martian's gesture. A short passage opened into a series of three rooms.

Nick looked around. The glow-plates in the ceiling were the same as those in the abandoned surface cities, but far brighter. The first room was furnished with a single broad couch and three peculiar objects he decided were chairs. There were no shelves or cupboards, but niches had

been cut into the smooth stone walls at irregular intervals.

The second room was completely bare, giving the impression that furnishings had been recently removed.

The bluefaced Martian emitted a series of chirps, and at once the creature around Nick's shoulders pulsated, uncoiled and fell to the floor with a dull thump. Nick jumped aside in distaste as it collected itself into a flattened ball and rolled toward the doorway. There it changed shape again, flowing into a slot in the door frame.

"He says the *varlu* will kill us if we try to escape," Susan translated the Martian's chirpings.

Nick decided that if there were any other possible escape route he would not try the doorway.

"*Mel nikko ne cho twa Klev?*" Susan asked again.

The Martians conferred, and finally the bluish one made a gesture of reluctant assent. All three withdrew.

"Just who is this Klev?" Nick demanded. "Why did old Blueface get so bothered whenever you mentioned him?"

"He's an old, old Martian," Susan explained. "He was dying of the Plague when Dad's experiments saved him. He remained our friend even when most of the others turned against us because of the Exploiters."

"Who's Blueface?"

"That's Merlo. He has the Plague and will die soon, just as the Martian who lived here must have died recently."

"*Voras? Plague? What's it all about?*" Nick sank into one of the chairs, suddenly conscious of fatigue. Despite the light gravity the human body tired rapidly in the thin atmosphere of Mars.

"The Martians lived on the surface long ago, in those cities that are still there," Susan explained. "Dad studied them a long while and said they're partly like plants, but with blocked electronic and electrostatic charges in their systems that even he didn't pretend to understand."

"We learned all this bit by bit. Metals have always been scarce on Mars, so the Martians concentrated on biological engineering instead of mechanics, breeding special creatures to fit their needs. Those are *voras*, their living tools and servants and clothes and weapons. That *varlu* is just a

specialized *vora*. They respond to thought waves and Martians can control them from quite some distance. Klev taught us a little about them, but human thought waves are of a different pattern and I have to actually touch them. Like that screen-*vora* back in the city."

"Can you—?" Nick interrupted.

SUSAN shook her head. "No. *Varlus* answer only to their owners, and even another Martian couldn't pass that one without Merlo's consent.

"Seven or eight centuries ago," she continued. "A spaceship crashed on Mars. Dad believed it came from clear outside this solar system. All the creatures inside were dead when the Martians reached the crumpled hull.

"It brought the Plague. Shortly afterward Martians began to turn blue and shrivel and die. For a while they thought water had something to do with the disease, so they developed huge water-*voras* that could tunnel through solid rock and pump water, and they drained all the surface water down into caverns deep inside the planet. But still the infection spread.

"Finally they discovered that sunlight and the Plague were connected, so they abandoned the surface cities and had their *voras* carve out this great system of tunnels. The plan worked, somewhat. Darkness stopped the spread of the disease.

"But Martians are partly plants. Without sunlight they die just as surely as though killed by the Plague. So for the last several hundred years they have barely existed in a precarious balance between the Plague and sunlight starvation.

"Nick, they're a doomed race. In the year Dad and I've been here we have seen only two Martian children."

"But Klev?"

"Yeast. Just plain yeast. I'd brought one package in the Trailblazer, for cooking. But there is no more yeast on Mars."

"About the water?" Nick asked. "How come your father didn't tell Harmon about that? Colonel Hammer had us drilling all over the planet."

"Luck," Susan replied seriously. "We didn't know where it was ourselves until after we came back from Earth, after we learned more of their language."

"But all our drilling," Nick protested. "Surely at least one—"

"Twice, at least. But each time the water-*voras* pumped it to other caves. Martians don't drink, but they saw, the Exploiters shipping water clear from Earth and realized its importance. We, and they, hoped the Exploiters would eventually give up and leave. Oh, if only Dad had told Harmon that Mars was completely arid!"

Nick got up and prowled restlessly around the room.

"Are they going to starve us?" he asked petulantly. His emergency rations were in his jacket, which Merlo had kept.

"Oh, no." Susan realized she was hungry too. "There's food here."

She led him into the back room, where a series of shelves were carved into the walls. Each shelf was covered with disc-shaped, fungoid-looking growths.

"When they turn pink like this they're ready to eat," she explained.

Nick found them tasteless and unsatisfying. She saw his grimace.

"Dad and I lived on them ever since the Exploiters came," she declared.

"No wonder you're thin," he retorted ungraciously, chewing on the pulpy mass.

It was only at his remark that she realized her face and hands were grimy and her clothing totally inadequate. She blushed.

"Don't stare at me like that!" she snapped.

Nick found the queer faucet-like arrangement in one corner.

"Water!" he said, gulping thirstily.

They both drank and washed, cleaning their skins of the powder-fine sand that could work its way into the pores and cause a tormenting rash.

"What were you and your father doing on the surface when you tried to scrag me?" he asked without rancor. He had been shot at so often in his short life that he bore no ill feelings. It was a normal incident.

"Dad was desperate. He was going to get an Exploiter's uniform and try to sneak in and steal the supply ship. But poor Dad wouldn't shoot from ambush and that Exploiter got his gun out as he died."

"Oh!" Nick was astounded and some-

what puzzled by the quixotic idealism of the scientist. A gunman with Gravinol-speeded reactions was no joke, and Nick, trained to kill in the most efficient manner possible, would have fired from ambush without hesitation.

They sat for a while, each immersed in his own thoughts. Nick tried to lay multiple plans for whatever might happen, but his thoughts grew blurred and fuzzy. He threw himself down upon the couch.

"Let's sleep," he said. "There's nothing we can do now, and we'd better be in shape when things do start popping."

"Well!" Susan gasped. He showed no intention of giving her the single bed. Evidently he had never heard of chivalry.

"Are you coming to sleep or not?" he demanded in irritation.

She considered carefully, and at last lay down as far away from him as possible. The chairs were uncomfortable and the stone floor was cold.

As she settled herself a brown roll at the foot of the couch unfolded and flowed up over them like a cover. For a moment Nick threshed, remembering the *varlu*, but when it did not squeeze or numb him he quieted.

"Another *vora*?" he asked, still uneasy.

Susan nodded.

For a minute or two he squirmed restlessly, but the *vora* was warm, with a surprising fleecy texture. Then he was sound asleep. The girl lay awake a minute longer, revising her estimate of his age as his face relaxed and lost its tense, hawklike look.

III

HE WOKE TO INSTANT ALERTNESS as Susan's fingers encountered the bruise his pistol had left on his ribs.

"Klev is here," she said.

He sat up, and as he did so the living blanket rolled back. Both shivered in the sudden chill.

Two Martians stood in the doorway, with Merlo in the lead. The greenish face of the other was seamed and wrinkled, and the crest atop his head was shrunken and tattered at the edges. He walked with a stoop, his movements slow and deliberate. Under his arm he carried a bundle of Earth clothing.

"Klev," Susan called. "*Tec qua hala mo.*"

Klev raised one hand in greeting and spoke to Merlo. The blue-faced one answered in surly fashion and chirped to his waiting *varlu*. Klev entered.

Susan noticed Nick shivering and said something to Klev, who returned to the doorway and spoke once more to Merlo. The blue-faced Martian produced Nick's jacket with obvious reluctance.

Quickly Nick ran his hands through the pockets. The oxygen sniffer bottle, half empty now, and the kit of emergency rations were still there, but everything which could conceivably be used as a weapon had been removed. He had only the knife at his belt. He started to don the jacket, but the girl stopped him with a quick gesture.

"Rip off the insignia first," she urged.

Nick saw the point, and sat in one of the peculiar chairs cutting out the stitches while Klev and Susan talked. Merlo stayed in the hallway, beyond the *varlu*, watching and listening.

At first the Martian asked brief questions and Susan answered in his chirping, twittering language. Nick could see Klev's bulging eyes turn toward him now and then, and would have given much to understand the thoughts in that alien brain.

Without understanding a word of the conversation he knew when Susan told of her father's death by the break in her voice. Klev looked at him angrily for a moment, until she shook her head and continued her explanations.

Then Klev talked, while Susan grew more and more agitated with each sentence. Finally Nick could stand it no longer.

"What's he saying?" he interrupted.

"Oh, Nick," she said unhappily. "Representatives of all eleven of the underground cities are gathering now to plan a mass attack on the Exploiters' camp."

"But they haven't ever fought back. They can't hope to—"

"They haven't always hidden underground like rabbits," she corrected. "Once they were a proud race, and even though the Plague and lack of sunlight have left them weakened and barely alive some of that old spirit remains."

"But they haven't any proper weapons,

and they'll all be killed, and that's just what the Exploiters want. And, Nick, Merlo is going to take us before the Council for trial. He's the leader of the group that wants to fight, to make one last attempt to kill all Earthmen on Mars."

"What will the Council do?"

"Klev doesn't know. They have their own special laws but he isn't sure how they will interpret them. He's against the attack."

Klev spoke again, gesturing toward Nick.

"What's he saying now?"

She translated hesitantly. "He says I shouldn't have brought you down here. He can't seem to understand that you've left the Exploiters."

"Damn it, tell him it wasn't your idea."

"Useless. We came together."

"But the Council—"

THE prospect of being tried by a council of these alien creatures was more terrifying to Nick than any combat. In a fight one at least had a chance to influence the outcome.

"Ask the old one if there's any way to escape," he demanded. "Hell, we can't just sit here and take whatever Blueface dishes out."

She spoke softly to Klev, and the ancient Martian shook his head regretfully.

"Then we've got to wait?"

"I'm afraid so. But Klev says he will speak to the Council, and try to get others to speak for us too."

"But you, Sue. You didn't—"

"I'm an Earth woman," she sighed. "Most of them think now that all Earth people are like those Gravinol-doped killers."

Her mention of the drug brought the old craving once more into Nick's thoughts, but this time not too strongly. Resolutely he put it aside.

"Dad and I are to blame," the girl lamented. "If we'd broadcast our story when we returned to Earth instead of making a private report to that Harmon monster, all this could never have happened."

The situation looked hopeless, but Nick felt no self-pity. He had been trained as a fighter in an environment in which fighters were inevitably killed. But for

the first time since childhood he felt shame. Shame that because of him and his kind this girl had lost even her uncertain refuge.

Klev rose, patted Susan's shoulder with a long-fingered hand, and walked to the doorway where Merlo waited.

"He says he'll see if he can find anyone else to speak for us," she translated his farewell.

She took the bundle of clothing Klev had brought and went into the back room. A few minutes later he heard her sobbing and glanced through the archway. She was holding up a pair of ragged brown coveralls much too large for her slender form, the clothes her father had left behind when he made his last trip to the surface.

He grew restless under the enforced inactivity and at last moved experimentally toward the doorway. The *varlu* allowed him to approach within a few feet, and then Nick jumped back just in time to avoid a rubbery tentacle that lashed out at him. A vague hope of escape died as he realized the superhuman speed of which the creature was capable.

Sue was silent and withdrawn the rest of the day. Several times her grey eyes filled with tears, but each time she brushed them away before they overflowed.

And then the waiting ended. This time Merlo was accompanied by half a dozen other Martians who stationed themselves in the tunnel as guards. Merlo touched his *varlu*. It contracted about his hand and the Martian lifted it to his shoulders, where it flattened out and draped itself like a short cloak.

"He says we should follow him," Susan translated his chirps.

Once during their short walk Nick hesitated and looked back as though planning a break, but the ominous fluttering of half a dozen *varlus* told him escape was impossible for the present.

AN ANGRY buzzing filled the vaulted room and fully a hundred Martians turned to stare as the humans were led into the council chamber. Merlo motioned them to the center and addressed an ancient Martian who occupied a dais at the far end. The presiding Martian answered at length, as though Merlo were a person

of consequence, and then Merlo launched into his speech.

He turned now and again to address various sections of the assembly, and his voice grew louder and faster as he progressed. The Earthman recognized the sharp, chopping gesture with which he emphasized his points. A gesture of killing, whether on Earth or on Mars. Merlo was demanding their death. At last he paused amid nods of approval and motioned for one side of the room to be cleared.

He waited dramatically as Martians moved out of the way. Then from a pouch at his waist he drew Nick's pistol, raised it with a clumsy motion, and fired one shot against the blank wall. The sharp bark of the propelling charge and the roar of the explosive bullet blended in a thunderous concussion. Martians leaped to their feet with cries of rage, and even Susan Jones cupped her hands over tingling ears.

Merlo waited for the uproar to subside. Then, pointing at Nick and Susan, he concluded with a threatening shout.

Immediately another Martian leaped up and began to speak, also in an angry manner.

"Damn it, you green-skinned monstrosities," Nick bellowed in English. "Leave the girl out of this! Can't you see she's been trying to help you?"

Half a hundred *varlus* stirred uneasily on Martian shoulders as the assembly stared uncomprehendingly.

Nick turned to Susan.

"Translate what I said," he snapped.

She shook her head. "No use. But where's Klev?"

Klev came through the doorway just then, hurrying as fast as his age would permit. Quietly he moved toward a vacant seat, and at once the chairs around it were empty too, Martians moving away as he advanced. They seemed to regard him with distrust, distrust and fear.

He rose and spoke, the pleading note in his voice evident even to Nick. The others had been heard in silence, but time and again Klev was interrupted by shouts of disapproval.

"He's speaking for us and at the same time warning against a mass attack on Central Camp," Susan whispered.

"They don't seem to go for his ideas," Nick commented.

At last Klev finished, and even as he sat down a dozen Martians were shouting angry protests. Merlo was foremost among them.

The presiding Martian asked a question.

Klev replied shortly and turned in his seat to watch the doorway. The excited conversation of the assembly rose from a mutter to a babble.

After a short wait another Martian hurried in and took the floor.

His address was more pantomime than speech. He raised both arms as though holding a rifle and squinted through imaginary sights. Slowly he lowered the invisible weapon and stooped as though picking up a small object from the floor.

Nick gripped Susan's arm in sudden astonishment.

"Hell," he said. "That's the one who got me outlawed by the Mecs.

The Martian made a throwing gesture and waved his arms as though warning someone to go away. Then he pointed at Nick.

"I spotted him while I was on ground patrol in the city," Nick told Susan. "Caught him on a roof. But hell, I couldn't shoot him, not while he just stood there looking helpless and sort of pitiful, with his hands hanging at his sides. He didn't even try to run. Not without Gravinol, I couldn't. I chunked a rock at him to scare him away."

"But—?"

"Standing orders for all Mecs to kill anything that moves, particularly Marties, you know. Some lieutenant with field glasses saw me deliberately let that one get away and radioed in that something was wrong. Within two minutes Colonel Hammer had the orders out to get me."

The Martian finished, and this time the reaction of the crowd did not indicate any unanimous emotion. One after another rose to his feet and commented, Susan's head turning as she tried to follow each excited outburst.

At last silence settled over the room as the Martian on the dias raised both arms for silence.

"You and the man," he spoke directly to Susan and she translated for Nick's

benefit, "will not be executed. That is according to the laws of Mars.

"You will both be taken to the surface and released there. Do not return, under penalty of death."

A disguised death sentence, but as effective as though they were to be executed on the spot. Nick's hand streaked toward his knife, but before he could draw it half a dozen *varlus* had him numb and helpless. His last impression as they were led away was the smugly satisfied expression on Merlo's bluish face.

IV

IT TOOK THEIR EYES A MINUTE to adjust to the slanting afternoon sunlight into which they were thrust. The rocky backbone of the planet pierced the red sands here, and through the ages the wind-driven sand had carved the outcropping into caves and spires and overhanging ledges and gaunt pockmarked cliffs, all piled together in wildest confusion. They were left in a rough, rocky bowl deep within the outcropping, hidden from the desert by the surrounding cliffs and pinnacles.

The tunnel mouth was merely a black hole, almost indistinguishable from a multitude of shadowed cavities where sand-laden storm winds had found soft spots in the stone.

Cautiously Nick climbed the slanting wall of the bowl.

"Come here, Sue," he called.

Shading their eyes against the red glare of the wasteland they could discern the hangars and barracks of Central Camp a few miles to the south, and beyond that the hulking, dark mass of the ancient Martian city. But it was Central Camp, its buildings and landing ground and the thin metallic ribbon of the barrier, that held their attention.

"No ship," Susan said. The small rocket hangars could not possibly hide the bulk of a spacecraft.

"The supply freighter just left. Not another scheduled for eight weeks."

"What'll we do?" she asked plaintively.

Nick's answer was noncommittal. "First we get out of this sun."

"Then we stay here?" Her knowledge of the Martians was useless in this arid waste,

and she turned to him for leadership. "What else?" he replied with a shrug. "We'd scorch on the desert even if the Mec rocket patrols didn't pick us off. Here we can last for a while at least, and hope for a break."

Darkness fell without twilight, and almost at once the air took on a penetrating chill. They found refuge in a sheltered crevice, huddling close together for warmth while the rising wind howled a dirge of desolation and the two moons of Mars cast wavering shadows. They slept fitfully and uneasily.

A PEBBLE clinked against a stone. Nick's eyes opened in the orange dawn. A silhouette that was not human moved against the luminous sky and his grip tightened on his knife as he slid noiselessly out of the crevice.

He recognized Klev just in time. Then he stared and sheathed his knife again, for the Martian presented a picture of battered dejection. His face was shapeless, one eye almost closed by a pinkish swelling, and the crest atop his head was even more tattered than before. His shoulders seemed smaller, and Nick saw they were bare. His *varlu* was gone, and the other *voras* of his clothing were shredded and damaged.

At a rising hum from the south he made frantic gestures and the old Martian stumbled toward the hidden crevice, dragging one leg as though it were partially paralyzed.

Nick saw he could never reach shelter before the patrol rocket sighted him. He leaped forward, seized the Martian in both arms and carried him bodily the few steps to the protecting nook, dropping him and throwing himself flat just as the silvery hull appeared over the rim of the bowl. Susan awakened with a startled outcry but had the presence of mind to remain motionless until the rocket had roared away.

"We'll have to watch out for them constantly," Nick warned. "They'll gun or bomb anything that moves."

"Klev, what happened to you?" Susan asked anxiously as she saw the Martian's condition.

He grimaced as he tried to sit up, his injuries not helped by Nick's necessarily

rough treatment. Then he chirped a few sentences.

"Oh Klev! You shouldn't have done it," she protested in English.

"What is it?" Nick wanted to know.

"The Council voted to attack Central Camp, using their *voras* as weapons. Klev tried to warn them it would be suicide, and he and Merlo fought. Merlo is much younger, and although he has the Plague he's still strong. Then he accused Klev of treachery because he was friendly to us, and had him exiled to the surface too."

The injured, beaten Martian touched Sue's hand and chirped a few words as though in apology.

"When will they attack?" Nick asked.

"Nineteen days from now," Susan translated the Martian's answer.

"How?"

"They'll come up through the tunnels into the old city, spread out, and attack the camp at night."

Nick looked thoughtful.

"What difference does it make?" Susan asked. "They'll all be killed on the charged barrier, if the proton cannon let them get that far. They can't win."

"Maybe," was all Nick could reply.

The heat grew unbearable, and several times during the long morning they were forced to change position to remain in the shade. They moved as little as possible, saving their energy and conserving their precious body water by avoiding any exertion that would bring on sweating.

Only Klev remained in the sun, his alien body gratefully soaking up the harsh rays. Occasionally he moved, each motion bringing a half suppressed mew of pain to his lips.

"How bad?" Nick asked.

Susan shook her head.

"He says he will be all right, but that swelling Merlo's *varlu* made near his eye looks serious. His leg is badly hurt, and he's terribly old, Nick."

By midafternoon their faces were flushed and dry, and the powder-fine sand itched intolerably where it had sifted into their clothing. Susan napped, but stirred restlessly and muttered of water.

"Sue," Nick asked when she opened her eyes. "Is Klev in shape to talk sense?"

The Martian saw his glance and chirped affirmatively, then clamped his thin lips

to smother an exclamation of anguish.

"Ask him if the passage through which they brought us up connects with any of the water caverns you mentioned."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Might as well be killed by the Martians as die of thirst. Ask him."

Sue talked to the Martian, who nodded and began to trace a complicated diagram in the sand with one finger, hesitating before adding each line as though resurrecting old and almost forgotten memories.

NICK watched a while. Then a patrol rocket whistled over heading south, and after it had passed he climbed once more to the rim of the bowl. He watched it settle inside the barrier with a flare of braking jets and a cloud of red dust. And while he watched he thought.

To go below for water was absolutely necessary, but a purely defensive action which could at best only postpone the end. And nothing had ever been won by defensive action alone. Pure defense always meant eventual defeat.

He thought some more, then scrambled hurriedly down the rocks just as Klev completed the diagram.

"Sue," he panted, still out of breath. "Those creatures bred to tunnel and pump water. Are they still alive? Is there any way to make them work? Ask him!"

Sue hesitated, not understanding.

"Can they pump water up as well as down? Ask him!" Nick barked impatiently.

Suspicion showed in the Martian's manner as Sue made the request.

"He won't answer until he knows what you're planning," she reported. "If the Exploiters found water they'd never leave."

"One of us has to get back to Earth." Nick tried to be as patient as possible. "After everything that happened during the War years you can be damned sure the New Governments would handle Harmon fast and tough—if they knew what he is doing and planning. We need a ship, but when the next supply ship comes out eight weeks from now it will be too late. We've got to get a ship out *ahead of schedule*, and only one thing will do it. Water!"

"But how can you get—?"

"I'm not sure, yet," he admitted. "But its worth a chance. Now ask him again."

The Martian looked doubtful. For a moment his hand hovered over the chart in the sand as though to erase it.

"Give him time," Susan advised.

"It's a gamble," Nick admitted. "But the *voras*—"

"Live almost forever," she responded. "Whether we could make them work for us—"

The sun was almost down before Klev decided, but then he chirped and clicked for a good three hours. The water caves could be reached, he said, but some of the *vora* burrows through which they must crawl were so small it would be impossible to carry him, and his own strength was insufficient. And the distance from the water caves to the surface was too great for him to reach the *water-voras* by thought alone, the usual method.

"You made the screen-*vora* work," Nick reminded Susan.

She was uncertain. "Water-*voras* are different. But I'll try."

The moon shadows were too black to permit them to study Klev's chart during the night. Klev slept, with the patience and resignation only age can bring. Once or twice Sue nodded in Nick's arms, but he remained fully awake, thinking.

In the first light of dawn Martian and Earthman studied the diagram together, but it was already hot when Nick turned his back on the original and reproduced it in another patch of sand. Klev checked it and nodded approval.

"Let's go," Nick said, starting to rise.

Klev restrained him and fumbled in the torn folds of his clothing to produce a glowing sphere the size of a marble. It seemed to be a portable form of the glow-plates with which he was familiar.

"Thanks," he said. "Take it easy until we get back—I hope."

The Martian understood the sense though not the actual words.

Then he and Susan dashed across the small expanse of sun-baked rock and squeezed into the passage.

For a while they followed the tunnel through which they had been ejected, but shortly encountered a branching passage they recognized from Klev's map. It spiraled down, narrower and steeper than

the main tunnel, and soon it too branched. Once more they took the steeper route. The air grew stagnant but cool.

Most of the way they were forced to stoop or crawl, and three times they encountered sections so constricted that they had to stretch out flat and inch tortuously along. Little by little the air grew humid.

At last they came to an almost level passage where they could walk erect, rounded a turn, and their greenish light no longer was reflected by enclosing walls.

"Nick," Sue whispered. Her voice reverberated hollowly, dying away in distant echoes that seemed incredibly loud. Nick paused with hand on knife to see if they had been overheard.

Finally they tiptoed out along a sloping shelf of rock, out into the great cavern. And then the light shielded in Nick's hand gleamed on a sheet of black, still water. At once both were on their knees, scooping up the precious liquid in their hands, drinking their fill.

Satisfied, Nick placed his lips to her ear. "Where are the *voras*?" he breathed.

She pointed to the water.

TOGETHER they piled their clothing on the ledge, hooding the light with Nick's shirt so that only a faint glimmer showed. Then they waded out into the chill, unfathomable blackness of the underground lake, holding hands to steady each other. Nick's scalp was tingling and with every step he half expected his bare feet to encounter something soft and *alive*.

The water deepened rapidly and soon they had to swim. Nick had never had the opportunity to become an expert, so although he tried to be quiet his arms made small splashing sounds as he raised and lowered them, sounds that echoed sibilantly throughout the gigantic chamber. Sue swam close, invisible in the darkness, and he flinched momentarily as a current of water from her hand felt like something living brushing his side. She grasped his hands, pulling his arms through the motions of a breast stroke that would not require lifting them above the surface. He touched her to show he understood.

After that they swam more quietly, keeping together by the faint sounds of each other's breathing and an occasional touch of hands.

Every few minutes they stopped and floated motionless, listening and feeling with every fiber of their bodies.

Sue felt it first, a tiny, almost unnoticeable pulsation in the black water. She touched Nick's wrist, indicating a direction, and swam a few more strokes. The pulsation grew stronger. Nick felt it too, and only an effort of will kept him from thrashing away as tingles of terror oozed along his spine. He felt very naked and helpless and vulnerable as he floated.

Again Sue swam a few strokes and stopped. For a full minute she lay quietly, allowing her breathing to ease. Then there was a faint splash as she dived, and it seemed to Nick as though hours passed while he waited alone in the darkness.

"Psst!" he hissed softly at the sound of her head breaking surface. She rested a while, dived again, and when she came up this time the pulsations were appreciably stronger.

Something below turned and moved uneasily, questioningly, disturbed in its long slumber by their presence.

A third time Susan dived. Nick waited, counting seconds. She did not come up. He waited. And still she did not come up. Panic began to grip him.

He floundered into a clumsy dive and swam downward through the inky fluid. His ears hummed and his chest began to burn, but his groping hands encountered nothing. At last he fought his way dizzily to the surface.

She was just calling him the second time as his head broke water and he gulped a lungful of air.

"Nick!" The word was roaring from the rocks as she heard his splash and in-drawn breath.

"I touched it, Nick! I had to go deep," she panted as she swam toward him. "I think it got my thoughts, just what you told me."

Deep in the black lake something huge and unguessably powerful heaved and stirred, creating wavelets that raced toward shore and filled the cavern with insane, reechoing laughter as they broke against the rocks.

Racing now, without any attempt at silence, Nick and Susan swam toward the reassuring green pinpoint of light that marked the shelving ledge.

The waves were rising, lapping almost to their clothing, as they waded ashore. Without pausing to dry themselves they dressed and dashed up the tunnel.

Halfway to the surface they paused to rest, sitting on the cold, curving floor.

"What was it like?" Nick asked.

In the greenish light he could see her shudder.

"I—I really don't know," she confessed. "It was huge and it had no real shape, but some parts were hard and some weren't."

"Will it do what we want?"

"I—I think so. It was so *different* that I couldn't understand all its reactions."

It was night when they edged out through the narrow opening, but Klev was awake and watching. His jaw dropped in astonishment as Sue told of their journey, of how she had actually touched the *water-vora*.

"Martians can't swim, Nick," she explained.

"How soon?" he wanted to know.

"An hour or two," she said after conferring with Klev. "But he's not sure. This has never happened before in all the history of Mars."

After a while Nick crept up to the rim of the rocky bowl, shivering as the cold, sand-laden wind whipped his exposed face. Both moons were below the horizon, leaving the desert in darkness relieved only by the stars and the lights of Central Camp.

Phobos rose rapidly in the west, throwing long, distorted shadows over the red sands. And as the shadows grew shorter Nick thought he detected something. He rested his eyes and looked again. Yes, it was there, a darker, glimmering patch in a low spot a mile or so to the east.

"Sue," he called excitedly. "It's starting."

Quickly she was beside him, looking where he pointed.

The patch of wet sand and standing water had grown to several hundred yards across when the orange flare of one of the night patrols flashed up from Central Camp. From several miles away the pilot sighted the unusual patch in the desert and swung to investigate.

"Duck!" Nick warned as a flare blossomed into a circle of blinding whiteness.

THREE times the rocket dived and circled the growing lake, and when it left as the last flare died it returned to the field at full throttle. Nick could imagine the pilot's almost incoherent radio reports. Water on Mars! A lake in the desert!

The number of lights in Central Camp doubled while they watched. A gate in the barrier opened and three huge half-tracks roared out with searchlights glaring. They reached the pond, and even from the distance of their hiding place Susan and Nick could see the tiny figures of men as they rushed to the shore, touching the water, kneeling to dip their arms in it, even raising it to their lips.

The green star of Earth rose over the horizon, and then the thing for which Nick had been hoping actually happened.

All the lights of Central Camp went dim as power connections were changed. And then the flare of the great subatomic space beacon began to wink a message, the great beacon that depleted the power resources of the camp so badly that it was to be used only for messages of extreme urgency. But this was urgent indeed. Water on Mars! An hour, two, the coded news flamed into space.

Nick and Susan crept down the slope, bone-chilled from their swindswept watch, to tell the injured Martian what had happened.

"If that doesn't bring a special ship out, then nothing will," Nick exulted.

At dawn a procession of armored cars began to flow between the camp and the lake, and just before noon several hastily improvised tank trucks appeared, loaded and returned. No patrol rockets went out, for it seemed the entire schedule of the camp had been disrupted.

Shortly after noon the lake ceased growing and began to dwindle. Slowly at first, then with increasing rapidity the water vanished into the sand. There was confusion in Central Camp and at the shores of the pool.

By midafternoon it was gone, leaving only an expanse of mud that dried and cracked under the glaring sun.

Klev twittered anxiously at this latest development.

"He says the Martians have discovered what we did, and set the *vora* to pumping the water away again," Susan translated.

"No matter. The ship is on the way by now."

As evening approached Nick wedged a large boulder firmly into the mouth of the tunnel, placed his back against it and announced his intention of sleeping there.

"At least we'll know if they come after us," he said.

Klev nodded approval.

But the Martians made no attempt at reprisal for the humans' interference, as they were too busy preparing their attack on the camp.

Next morning truckloads of drilling equipment rolled out from camp, and soon a dozen rigs were boring through the sand and underlying rock. Floodlights were erected and the drilling went on day and night.

But the space beacon did not flame again with the news that the water had vanished. Power was too precious.

Nick counted the days as he doled out the water from the canteens they had refilled in the underground lake. His concentrated emergency rations, shared with Susan and Klev, gave out at last. The Martian did not drink, but finally the last trickle of water went down Susan's throat and the period of torture began.

Nick slept during the torrid days now, panting and itching and thirst-tormented beneath an overhanging rock, and through the nights lay on the edge of the bowl watching the sky. They did not talk much, for the effort hurt their parched throats.

It seemed a vision born of wishful thinking when at last the distinctive fan-shaped trail of a spaceship showed against the stars, dim at first but steadily growing brighter. And then it was in the upper atmosphere, the scream of the braking jets rising and falling as the pilot jockeyed the throttles. Down it came in a flaming arc, to land amid the beckoning lights of Central Camp.

"What do we do now?" Susan asked.

"Steal it."

"But how?"

Nick shook his head wearily. "Wait for the Martians to attack. Then try to break through."

"But the barrier? We'll be killed too, just like the Martians."

He looked at her sharply.

"I'm going with you, of course."

V

WITH FULL DAYLIGHT THREE half-tracks moved out from beside the grounded spacer to the site of the drilling operations. They paused while a group of men got out to inspect the dry holes and the line of stakes that had been placed to indicate the margins of the vanished lake. Then the cars moved on, scouting the surrounding desert.

The three wheeled together and headed straight for the outcropping, while Nick and Susan crouched low to keep their heads below the skyline. They came on and on until Nick began to have an uneasy suspicion they had been spotted, but at last they turned aside.

"Nick!" Susan's voice was vibrant with hatred. "That man in the turret of the center car is Gerald Harmon himself!"

Nick shielded his eyes and tried to study the tiny figure in the plastic dome, but the distance was too great to distinguish details. He cursed fluently and wished for any sort of power weapon, understanding now why the spaceship had seemed larger and sleeker than the usual freighters. The overlord of the Martian Exploitation Company had come to investigate in person, bringing his own personal cruiser.

Nick tried to rest, falling at last into an uneasy sleep disturbed by dreams of rippling streams and drenching rainstorms. He slept until the rays of the sinking sun crept under the ledge to bring him back to the realization of his arid, deadly surroundings.

But somewhere amid his dreams an idea had been born.

"You can handle a spacer, can't you?" he asked.

"Certainly. You don't think Dad handled the *Trailblazer* alone?"

"Good. There may be a chance for you then. I don't like that blue-faced Merlo at all, but we have to play along with him. And this thing is bigger than any of us as individuals."

"You've seen how the camp is built in a hollow to protect it from the wind?"

"Yes, but—"

"They never thought of floods."

Susan's eyes gleamed as she sensed his idea.

"You mean if the Martians made their water-voras—?"

"A dozen voras and a dozen water caves. The barrier would short out and the Martians could get in. There'd be hell's very own confusion and no lights. You might make it."

"And you?"

"Merlo is a bluefaced, pigheaded, tradition-bound fool, and no general. He'd just beat his men's lives out against the charged barrier without thinking of the only weapon he has that's worth a damn. I'm going down and tell him, right now. The attack is tomorrow night."

Susan's grey eyes searched his face.

"Aren't you a bit confused?" she asked mildly.

"How?" He was annoyed at her implied criticism.

"You are a fighter. I'm not. I speak Martian. You don't."

"They'd kill you, Sue! I can't let—"

"Then tell me, in Martian, just what you'd say to Merlo!"

"But—"

She threw his own words back at him. "This thing is bigger than any one of us. I'm going."

Reluctantly he agreed that her words made sense.

"All right," he sighed. "Tell Klev."

The Martian broke into twittering, remonstrating speech as Susan explained, pointing at himself. Slowly and painfully he climbed to his feet and took a few uncertain steps. But then his injured leg collapsed and he crawled ignominiously back.

"That leaves it to me," Susan declared. "Roll that boulder out of the way."

The old Martian, shamed by his own weakness, sat with shoulders slumped and face hidden in his hands as Susan prepared to leave.

She came to Nick and in an unexpected move threw her arms around him and pulled his face down. For a moment he held her close, their sun-parched, cracked lips clinging together.

"It could have been so lovely," she whispered as she broke away.

She was crying openly as she squeezed into the tunnel. Nick's fingernails dug into his palms as he stared after her, but there was nothing he could do.

The day was long, and without Susan beside him the night was even colder than the others. Once he woke and found his arms reaching out as though to touch her. But the following day, the last lonely day of waiting, was the worst and longest. Once he tested the point of his knife against his thumb. If the plan worked at all, he resolved, he would look for Merlo in the camp even before going after the spaceship. At least there would be revenge.

From time to time Klev looked up from where he lay in the blinding sunlight. There was sympathy on his greenish, distorted face, and although Earthman and Martian had no common language he seemed to understand the depth of Nick's feelings. And Nick in turn pitied this aged Martian who was dying an exile from his own race.

As the shadows lengthened Nick made his few preparations. Strips of cloth from his jacket made a harness to hold the nose-piece of the tiny oxygen bottle, still half full, against his face. No matter what happened he wouldn't need the jacket again. A piece of empty ration tin formed a clip that would hold the button valve open.

DARKNESS came and Nick rose. Klev chirped softly and extended his hand Earth fashion. Nick took it briefly, then turned away and clambered down from the outcropping into the desert.

The lights of Central Camp guided him as he set out. Deliberately he held a slow pace that would not tire him unduly, but his heart was pounding. This was the pay-off.

Everything was normal as Nick drew near. Groups of men moved about under the floodlights. The revolving searchlights atop the guard towers swept remorselessly around the circle of the barrier, occasionally striking the two half-tracks that held secondary patrol inside the charged fence. The ports of the big spaceship squatting on the launching grounds were dark, its polished hull reflecting the unwinking stars.

He was still a quarter mile from the barrier when the first excited yell reached him on the wind. One of the floodlights winked out. Nick quickened his stride as the noise from the camp increased. The

lights showed a darkening patch that stretched from the launching grounds into the barracks area.

The barrier sparked as though some living creature had come into contact with it, and an alert sentry scoured that area with machine gun lead. Again the barrier sparked, hot blue and green stars shooting up in a great fountain.

And then Nick could see the water itself. He ran on toward the northwest border where the terrain was lowest, trying to keep his mind on the desperate business ahead. His spirits lifted slightly as he realized that Susan had reached Merlo. But what had happened to her then? She had still defied the Council.

His feet struck wet sand, then shallow, murky water while he was still a hundred yards from the barrier. He waded on as the water deepened.

Only a few scattered lights still gleamed as he stopped to adjust his improvised diving mask. Evidently the water was reaching the central power plant, but flares arched upward at irregular intervals to shatter the night. During the intervals of brightness Nick froze to immobility.

The gunners in the guard towers were firing at shadows. But no explosive bullets, for which Nick was especially glad as a stream of lead whipped the water nearby. There was a standing order forbidding the use of explosive shells where they might damage the barrier wires.

So far the firing was desultory, bursts coming only when the barrier sparked as the water deepened. Evidently the commander still considered the flood merely a freak of nature.

All at once there was no more ground beneath his feet. Nick began to swim.

A yell of alarm that changed to a shriek of agony cut the air, coming from the southern border of camp. Another. The firing grew suddenly intense, lines of red and yellow tracer whipping out from the towers. A flare exploded overhead to disclose a shadow like a giant bat that swooped heavily across the barrier and fell upon a Mec just inside. The man's automatic rifle roared a futile, unaimed burst as he died. The Martians themselves Nick could not see.

Dazzled by the intermittent glare, he almost swam into the barrier without see-

ing it. Only the barrier itself saved him as the rising water engulfed another wire and the lethal current popped and sparked. With a heave of his shoulders he swung aside and glanced up. Ten or twelve feet of the fence's thirty foot height still projected above the surface.

He floated, tightening his mask until the nosepiece dug into his face. Then he pushed the clip down over the valve, and as the life-giving gas hissed out closed his eyes and let himself sink into the silt-filled, inky water.

Bubbles spurted around the edge of the mask and roared upward past his ears, but he found that by inhaling slowly he could breathe. His feet touched bottom and his legs sank in almost to the knees. The fine, dusty sand of Mars that had lain arid for so many centuries had changed to clinging, sticky mud. He pulled himself free and swam forward anxiously along the bottom.

One outstretched hand found the barrier. He felt the prick of the hooked, knife-edged barbs as they sank through the cloth with which he had wrapped his hands. He advanced the other more cautiously. Here below the surface the killing current of the barrier was dead, shorted away by the dirty water.

He drew himself downward, hand over hand along the closely spaced wires, down to where the barrier met the ground. He probed at the mud, holding himself in place with one hand. Wires. And at full arm's depth in the mud, still wires. He hooked his feet into the fence and dug with both hands, flinging the gooey muck aside in great, swirling gobs until the water grew thick and viscid around him. More strands of wire. He dug more frantically, hanging head down in the hole he had made. And then his clawing fingers encountered the solid rock into which the steel supports of the barrier were anchored. It was impossible to dig under that.

A trickle of muddy water seeped into the mask, stinging the lining of his nose and making him want to sneeze. With an effort he extracted himself from the sticky burrow and clung to the ground level strands until the spasm passed. The hissing tone of the compressed oxygen was perceptibly lower.

GENTLY he grasped one strand with both cloth-wrapped hands, spreading his fingers in an attempt to avoid the barbs. But this was no ordinary barbed wire and the spacing of the evilly sharp, machine-finished prongs was such that one still pressed against each palm. His heavy boots protected his feet as he braced them against the adjoining strand.

He brought his powerful back and leg muscles into play, ignoring the pain that lanced through his hands. The wires gave a fraction of an inch. He pulled again. The wires had been four inches apart; now they were almost six. At the third pull he could feel the barb in his left hand touch bone with a grating rasp, but the wires stretched still further. Again and again he tugged, resting only when he grew dizzy with pain.

And then the oxygen was gone. He had just time to gulp in one last lungful as the hissing died and the bubbles around his face stopped. Once more he heaved at the wires, using every ounce of power his body could muster.

Then, holding his breath, he rolled sideways into the gap he had created. The slackened wires sagged down and the cruel barbs bit into his chest and back and legs.

He winced at the pain as he tore his hands loose from the deeply embedded prongs, then pulled the wires away from his chest and rolled his body further into the opening. The points dug into his chest again while he moved one leg and then the other.

When he knew he could hold his breath only a few seconds more he broke clear with a lurch that left bleeding furrows across his body and floated dizzily toward the surface. One hand whipped the useless, empty oxygen bottle from his face.

He sucked in the thin air of Mars with harsh, rasping, grateful breaths as he broke surface, glancing around to restore his sense of direction. He was inside the barrier.

Seven of the armored cars were lined up along the southern boundary of the camp, the focusing coils on the muzzles of their proton cannon glowing red from continual firing, their powerful lights picking out targets for the gunners. As Nick swam on, one of the cars tried to move forward and struck a soft spot in the

muddy ground. Its light waved wildly, then went out as the car overturned and rolled into the water.

High above the dark water the hull of the spaceship glowed in the starlight. Nick headed straight toward it, sometimes swimming, sometimes floundering through deep, sticky mud that sucked tenaciously at his feet. Even in the darkness and confusion he knew his way, for Central Camp had been his home for many months.

As suddenly as it had appeared the water began to recede, draining into the ground. Nick understood. The barrier had been breached, and Martians were not able to swim. The heavy combat vehicles of the Exploiters were bogged down in the mud, but from the sounds of firing Nick knew that a good many Mecs had gained the safety of the high, unflooded guard towers. With daylight the surviving Martians would be forced to retreat.

There were still many deep pools of water about, and a layer of slippery silt over everything, when his route took him close to the administration building. He edged quietly around the corner just as a wet, bedraggled figure floundered through the mire to the doorway. The figure, outlined for an instant, was human enough, but to Nick it seemed somehow *wrong*. Quickly his mind placed the discrepancy. The man wore a coat instead of the short uniform jacket of the Mec.

Mud sucked noisily at Nick's boots as he followed, but the sound was drowned in a renewed burst of gunfire. Nick smiled grimly as his killer training awoke again under the influence of familiar surroundings.

Harmon was halfway up the stairs, sure of his own safety and pausing to wipe some of the mud from his face, when Nick's knife point penetrated the overlord's expensive suit and jabbed at his back.

"Don't move!" Nick snapped.

VI

HARMON JERKED AND HALF turned, but stopped as the knife prodded harder. Nick's free hand swept around the older, heavier man and snatched his pistol from its holster. He could feel the raised inlay on the frame as he grasped

it. Gold or platinum, he'd be willing to bet, but the gun was no toy. With a practiced hand he thumbed off the safety and slid it into his belt, feeling renewed confidence at being properly armed again.

"On up!" he hissed, his knife jabbing viciously, as the sucking footsteps and muttered cursing of several men sounded close outside.

In the upper hallway a small battery lamp showed Harmon's pasty face and slack jaw. He managed to turn his head far enough for one glance at the muddy, blood-streaked apparition behind him.

"Who are you?" he quavered. "You can't do—"

Swift as a striking snake Nick's opened hand flashed out. The overlord's head rocked at the impact.

"Shut up!" Nick's voice was low and deadly and his captured gun covered the stairway. But the footsteps outside went on past.

"Do you want—" Harmon began, one hand reaching toward his coat pocket.

Nick saw the movement starting. Harmon uttered a squeal of pain as the heavy gun barrel chopped down with bone-crushing force. He moaned and clutched his injured hand while Nick returned the gun to his belt and dipped into the overlord's pocket.

He whistled under his breath as he saw the small metal box, and a feeling of uneasy longing swept through him. Day and night that box had remained on a small table in the lower hallway, presided over by an orderly who opened it to anyone who asked. The Gravinol was given freely to any Mec, but its method of distribution was a clever psychological trick to emphasize the dependence of each individual upon the Martian Exploitation Company.

Automatically he dropped it inside his tattered shirt.

"To your ship, Harmon. Get moving!"

"But you can't—"

"I said move!"

The overlord gasped, more from the indignity than from pain, as Nick's water-soaked boot met his trousers.

"I am The Man!" he tried to bluster.

"I know." Nick's answer was coldly venomous.

It was sheer bad luck that brought Colonel Hammer around the corner of the

building just as Nick prodded his captive out into the sea of mud, and more bad luck that the camp's commander was nervously fingering a night gun.

Nick felt the gun's light beam fall upon him, saw the red sighting spot, and felt a stunning tug at his shoulder just as he threw himself flat. Then Harmon's pistol rocked in his hand and Hammer's body vanished in a shower of coruscating orange sparks.

Groggily Nick pushed himself to a sitting position. He tried to move his arm and found it limp. His right hand explored the injury. It seemed to be a flesh wound.

Harmon! The ship! All at once he recalled his mission. The overlord had vanished in the darkness and there was no time to look for him. The ship came first. His hand moved from the box of Gravinol to his pistol.

THE shining hull lay in a depression blasted into the dry sand by its own landing jets. Water glistened darkly around it now, and against the gleaming metal the open entry port was a circle of blackness. Nick's legs were heavy with clinging mud and weakness as he waded into the pool, and only the knowledge that it was now or never kept him in motion.

His eyes slitted and the gun came up as he glimpsed movement in the water. There it was again, a flash of white with something darker beside it.

"Nick!" a voice screamed. "Don't shoot!"

The cry was too late to stop his trigger finger, but he managed to raise the gun so that the bullet whined off into the darkness.

"Nick!" she screamed again. "It's me!"

Some of the heaviness left his legs as he struggled toward her, and his bullet-torn shoulder and gashed hands no longer seemed to pain so acutely.

But what was that darker shadow beside her? His gun came up again.

"Who's there?" he demanded. The water that was only chest deep on him was neck deep on her, but he could see that she was supporting her companion.

"It's Merlo," she panted.

Nick's lips drew back in a snarl.

"No, Nick! Don't!" she gasped.

THE MARTIAN gained a footing and stood motionless, his head bowed. Nick noticed that one long arm was holding a small package carefully above water.

"Don't kill him!" Sue urged again. "He saved me once tonight."

Doubtfully Nick lowered his gun.

The Martian looked up and twittered briefly.

"He says thank you for his life, and that he was a fool," Susan translated. Nick ignored him.

"Come on," he said impatiently.

The water grew shallower as they plodded toward the ship, until it was only a thin layer over the deep mud.

"What's Blueface got in that package?" Nick asked, still suspiciously keeping the Martian ahead of him.

"Yeast," she answered. "We found some when we raided the kitchen building. Klev was with us then—Merlo had two Martians carry him—he wanted to come."

The kitchen building was on the edge of camp where the fighting had been heaviest. He glanced at her and saw a heavy regulation gun belt dark against her bare white skin. That belt had not been a gift.

"Bad?" he asked.

She nodded silently.

"What happened to Klev?"

During those tortured days of waiting Nick had developed a strange liking for the ancient, uncomplaining Martian.

"A half-track caught us. We had to scatter, and lost Klev in the darkness."

"He's probably been killed by now. No time to look." Nick felt a sense of shame as he said this. But it was true. The ship came first.

He glanced apprehensively to where the rim of one of the moons was peeping over the horizon. Then they were in the shadow of the hull, struggling through the mud beneath its outcurving surface toward the portable metal stairway leading to the port. The stairway was tilted to one side where its wheels had sunk deep into the soft mud, and the steps were slippery with slime. Nick started up, holding his gun ready.

Suddenly a mocking laugh came from the entry port above. "Stay where you are!" a voice said.

"Harmon!" Sue gasped.

The nozzle of a bulky flame gun appeared over the edge, followed by a head. The nozzle swung downward as they clung helpless on the slippery stairway. On the ground below Merlo made some involuntary motion and the weapon swung to include him in its range.

"Any last words?" Harmon mocked.

Susan said something, using extremely nasty words that Nick had never expected to hear from her lips.

"Such a sweet child," Harmon gloated. "And such a pity to break up your tender scene."

Susan kept staring up, and suddenly her arm tightened convulsively around Nick's waist.

Then she was screaming, screaming and sobbing and crying at the top of her lungs.

"Please, please, Mr. Harmon!" she begged. "Don't kill me! I'll tell you everything, all about the water! Only don't shoot me, please!"

Harmon leaned further out the port.

Nick was actually nauseated with disgust.

"Don't!" he snapped at her. "For Pete's sake don't give him that satisfaction!"

Susan ignored him.

"Please, Mr. Harmon! I'm too young to die! I'll tell you everything! Just get me away from this man!"

Harmon's shoulders appeared as he leaned out.

"Tell me now," he ordered. "Where is the—"

His sentence ended in a bellow of terror as a dark shape catapulted down along the polished curve of the hull. Long arms clutched Harmon's beefy neck in a death grip. For a moment two figures struggled and wrestled furiously on the rim of the port.

Then Harmon lost his grip and they fell, missing the tilted stairway by inches. Harmon emitted one choked wail as he whirled through the air with the dark figure still clutching his throat. Mud spattered as they struck, and in a last effort Harmon tripped the trigger of his weapon.

A sheet of flame billowed out, followed by a spreading cloud of steam tinged with the stench of charred flesh. The two hu-

mans clung to the stairway, sickened and gasping for breath.

"Nick, oh Nick!" Susan choked out. "He must have climbed up over the tail fins."

"Who?" Nick was still half stunned.

"Klev." Susan was crying. "It was Klev. I had to hold Harmon's attention and give him a chance."

Nick shook his head to clear it and once more started up the stairway on hands and knees.

A searchlight came on in one of the towers, swept erratically across the camp, flickered across them, moved back and stopped. Nick tried to rush the last few steps, knowing that bullets would follow the light, but his injured arm gave no support.

THEN, amazingly, the beam shifted. He looked down. Merlo had gotten up from where the detonation of the flame gun had tossed him. Still carrying his package of yeast he was splashing through the mud, running with no effort at caution. The searchlight operator, in doubt, followed the moving target.

Seconds seemed like hours and inches like miles, but at last with Susan pushing him from behind Nick tumbled into the airlock. Susan Jones scrambled across his body.

Together they swung against the heavy circular door, and it was then they had their last sight of Merlo.

The Martian paused directly in the light, shifted the small, precious package to one armpit, and clawed hastily at his living clothing.

"My gun!" Nick said. "The one he took from me below."

Merlo fired clumsily and the blue flare of the bullet was low on the guard tower, but the light wavered and swung away for an instant. It swung back, but the Martian had vanished in the darkness. Then it traversed once more to bathe the closing port in its glare. A stream of bullets clanged and clattered against the steel as they wrenched the locking lugs into place.

Nick staggered to the control chair. Automatically his hand reached for the

converter switches and found them on. The converters were already warmed, as though Harmon had been planning a solo get-away in case the battle went badly for his forces. Still only half realizing that it was the similarity to the fighter rockets of the War days that made the spaceship controls seem so familiar, Nick opened the fuel feeds to the main tubes and his hand hovered over the ignitor key.

"Ready?" he asked.

Susan threw herself into the acceleration cushions.

"Blast it!" she urged. "Quick, before they turn a proton cannon on us!"

Nick's finger hit the key and the world went black.

His stomach was twisting in the agonies of acceleration cramps. His shoulder thumped and throbbed, and the gashes the barbs of the barrier had left on his body felt like lines of fire. Some sharp cornered object was wedged between his side and the seat belt, poking at his bruised ribs. Clumsily, his one usable hand lacerated in his struggle with the barrier, he fished it out. His hand failed to grasp it properly and the box of Gravinol slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor.

He stared down at it, and there was longing in his look. In that little box was relief from pain. But other things too were in that box. Slavery, for instance.

He looked a long time, then slowly shook his head.

"Ease off the throttles," Susan spoke. "We're out."

He did so, aiming the cross-hairs at the green star of Earth and coupling in the gyros.

"It'll be hell back there without Gravinol," he reflected aloud. "You'll never know how bad it can be."

Susan brought out the first aid kit and gently wiped the dirt and clotted blood from his wounded shoulder as he slumped in the pilot's seat.

"A few will survive and be cured. The strong ones," she reminded him.

"Ouch! That hurts!" he protested, and sat up suddenly as antiseptic stung in the wound.

"You did, dear," she replied with feminine irrelevance.