

# THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

STORIES

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## NOVELETS

- THE WILD ONES ..... *Tom Godwin* 20  
They'd been welcome and needed once, but they'd served their purpose, and Earth wanted no more heroes on the frontier worlds. Not even men who'd kill in self-defense...
- THE BETTER EGG ..... *Dick Hetschel* 61  
"Harmonized eggs" huh? thought Norman Estes. Only he was an expert on eggs, and he knew that no chicken had laid these prodigies...
- DEATH WISH ..... *Nicholas G. Lordi* 84  
There was one thing that this strange being they called "Pincus" could not do for itself...

## SHORT STORIES

- PRIME COMMANDMENT (illustrated on cover) .....  
..... *Calvin M. Knox* 6  
The two groups agreed on so many things that it was fatal...
- DANGEROUS WEAPON ..... *Donald Franson* 110  
Any intelligent man would tremble at the thought of what might come were it to get out of control...

## FEATURE

- OH, THAT LOST SENSE OF WONDER! .... *Isaac Asimov* 103  
With thanks to Sir William Gilbert's "Yeoman of the Guard".

## DEPARTMENTS

- AUTHOR, AUTHOR! ..... 5  
A brief run-down on some of our contributors.
- THE EDITOR'S PAGE ..... *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 17  
It's a grand word, but what do we mean by "Freedom"?
- INSIDE SCIENCE FICTION ..... *Robert A. Madle* 104  
Reports and Reminiscences from the science fiction world.
- THE LAST WORD ..... *The Readers* 119
- READERS' PREFERENCE COUPON ..... 130  
Clip it out, fill it out, and send it in, if you haven't time for a letter!

Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES

MARIE A. PARK, Asso. Ed.

COVER BY EMSH

DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.

Illustrations by Emsh, Freas, and Murphy

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# Author, Author!

TOM GODWIN will probably be associated for years to come with a fine story that John W. Campbell used for the purposes of illustrating his ideas of science fiction in an article he wrote for *Saturday Review*, in 1956. You remember "The Cold Equations", and we hope you'll remember, "The Wild Ones".

★ DICK HETSCHEL and NICHOLAS G. LORDI have one thing in common, besides their debut in SFS, this issue. Before we'd read their stories, we had never heard of them before. But I think we'll be hearing more from them.

DONALD FRANSON could be found in the "Science Discussions" departments of leading science fiction magazines, back in 1937. His last appearance with us was in a short story on language reform, called, "Comes The Revolution".

★ CALVIN M. KNOX is a great admirer of Robert Silverberg, and seems to follow Bob around in the magazines. Latest news is that Knox expects to follow Silverberg into the pocket-book novels market,

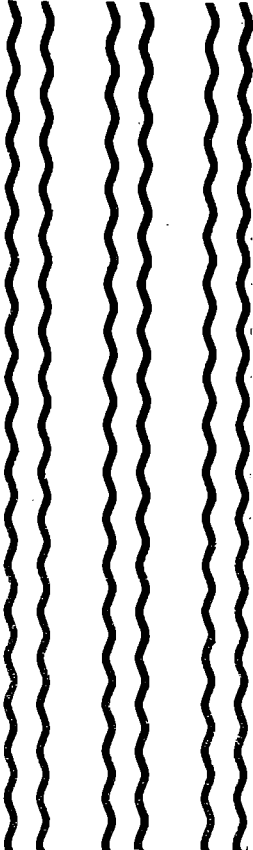
# DEATH WISH

*Novel*

by Nicholas G. Lordi

illustration by ESMH

It had been a mistake for Roy Falstun to come to Mars, a mistake when he married Linda, a mistake when they found and preserved the mysterious creature they called "Pincus"...



**T**HE WIND had begun to rise. The first bursts of sand already sprayed the exterior of the station with grinding force. Falstun was unaware of the approaching storm. The electronic senses of the station recorded their warnings to no avail.

Inside the sealing walls he lay sprawled near the body of his wife, amidst a puddle of viscous fluid littered with glassy fragments.

Falstun moved. His hands, slipping in the slime, pressed against the floor for support. He staggered to his feet and

Falstun picked  
up the strange  
creature.



stepped backwards out of the wreckage, his hands clutched to his throbbing head. He stared down at the floor through stained eyes. Between his feet lay the now-withered tissue, shapeless and quite dead. His eyes went no farther; they jerked away from the impossible haze which obscured his vision in the center of the room.

The odor of decay which permeated the room and drenched his body choked his nostrils. He turned. There, as always, Pincus stared out at him from the confines of its biome. Faithful Pincus. Mysterious Pincus...

A wild thought shot through his mind. It was insane. It was silly. His discomfort forgotten, he began to laugh.

"Last night I dreamed," he said aloud, "that I killed my wife."

**M**ARS WAS a whirling globe on the top of Morrison's desk. The Co-ordinator of the Persephone Project's hawkish face studied Falstun with all the irreverence of a two-year old.

"Roy Conrad Falstun," he said. "Ph. D., geochemistry, Cal Tech, 1981. Married. No children. Brilliant thesis. Refused offer from Pacific Minerals in order to volunteer for the Persephone Project. A commendable action, considering the pay differential.

"You and your wife are

lucky. The response to the project has been gratifying, the number of applications received exceptional. Again, my congratulations."

"*Liar!*" thought Falstun. They had been forced to accept his application, just as he had been forced to make it. He fidgeted; he felt uncomfortable in the plush seat. There was something wrong with the room. Behind him, an immense window looked down over the San Francisco Bay; in front of him, behind Morrison, an equally-immense mirror seemed to reflect an unreal image of his immediate environment. Perhaps it was only Morrison's annoying habit of tapping the edge of the desk with his knuckles which bothered him. More likely, it was his own feeling of inadequacy, which was particularly intensified in Morrison's presence.

Falstun's eyes fixed on the whirling globe. He watched as Morrison stopped Mars' motion with a flick of his wrist.

"An interesting terrain," said Morrison. "An appalling lack of mountains. Be that as it may, the purpose of the Persephone Project is to see what can be done with it. Money has been appropriated, Doctor Falstun. Results are expected; in fact, we must guarantee them—over a suitable period of time, of course—in order to function at all."

**F**ALSTUN SAID nothing; he had nothing to say. Let Morrison do the talking, he thought; it was his function. Falstun had heard the words before, many times; he was tired of them. Wasn't it enough that he had endured the examinations, the indoctrinations, the unnecessary prying into his personal life and habits? Wasn't it enough that he had feigned unnatural interest in the project and the training he had been forced to undertake? Wasn't it enough that he was involved in a marriage that was not yet consummated? It wasn't; he still had to endure again, for the last time he hoped, Morrison's constant chatter.

"Every insignificant detail has been studied by dozens of experts. The project will be the most carefully prepared for adventure man has yet undertaken. Necessarily, we were limited by the amount of allocated funds. Originally, two alternate proposals were made. One large central camp could be set up on Mars to serve as the focal point for a gradually-expanding sphere of colonization and exploration. In contrast, the plan which was finally accepted proposed the establishment of many small foci of colonization. In terms of time and money, we expect it to prove the most expedient."

**M**ORRISON pointed to the model, designating sever-

al spots near the polar caps and equator with his left index finger. "For instance, here, here, here. You get the idea? Naturally, the size of the stations would have to be small; in fact, they were designed to support no more than two adults to make the plan practical, moneywise. Obviously, a male and female; preferably husband and wife, both of whom were technically trained. That proved to be the crux of the problem: to find couples of which both partners were technicians and necessarily not specialists.

"Falstun, the rocket must leave within the week and carry its full complement to Mars. We have no choice; we must send you. Under any circumstances, however, we would have never considered you at all if it wasn't for your wife.

"The individuals concerned must want to go, fervently; you don't. Moreover, we are forced to tolerate a situation in which one partner is jealous of the other's achievements. We have no one to take your place—sit down, Falstun."

Roy, halfway to his feet, sank back into the seat. He wanted to protest; he wanted to tell Morrison he was crazy. His lips moved, but his speech failed; he knew that Morrison had spoken the truth. He was jealous of Linda.

MORRISON continued to batter him with truths he had refused to admit existed. "We know more about you than you yourself realize. For example, we know that your wife supplied you with the basic ideas which turned your thesis from an obscure piece of work, which would have moldered in some library's archives, into a memorable piece of work. It was on the strength of your thesis that you got the offer from Pacific Minerals. We know that you are emotionally unsuited to isolated living; your extrovertism is a by-product of an inferiority complex. When a man feels inferior to his wife, it is as bad for the wife as it is for him. Couple this with a fear of loneliness..."

"I'm no coward," shouted Roy, rising to his feet. This time he remained standing.

"Every man is a coward," said Morrison. "Look at yourself: A fine physical specimen; young; probably endowed with an exceptionally long lifespan, barring accidents; and genetically sound. Physically, you will have no trouble with Mars, as you would have had no trouble with Pacific Minerals. You would have probably made good, even to the point of attaining executive rank. On the other hand, the Persephone Project offers glory, immortality, a concrete place in history."

FALSTUN looked at himself in the mirror. He was a fine specimen of manhood; the women had literally flocked about him during his college career. Yet, he had only been attracted to one—one who had virtually ignored him. He hadn't as yet been able to really fathom why he preferred Linda enough to make her his wife. She wasn't even a pretty girl—rather plain, the studious type. She had always appeared indifferent to the things he enjoyed most; nevertheless, she was the only one in whose presence he lost that vague feeling of insecurity which had always seemed to plague him.

He visualized Linda now, an image in the mirror, as she had appeared the night he had proposed to her. It had been the week before graduation. They had both successfully passed their final orals. All the studying was over; there had only remained the laying on of the hood. He had told her then about the Pacific Minerals offer. He had emphasized the element of risk involved. Prospecting for minerals on the ocean floor was necessarily a risky business. He had emphasized the fact that they could have their own home on the coast, and that his salary would have warranted the setting up of a laboratory so she could carry out her own private research.

The implication had been

clear, and her answer had shocked him. The first emotion he had felt was fury; such a relationship could not be governed by conditions. He had wanted, in that brief moment, to wipe out the memory of her existence as easily as he could blot the image from the face of the mirror. But the fury could and did not endure. He had tried to reason with her.

**T**HE PERSEPHONE PROJECT was out of the question. It meant a lifetime of isolation; it meant leaving Earth, perhaps for good. It was not the risk that bothered him; working in pressurized areas on the ocean floor was just as dangerous, if not more so, as traveling to the red planet in a sealed can. The territory he would explore would be just as alien as anything Mars could offer.

Reason had not prevailed. Roy sat now staring at a model which would soon be something more than a plastic globe. He had had no choice, he needed Linda, desperately.

Falstun spread his arms in sign of resignation to his fate. "Obviously, I am totally unsuited for life as a Martian," he said. "By your own rules, we should not be allowed to be a part of the Project."

Morrison set the globe to whirling again. "It is seldom," he said, "that we get the ideal combination of geochemist and biologist in husband and

wife. Your wife happens to be the most ideally-suited individual for this program whom we have tested up to this time. You are sufficiently qualified in your own field, as well as possessing the necessary physical attributes for survival. You work well under pressure. Of some importance is the fact that you are both able to perform the wide variety of tasks which settlement on Mars will necessitate. Under the present setup, an individual must be able to perform the duties of scientist, doctor, engineer, farmer, and virtually any other occupation you can think of.

"If you think about it, you will be able to overcome your own limitations. I suspect your wife knows your weaknesses; she will help you survive what you expect to be an ordeal. But perhaps, you will find out that the ordeal is really an adventure. Remember: to know thyself is to save thyself."

**E**XACTLY three days later, Roy and Linda were transported to the Satellite in the shuttle rocket. They had barely time to gaze down on the Earth from its artificial moon for the first time seeing it from space, before they were transferred to the ship which would take them to Mars.

The trip itself was uneventful, in that nothing unexpected happened. From Falstun's viewpoint, the time passed all



too quickly. The voyage was one long honeymoon; Linda proved to be the perfect, loving wife. During the eight months of bliss, Falstun was unmindful of the cramped quarters of the vessel and the unnatural stresses imposed on his body. Morrison's words, Morrison's warnings, slipped from his consciousness; for a time Falstun believed he was in paradise.

All good things end. Eight months and three days out from Earth, the ship landed. Mars was no longer a model sitting on Morrison's desk; it was no longer just a name, a symbol of some distant goal. It was their immediate environs. An indescribable desolation. The feeling of loneliness which encompassed Falstun when he first set foot on the dusty surface was the worst he had ever experienced. Shut off from the environment by the tight-fitting leather suit, his head confined by the necessary oxygen mask, he quaked inwardly, even with Linda hanging onto his arm. To her, the experience was the fulfillment of a dream; to Falstun, it was the beginning of a nightmare.

The honeymoon was over.

**H**ERE, AT the main headquarters of Project Persephone on Mars, they had barely time to make the acquaintance of the couple—Mars' first settlers—who operated the station, before they

were shuttled off to their own little home in the wilderness, somewhere near the equator. The pilot of the atmosphere flyer said little during the eight-hour trip. He left them standing outside the station assigned to them; the small but brilliant sun was just beginning to disappear over the horizon. His parting words were, in essence, a concise summary of the intense training they had undergone before embarking from Earth.

"No one can tell you how to live on Mars. That's your function: to find the best means of survival. All we can do is provide the necessary equipment and materials, and perhaps a few hints from our own personal experience. Good luck."

Good luck indeed, thought Falstun bitterly.

They entered the station together through one of its two airlocks. From the outside, the station looked like a glisten-pinkish plain. The interior was not unfamiliar to them; they knew every vestige of its layout. Falstun, for an instant, thought he had stepped into the mock-up they had trained in on Earth. He was not afraid to admit to himself that he wished it was the mock-up.

The single large room was lit because they wished it so. The light seemed to have no source. The air continuously cycled through the purifiers was maintained at a uniform

temperature, the optimum for human comfort. The humidity was precisely controlled. And a noise level was maintained not constant but sufficient so that silence was nonexistent.

This was the station. Haven. A bit of home entrenched in an alien environment. In fact, a womb.

**T**HEIR HOMEOSTATIC environment served them well during the first three months. It took that time to establish a routine. Once the routine was established, living on Mars became nightmarish, at least to Roy; Linda, on the other hand, still seemed to enjoy herself. He knew that the novelty would soon wear off; he hoped that Linda would soon grow weary of the monotony and yearn for Earth as he yearned. They could not be forced to stay. It was part of the agreement when they signed up for the project. They were expected to stay for the full term—their natural lifespans. They could still return on the next ship from Earth, but that was not scheduled to land for another two years; he would have to endure Mars for two years.

In the meantime, Roy grew to hate the everyday sounds of the station as he waited fervently for the weekly radio contacts with the headquarters station. He looked forward to conversing with his fellow humans, trapped like him in

their own private wombs on distant parts of Mars. When the contacts failed, because of atmospheric disturbances, Roy became more depressed than usual. The conversations served to buttress his faltering morale.

**L**INDA SPENT a large fraction of her leisure time at work. Her mission was to study the plant life characteristic of the surrounding terrain. Her primary goal was to adapt Earth plants to thrive in the weak atmosphere and Martian soil. The soil, and its minerals, were Roy's province. The outer crust was comprised mostly of silicon, oxygen, and iron, as well as smaller amounts of aluminum and magnesium. He had already found twenty minerals new to him composed of these elements. With the exception of a few pockets of beryllium, he as yet had made no otherwise important discoveries.

There were always the periodic trips out into the wasteland—the flat, desolate wasteland—each trip radiating out a little farther from the station. There were the periodic trips to the channels. A misnomer, actually: they were, in fact, deep gorges, at the bottom of which water sometimes trickled. The sides were often lined with lichenous growths, extending from the edge of the water to the very top to dwindle into the desert. The channels crisscrossed Mars, the

result of erosion and a dwindling atmosphere.

Mars' canals.

Not the result of intelligent planning, but a natural phenomenon.

Besides the atmosphere and temperature, which often hit a hundred below at night and seldom went above fifty during the day, the only other thing that was really inimical to human life on Mars was its equatorial storms. Seasonal, yet erratic, the sand storms were sudden and durable, sometimes lasting for days. To go out in one was suicidal; the sand was driven with such force that it could readily penetrate a man's skin. The station served to shut out the grinding sand as it did the concurrent shrieking noise of the storm.

Their first experience with a Martian sand storm happened on the same day they discovered Pincus.

**A**N AZURE SKY and a small red sun—the day began no differently than all the others.

Falstun hesitated at the edge of the greenish-brown carpet which spread out before him; a week ago it hadn't been there. The rudimentary plant life had sustained itself along the trickle of water which alternately flowed and disappeared at the foot of the incline. Since then, the melting polar caps had replenished the stream. In response, the

lichenous growths had reached out into the desert, reproducing and dying in an endless struggle against the hostile environment. He stood now at the outermost boundaries of this struggle.

At this point, the slope was gentle. Falstun moved as rapidly as possible down the incline, his boots crushing and slipping in the spongy rug. His sample bag tight against his side, the goggles of his mask only obstructed his peripheral vision.

Below, where the stream narrowed, Linda stood, half in and half out of the murky water. Her screams still rang in his ear, her voice distorted by the intercom. "Roy! Help me! Quick! I'm killing it."

**R**OY FINALLY reached Linda's side. She was holding something beneath the surface of the algae-steeped water. Something which did not struggle.

He pulled her out of the water, forcing her to release the object. She fell back onto the brown carpet with a sob. A small pinkish bundle floated up to the surface of the water. Caught by the current, it began to float downstream.

"Save it," shouted Linda. "We must save it."

Roy quickly strode downstream and picked the object out of the water before it was swept away into the center of the stream. He brought it back

and placed it gently on the ground beside Linda.

"I don't understand what made me do it," she said. "It must have been the shock of seeing it, the unexpectedness of its appearance. I thought it was attacking me."

"How could that thing have hurt you?" asked Roy. He examined the creature. Its pinkish fur was plastered to its body. It looked harmless.

Likewise, Linda studied its appearance. "We mustn't let it die," she said. She grabbed Roy's shoulders. "There's animal life on Mars."

There was animal life on Mars, thought Roy. Not some many-limbed monster; not an oozing lump of protoplasm which displayed an impossible intelligence—merely an ordinary looking creature, it's only unusual characteristic apparently being the pinkish cast of its fur. And even that wasn't really strange. Yet, by definition, it was still alien.

"If it attacked you, it might be dangerous," said Roy. "In the long run, it might be better off dead."

**R**OY KNEW then that he had said too much. Linda rose to her feet, picked up the creature, and started up the hill. Roy followed. Linda wanted the animal alive. What she wanted she would have, but they would have to get back to the station first; she could do nothing here. The station was almost four

miles from their present position, built near the same channel only to the west. Over an hour's walk. However, Linda was half-running over the sandy terrain. Roy followed more slowly; there was nothing he could do to aid her.

They had covered half the distance when Roy first noticed the difference in the day. The normally-clear sky had reddened; the disc of the sun was no longer visible. A bright patch in the sky was the only sign that the sun was still there.

A change in the character of the usual changeless Martian day was indicative of only one thing: An approaching storm. This they had been told.

In a few minutes, Roy had caught up to Linda. The sky was now beginning to blacken; soon their visibility would be nonexistent. The wind buffeted them, slowing their progress. The sand rose in great clouds about their feet. The last thousand yards they made by instinct alone, the sand stinging them even through their leathery outer garments. Linda still held the Martian, tight against her breast.

**P**INCUS was its name; Pincus they called it. They even constructed its own private biome. The chamber enclosed what was essentially a reproduction of the terrain which surrounded the station. Pincus huddled on the red-

dish ground, blending almost to the point of invisibility. In one corner lay a pile of the rust-colored lichens which seemed to be its only food source. The chamber also enclosed the much-rarefied Martian atmosphere. The first time, the day of the storm, they had brought Pincus inside the station, it had almost died. Not from its experience in the stream, but the atmosphere had been too rich for it. Pincus could not survive in the oxygen-laden atmosphere of Earth.

The biome was a necessity, a haven within a haven. Pincus' own private womb.

**T**HE CREATURE was well suited to its environment; Linda had pointed this fact out to him many times. It's small, beady, deepset and black eyes, the heavy fur, and the peculiarly clawed paws, all fitted it to a desert existence. Its ability to survive without water for long periods of time was striking. There were other peculiarities; it took Linda just two months to discover them all.

Roy had to admit that it was to her credit that she was able to achieve so much. The problem could be stated simply. The creature must be studied in its entirety—habits, structure, function—yet not killed or mutilated in the process. The problem appeared to be insurmountable, at least, to Roy.

There was only one Pincus. They had searched for others during the succeeding days without success. For all they knew, Pincus was the last of its species on Mars. In any case, Linda often told Roy that she could never do anything to Pincus which would result in permanent harm. Pincus had become not only an object of study but also a pet.

The problem, in any case, was solved. Its solution only required ingenuity.

**L**INDA HAD the ingenuity; Roy had the necessary mechanical skill. Together, they built the necessary apparatus which Linda required. The station had been stocked with the object of versatility in mind. Its instruments could be adapted to a wide variety of usages. In the end, what appeared to be insurmountable turned out to be no problem at all.

More important was the fact that Pincus had shattered the routine. The native plant life no longer occupied Linda's attention. She neglected her promising discovery that the soil along the channels was rich in mineral-attacking bacteria. She even began to neglect Roy.

For a time, Falstun shared Linda's enthusiasm. He set aside the search for radioactives, the zirconium, tantalum, and titanium which were of top priority. The minerals

Earth needed for her interplanetary vessels. He helped Linda as much as he could, and learned as she learned.

**P**INCUS was a vertebrate. Its heart and brain were well formed. Although its lungs were of large capacity, to compensate for the thin atmosphere of Mars, they were still lungs and a hundred percent efficient. It conserved water, excreting none.

Linda had constructed an anatomical model of Pincus, complete in every detail. Roy looked on it as a perfect work of art; it signified the completion of the first phase of the problem.

At this point, Roy lost interest. It wasn't that he couldn't appreciate the gross picture; he could. The detailed study which Linda then undertook was just beyond his grasp. She had progressed from stereoscopic fluoroscopic to submicrosurgical techniques. Histology and the study of cycles bored him.

For the first time since Pincus had entered their lives, Roy began to feel the brunt of Linda's neglect. Linda's habit of putting all her reports orally on tapes irritated him more than usual. He became subject to frequent painful headaches; he grew moody and took to taking farther and farther trips away from the station. He even began to believe that his secret hope that Linda would soon yearn to re-

turn to Earth was unfounded. At times, he found himself losing contact with the station and reality, imagining himself on Earth, working for Pacific Minerals as if there had never been a Persephone Project. The dreams persisted, because he wanted them to persist.

**H**E NO LONGER looked forward to the weekly radio contacts with the other stations. As far as he was concerned, they had degenerated into a mere exchange of technical data. And all of it concerned Pincus; it was Linda's show every time. No one was interested in what Roy had to say; Pincus was the only topic of discussion.

There was one mystery concerning Pincus which these discussions never failed to touch upon: Reproduction. Pincus appeared to have no sex; it was neither a she nor he, not able to find any organs to which she could assign a reproductive function, she did point out to them that "...in the region where one would expect to find the reproductive apparatus localized, there exists instead a queer patch of unspecialized tissue surrounded by what appears to be a dormant glandular tissue."

These facts made no impression on Roy. In his own mind, he thought of Pincus as a male, as Linda probably thought of it as a female. The

fact of reproduction did bother him. Even his wild imaginings did not relieve his frustrations. Linda's interest in Pincus was intense; in the evenings she was so tired that she often sank into sleeps of exhaustion.

FALSTUN took to taking Pincus outside the station and playing with the creature, against Linda's wishes. But Pincus never roamed far; it stayed near the station and Roy. Whenever Roy had one of his good moods, which was now rare, Pincus avoided him. Whenever Roy felt angry Pincus always seemed to want to play. It was an aspect of Pincus' psychology which he could never hope to understand. The creature always seemed to stare at him with sorrowful looks, as if it desperately wanted Roy to do something. But it never attempted to escape, even though Roy gave it every opportunity to do so. Perhaps Pincus realized it was on to a good thing; the desire for security was universal.

The more Roy learned to like Pincus, the more bitter he became towards Linda. He never associated Linda's neglect with Pincus; it never occurred to him to do so.

It was inevitable that Falstun should release his pent-up emotions in a display of violence.

THE SUN had long since set when Falstun returned to

the station that particular evening. He set the flyer down roughly, not bothering to put it away for the night. He had just returned from a survey trip, which had covered a distance of some five hundred miles. He was tired, but not sleepy. The trip had been successful; about a hundred-and-fifty miles to the northeast he had discovered an unusual outcropping on the desert floor. Consisting of a unique mixture of quartz, shale, and pitch, it had exhibited signs of radioactivity. His specimen bag full, he had returned immediately to the station instead of spending the night in the desert as originally planned.

Roy's unexpected entrance into the station did not seem to disturb Linda. Since she didn't show any interest in his appearance, he offered no explanation.

"I have a report to record," said Linda. "I must do it while it's fresh in mind; I hope you don't mind."

"No," he said. Why should he mind? Having already eaten in the flyer while returning to the station, he wanted to begin the analysis of the samples at once. The spectrograph was waiting for him; he turned to it.

Linda began to speak. Her voice picked up by the apparatus on the bench in front of her was magnetically recorded. Roy dumped his specimens on his own work bench.

He didn't want to hear what his wife had to report, but he had no say in the matter.

“THE NATURE of Pincus' reproductive facilities remains unknown,” she said. “It is not, however in any sense unknowable. There are three alternate lines of reasoning which may be followed. One: The creature is a freak, having been born lacking the ability to reproduce itself. Two: The creature is capable of reproducing itself non-sexually, in one of the ways characteristic of lower life forms. And three; Its mode of reproduction is unique unto itself.

“The first line of reasoning admits of the easy solution, in that it states there is no problem. Such a solution is emotionally unsatisfying, and has been rejected. The second alternate admits of being the one most subject to systematic attack. It has been chosen as the most profitable course of action, at the same time, keeping in mind the distinct possibility of the third alternate.”

There was a sputter. The spectrograph died. Roy cursed; he tore away the piece of chart which had already been ejected from the instrument and threw it to the floor without looking at it. In a matter of minutes, he had the front panel off and was staring at the instrument's innards. In the back-

ground, Linda's voice continued without a break.

“OF THE THREE non-sexual forms of reproduction—binary fission, sporulation—and budding, the latter may most logically constitute Pincus' means of reproduction. Binary fission and sporulation in an organism of the complexity under investigation is wholly unlikely. Budding, on the other hand, is quite probable. Confirmation can only come through demonstration.

“The available evidence suggests that Pincus has not as yet reached full sexual maturity. All its tissues are young tissues; its healing properties are remarkable. However an estimate of its age cannot be given. Its growth processes have apparently long since subsided. During the six months Pincus has been studied, no signs of any growth have been noted. Metabolically, its only waste products of any significance are carbon dioxide and guanidine. It utilizes most elements with an apparent efficiency of a hundred per cent: the rate of its tissue renewal is remarkably high. Thus it appears that Pincus is physically mature, sexually immature, yet possesses a potential to be immortal.”

It was impossible for Roy to repair the spectrograph; he couldn't keep his mind on the task. With a grunt, he swept



the specimens from the bench with his arm. They clashed to the floor. The clatter was great enough to cause Linda to stop abruptly and glance inquisitively at him.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"Wrong? No. No. There's nothing wrong."

**L**INDA FACED the recorder again. She began to speak, first making sure that the sounds of the disturbance were obliterated from the wire. Roy just watched her, unmoving.

"The question of immortality is disturbing. Nature cannot admit of individual immortality, only species immortality. Admittedly, there are many living organisms which possess potential immortality under ideal conditions. But there are no ideal conditions in nature; there is only balance—and balance is a function of reproduction and death.

"The associated question of stimulus must also be treated. The egg is stimulated by fusion with the sperm to develop, or by chemical or physical agents in parthogenesis. The one-celled organism divides when it has reached a certain critical size. Here the stimulus is growth. The problem of stimulus with reference to the Martian's reproductive ability is one which is subject to experimentation. This..."

"Shut up!" shouted Roy.

Startled, Linda looked at him in surprise. "What is the matter with you?" she asked. "You have been acting very strangely tonight." Her voice as always, showed no signs of undue stress.

"Tonight? Only tonight?"

Falstun crossed the room. He pulled Linda to her feet. She struggled.

"I don't understand," she said. "Let go. I must finish."

He kissed her roughly. "Do you understand now?"

The struggle ceased. "Yes," she hissed. "I hadn't realized. But Pincus..."

"I know," he said, kissing her again.

She responded. That night Falstun forgot his worries; there was no headache, no depression. Linda was once more a wife to him.

**D**URING the succeeding days, Linda no longer neglected Roy; neither did she neglect Pincus. The experiments went on, but less intensively. She took special pains to explain them to Roy. And he, in turn, tried to listen.

She had succeeded in culturing the tissue which she believed was the site of Pincus' as yet dormant reproductive activities. Her approach was to test the effect of a variety of chemical agents on it as possible stimulants. In addition, she had discovered an unusual cyclic event occurring in Pincus' blood which she

also tentatively associated with its reproduction.

Unfortunately, something happened to the culture; it died. Linda was forced to repeat the experiment. This necessitated the extraction of another fragment of the required tissue from Pincus. The old flask was set aside, forgotten, its contents allowed to rot.

The trials of research did not interest Roy. His headaches had not ceased; they continued to persist, and in greater frequency. His fits of anger and moodiness began to irritate Linda. For the first time in their relatively short married life, Linda took an active part in the quarrels.

**T**HE OLD doubts continued to assail him with greater force. Why did he ever marry her, he asked himself. It was her fault that he was on Mars. She had had no right to ask him to take the step. He had been a fool; but she had deluded him, she had made him the fool. He knew that she thought him a coward, a weakling, a person who couldn't stand on his own two feet. He just knew it. That's why she married him. She didn't love him; she had never loved him. And she had made him think he needed her—when he, Roy Falstun, could have had his pick of the women, and on his own terms.

If he had had his own way, he could be living the only

way a human should live—on Earth. He would have to remain on Mars for more than a year yet, before he could return. And return he would.

She would have to go with him. He laughed at the thought. She would have to go with him; she wouldn't get her way this time, even though she was scheming to keep him here. He made a vow; he would force her to return to Earth with him.

Roy blamed everything that went wrong, every minor irritation on Linda; she became his scapegoat. He bothered her, deliberately making every effort to irritate her, to cause her to do something she might regret. He tried to make life miserable for her and didn't succeed. Linda only ignored him. She didn't speak to him for a whole week. Finally, defeated, he caged himself in the misery of his own thoughts.

**T**HE CONSEQUENCES of Roy's state were inevitable: the doubts evolved into dislikes and the dislikes into hate. At first, the hate was small and inconsistent. But with each passing day, with each passing hour, it grew and intensified. Roy didn't want to hate his wife, but he couldn't help himself.

He took to sitting motionless in front of the biome, staring at Pincus for long periods of time. Pincus watched Roy in turn, almost hypnotically.

He took to following the progress of the chart Linda was constructing. It depicted the changes in concentration of the substance she had identified in Pincus' blood and associated with its reproduction. It was a queer sort of cycle. It rose and fell in a matter of hours. Yet the frequency, duration, and amplitude of the oscillations were continually changing, the frequency decreasing, the amplitude and duration increasing. Roy found that he was fitting his moods to the same sort of rhythm.

The greater the amplitude, the more intense was his hate; the greater the frequency, the more numerous were his fits. Soon even these facts slipped from his mind. Soon all he thought was hate.

LINDA BROKE her silence on the day the cycle reached its maximum amplitude and duration. That day, the pressure had built up to such an extent in Falstun's mind that he could no longer repress it. He listened to Linda's words. But they were just that words. Meaningless bits of sound.

"Look at this," she said. She was holding a culture flask in her hand.

Falstun stared at the flask. He attached no significance to the queerly-formed mass of white tissue floating in a blackish slime which formed

the bulk of its contents. His mind was in turmoil.

It was Linda's fault, he thought. Linda got him into this mess.

"Well, what is it?" Linda smiled.

He had no answer. His thoughts raced. Only Linda kept him here; if it wasn't for Linda, they would *have* to send him back to Earth. The solution was simple. As simple as one plus one equals two.

"An embryo. Look at it."

"An embryo." Linda held the flask high. "This is the culture I thought had died. It had begun to decay. I have found the stimulus. Pincus' mode of reproduction is non-sexual—and unique."

Falstun's hands clenched and unclenched. It would be so easy. The concept loomed from the depths of his subconscious; it took hold and rooted. Somewhere in the depths, something protested, weakly. It was too late; the pressure was too great, and there was only one way it could be relieved.

Falstun's hands raised. Linda's went suddenly limp. The flask dropped to the floor and shattered. Linda screamed. The scream, turned into a choke, and then a gurgle.

And then silence.

FALSTUN stirred uneasily on the couch, the half-empty cup of stimulant in his hand already cold. For

the first time in many months, the normal sounds of the station were getting through to him. The throb in his head was replaced by the throb of the power plant buried beneath the floor. The whirs and clicks of the devices in the instrument section fluctuated unrhythmically, seemingly creating their own peculiar melody.

The odor of decay which still drenched the room no longer bothered him. He was no longer puzzled by the fact that his vision blurred whenever he gazed into the center of the station; he accepted it without question. It was now a manifestation of his normal behavior.

He felt quite normal now, relaxed, at ease, not in the least bit distressed.

It had been the station, he thought, the whole blasted planet. His behavior had been irresponsible. If only Linda would forgive him.

The thought of his wife brought the memory of the dream back to him. Where was she? Where was Linda?

The cup dropped from his lax fingers. The resultant pool of liquid spread rapidly over the floor. Falstun leaped to his feet, the memory of his nightmare strong.

It was a dream. It couldn't have been anything but a dream.

He started towards the center of the room. He remembered everything now.

Linda had been standing there, holding the flask. The flask now lay shattered on the floor. And Linda...

The haze cleared. His vision had never really been obstructed; he had only imagined it. He stared at the floor.

It had been no dream.

FALSTUN did not burst into tears; he did not develop hysterics. He did not bend over and fondle the body. All emotion had been drained from him. He felt nothing, not even sorrow.

There was nothing left for him on Mars—or Earth; for the first time in his life he was truly alone.

The station was an empty tomb, devoid of sounds and life. Roy Falstun was an empty husk devoid of all but one desire—the desire to obliterate from his consciousness the knowledge of his guilt. He turned once again to the biome to seek the comfort of Pincus' gaze. Pincus stood there, nose pressed against the inner face, waiting for him. The two stared at each other.

Falstun had begun to imagine things. For an instant he thought he had been staring into Linda's eyes. For an instant the pressure had begun to build up in his mind again, only this time it was readily repressed. And in that instant the concept once again entered his conscious-

ness. Only this time, in its true light.

Kill me.

**I**N THAT instant, Falstun knew. He didn't even have to rationalize; it was all so simple. All the facts lying dormant in his subconsciousness tumbled into place.

He had not killed Linda. Pincus had.

It was funny. He began to laugh; he laughed until tears streamed down his face. It was all so funny, a simple case of misdirection.

It had been a mistake in judgement on Pincus' part; it had chosen the wrong individual to influence. But perhaps he had been more susceptible than Linda.

More out of pity than anything else, Falstun opened the biome with the simple flick of a switch. The front panel slid slowly up. The two atmospheres equalized. as Pincus tumbled to the floor.

Falstun looked at him. Already the creature's system

was overloading with oxygen. Pincus looked almost as if it was in ecstasy. But then, reproductive processes were generally pleasurable.

Falstun turned towards the lock, Pincus forgotten. He had yet one thing to do. The inner door slid slowly open at his touch. The outer lock was almost as easily opened. The burst of sand took him full in the chest. He still managed to force his way out into the storm with the help of the outrushing air behind him.

Again, the two atmospheres equalized. And fate willed that life should continue, perhaps for another eternity. Pincus revived slowly, the moment of ecstasy gone. Resigned to its fate, it crept into the shelter of one of the room's corners, out of the path of the in-blown sand. It would have to wait out the storm inside the station.

For this was the one thing it could not do.

Kill itself.

## Department of Definitions

Ultimate Entropy is Cosmic Democracy.