

**SUPER  
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Kestrel realized then what had happened. He ran out into the desert, but it was too late. The sand for yards around the wing was a hell of impassable flame.



By Margaret St. Clair

# DREADFUL DREAMER

**“H**ERE, kitty,” Kestrel called into the blue Martian dusk. He put the saucer with the food down on the sand.

“I didn’t know you had a pet,” Foner said languidly from within the tent. He was still young enough to find languor an amusing attitude.

“It adopted me. I haven’t had a good look at it yet, but I think it’s what Marcia would call a dwarf desert lynx.”

“Company for you, I suppose,” Foner said. There was a pause. “Listen, Kes, about your find—”

“Yes?”

“Frankly, I can’t understand why you called me here. Mica, yes, but Mars already produces more mica than it can use. Anyhow, the commission didn’t send you here to look for mica. I thought you had something valuable.”

“You saw the indications,” Kestrel said sharply.

“I saw the indications, yes. Do you think they add up to beryllium ore? The most you could hope for would be a trace.”

Kestrel rubbed his forehead. “I was sure—listen, Foner, do you have to be back at Marsport tonight?”

“Not absolutely, no.”

“Then stay with me. I want to check

the diggings again with you by daylight. I can’t understand this. It looked like high-grade stuff.”

“As a favor to an old pal,” Foner replied lightly, “okay.”

“Good!” Kestrel’s face relaxed. “I’m not the cook Marcia is,” he went on, “but I can promise you something fairly edible. I found a can of pineta nuts this morning, and I’ll cook a mess of my famous desert burgoo.” He began rummaging about in boxes and tins.

“Let me help,” Foner said, getting lazily to his feet.

“Well, there’s not much—but you might open the pineta nuts. They’re in that big chest.

Foner hunted in the chest Kestrel pointed to. “The can’s not here,” he said after a moment.

“Hunh? Sure it is! I saw it this morning myself. Look, what’s that?” Kestrel pointed to a can.

“Lichee nuts,” Foner replied.

Kestrel blinked. “So it is,” he said slowly. “I must be seeing things. I’d have sworn that label read pineta nuts. And there’s no ydrella in the chest either. What’s the matter with me?”

Foner made no direct answer. His mouth was puckered up.

They dined on the burgoo, a rather insipid dish without its two main ingre-

**The Mars cat would give you anything you desired—and it took nothing but friendship in return . . . nothing except one tiny thing you didn’t want, and without which you couldn’t live!**

dients, and sat smoking in silence.

"It means a lot to you to find high-grade ore, doesn't it?" Foner asked.

"Yes, it does," Kestrel answered soberly. "My future, and Marcia's, all our plans—just about everything."

"Um."

From outside the tent there came a faint scratching of claws and then a delicate whine. It was not quite a meow. "That's the kitty," Kestrel said. "He shows up about this time every night for chow."

Foner had taken the pipe from his mouth and was listening intently. "That's no dwarf desert lynx," he said.

"Isn't it? Well, I said the identification was only tentative.

"When did it adopt you? Just about the time you found the beryllium ore?"

"Why, yes, the day before. How did you know?"

"You'd better stop feeding it. It's a dangerous animal."

Kestrel raised his eyebrows. "Dangerous?" he said. "How? It's not over a foot long. Has it got poisonous fangs?"

Foner permitted himself a smile. "It's not dangerous in that way. Don't you really know what you've got, Kes? It's a paididion."

Kestrel's face remained blank. "They call them Lyall's babies sometimes," Foner went on. "Does that ring any bells?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm new to this part of Mars."

"I see. Of course they have only a local distribution. No, seriously, Kes, you've got to stop feeding it."

"I don't understand. You say it's not poisonous; and it seems as friendly as it can be."

"That's where the trouble comes in." Foner took a deep breath. "The paididion," he said, his languor giving place to an unconscious pedantry, "is like

the members of primitive races on earth. Stefansson, who did some fine work with Eskimos, says you must never put a question in the form, 'So-and-so killed a lot of bears, didn't he?' to an Eskimo, because he's sure to answer, 'Yes, he did, he killed an awful lot,' regardless of how many bears so-and-so really did kill.

"The primitive isn't lying, he's being friendly and courteous. He's telling you what he thinks you want to hear. A paididion is like that. Only he makes you see what he thinks you want to see."

**K**ESTREL rubbed his forehead once more. He looked confused. "You mean that animal had something to do with my finding the beryllium ore?"

"With your thinking you found beryllium ore," Foner corrected, "yes. Somehow the paididion projects—I don't think they know how, exactly; paididions haven't been studied much—somehow it projects a very vivid image of what the person it's trying to please would like to see. Hence, the day after the paididion adopts you, you find a rich vein of beryllium ore.

"That's why you were sure you'd seen a can of pineta nuts in the chest. You knew I was coming, you wanted me to stay for supper, you wanted to be able to make your special burgoo. The paididion did the rest."

There was a silence. "How's it dangerous, though?" Kestrel asked at last. "I don't see that. I've gotten rather fond of the thing, Foner, since Marcia's been away."

"Well, it's made you waste two weeks hunting a nonexistent vein of beryllium ore," Foner pointed out. "Can't you think of situations in which believing that what you wanted to be true, was true, would be dangerous?"

I can. Besides, people get addicted to them.

"That's how the animal got its popular name, Lyall's baby. Lyall lost his only child under terribly tragic circumstances. He was nearly crazy with grief. They found him two or three years later, almost starving, living in a cave with a paididion. When they tried to take it away from him and bring him back to normal, he killed himself. He said it was his baby."

"Brr-r-r-r," Kestrel said.

"Yes, quite. Of course the paididion doesn't mean any harm. I doubt it has a single malicious thought in what passes for its head. It's only trying to ingratiate itself. They're fond of human beings in the same way that dogs are. You say you've never really seen yours! That's because it's not sure, yet, that you're attached to it. When they know they're welcome, they're not a bit shy. . . . When did you say Marcia was coming back?"

"Tomorrow night. Flying her own wing. She mentioned something about bringing Alis with her for a day or two, if you could spare her. Anyhow, she can't come too soon for me."

"You and Marcia, me and Alis," Foner said, speaking, for the moment, perfectly soberly. Then, with a return to his usual manner, "Pitiful, isn't it, the way these women get their hooks

into one. Well, when Marcia does come, my advice would be to get away from here as soon as you can. As I say, the paididion can be dangerous."

"Okay."

THE DIGGINGS, inspected in the hard light of a Martian day, proved as deficient in beryllium ore as Foner had insisted they were. Foner clapped Kestrel twice on the shoulder, murmured "Hard luck, hard luck," several times, and then started back to Marsport. He warned Kestrel against the paididion once more before he left. Foner, though he was not then aware of it, was to return to the camp that evening with the ambulance from Marsport Foundation Hospital when it flew in to pick the bodies up.

The story, as nearly as it could be gathered from Kestrel, who was almost incoherent from the pain of his burns, went like this:

Marcia had come back to the camp just at dusk, an hour or so before Kestrel had been expecting her. He was overjoyed to see her, though he scolded her severely for having made the dangerous landing in the bad light. She might have wrecked the wing, he said; he had been just on the point of going out to fix a beacon for her.

He noticed that she seemed silent and remote, but he put it down to

fatigue; he knew she had been working very hard. Once or twice the automatic signaler in the corner of the tent buzzed, but Kestrel was too absorbed in Marcia to attend to it especially.

Kestrel and his wife were still talking quietly in the soft glow of the tent lamps when there was an intense white-hot glare of light from the desert outside. Marcia vanished incontinently (the explosion had frightened the paididion) and, seconds later, the tremendous impact of the crashing wing shook the ground.

Kestrel realized then what had happened. He ran out into the desert, but it was too late. The sand for yards around the wing was a hell of impassable flame.

There were screams from the cabin. Kestrel tried twice to get in to the women, and was badly burned. He sent an emergency call in to Marsport for help, and then collapsed.

There was not much left of the wing when the ambulance got there. The attendants whistled at the sight of Kestrel's burns and proceeded to shoot him full of narcotics; but Foner—the self-possessed, worldly, sardonic Foner—they had to put in handcuffs, and even then it was difficult to handle him. The ambulance pilot thoroughly regretted that they had let Foner come with them. He was still screaming, "I told you it was dangerous!" when the wing took off.

From its hole near the cook-tent the paididion watched the departure with bright, unintelligent eyes. Then it went back to cleaning itself.

**KESTREL** was hospitalized for eighteen days; when he was released he took the first ship back to Terra and thus passes out of this history. But Foner's weeks grew into a month and then another one, and still he screamed

and fought against the opiates which would have given him peace for an hour or two.

It was nearly three months after the crash that they let him out. He had lost much weight and his hands persisted in trembling. He hired a wing and flew to the place where Marcia and Alis had had their wreck.

It was late afternoon when he got there, and he waited patiently inside the wing until twilight came on. Then he got out and walked toward the spot where he thought the paididion was. He had bought food and a dish to hold it before he left the capital. "Here, kitty, kitty," he called into the rich blue dusk.

The paididion heard him. For a space it lay with its nose between its paws and listened. The process that was going on in its tiny mind could hardly be called thought; all the same it was gauging, and very accurately, too, the misery and need and hate which had driven Foner into the desert to look for it.

"Here, kitty, kitty," Foner called again. He drew back into the shadow of the wing, his gun in his hand.

There was a silence. The sky had grown quite dark, and the thin night wind of Mars was springing up. The man in the lee of the wing shifted his weight to the other foot and then leaned forward, peering intently. Was something drifting toward him over the surface of the sand?

The paididion waited. "It's—Alis," Foner said oddly. "Alis—Alis—" The moments passed and then, above the sighing of the wind, there was a dull sound which meant that the gun had fallen from his hand.

The paididion waited a little longer, waited until it was absolutely, perfectly sure. Then briskly and self-confidently it came trotting across the sand to him.