

# SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

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# EXPLOSION DELAYED

BY WILLIAM VINE

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

Everyone knew what happened when an Earthman married a Martian. The results—or lack of them—were completely sure. But when Peter and Luara broke the rules, they threatened two worlds.

Uncle George said flatly: "It won't work out."

"It isn't even going to start," his father said grimly.

Beyond the transparent side of the house, the air was a slowly churning cauldron of yellow. The dust storm was at its height. From the weather reporter in the wall a voice said monotonously: "Storm center passing Aurialis: leading edge making south. Recommended to take cover in the belt between Nagaha and Bartonsville."

He said wearily: "We've been over it all before. I'm sorry about this. You don't think I enjoy causing trouble, do you?"

But it's no good talking. We've made up our minds."

Uncle George said: "You've been out a long time. Two years here, at your age—it's bound to be a strain. My idea is you should take a holiday back home. . . . In the Tyrol, maybe. Mountain air, and springtime. And the loveliest girls on earth, I always thought. Out here . . . you get to brooding. You see things a different way."

"Look," he said. "I'm twenty-four. I know my own mind. And I want to marry Luara. I don't mind taking her back to Austria with me, if that'll help."

His father, taking the sugges-



tion seriously, threw up his hands.

"Damn it, Peter, you know as well as I do that's impossible. Martians aren't allowed on the planet except in reservations. And a good thing, too, to my way of looking."

Peter said dangerously: "I think we'd better keep our private opinions out of it, don't you?"

"No," his father said, "I don't. When your son comes to you in twenty-five years' time and tells you he wants to marry a slave, a Martian, you'll know how important it is."

"I might consider him the best judge of the way to run his own life."

"But there won't be a son, will there?" Uncle George said. "Not if you marry Luara. The unions are sterile. And that's another good reason for thinking carefully. It may seem unimportant now, but I can tell you that later one misses the kids that were never born. I've got a right to tell you that. If I could live my life again . . ."

"It's no good," Peter said doggedly. "I know what I want." He looked at his father directly. "You know Luara. Give me an honest answer. Have you ever known a human woman with her sweetness, her goodness?"

Their glances levelled and locked.

"No," his father said at last. "I'll admit that. But I don't admit that it alters my case. Love isn't everything in life. Even if it were, the kind of love that can't find a natural fruition—in children—carries its own destruction with it. I have to ask you to take that on trust. For the last time, Peter, I want you to accept my judgment."

He turned away. The dust storm was dropping, the yellow thinning out, becoming streaked with the sky's dark blue.

"I'm sorry," he said. "No."

His father said: "Now I'm going to ask you a question. Have I been a reasonably good parent?"

Peter nodded. "Yes."

"I've tried to be. And when you come to your senses I will try to be again. When you get tired of this folly, come back and everything will be as it was before—no reproaches, nothing. Keep that in your mind. You are welcome at any time—without the Martian woman."

"The Martian woman will be my wife."

"Not by human law. The Martians may recognize the marriage. Or they may not. They're funny creatures."

Peter stared at him. "I know

you mean well," he said. "I'm keeping that in mind, at least, but it isn't easy."

His father looked away. "All right. We won't labor it. Will you tell your mother?"

He went through to the little room at the end of the ranch that was his mother's retreat. She was sitting weaving, the electronically guided shuttle flicking to and fro in front of her. He came up quietly and stood behind her. She looked up, but did not smile.

"Mom," he said.

She smiled then, with difficulty. "Come to say goodbye, Petey?"

He nodded. "Pop thinks I'll come running back in a few months. I don't want you to be deceived about that."

"No, Petey. I won't be. Don't think too hard of your father. It might have been easier for him if your brother had lived. Now . . . we're at an age where you think of grandchildren."

"I'm sorry."

"Never mind. But don't blame him, either. There is nothing else he could do, you know. You can't take Luara to Earth, and if your father agreed to her coming here it would be only a few weeks before it was reported. He would have to go back, and lose his colonial pension rights. So he hopes . . . in

time . . . you will change your mind."

"Mom," he said, "how did things get this way? I mean—treating the Martians as though they were animals, enslaving and segregating them?"

"Men who go long journeys get strange ideas of grandeur. They always have done. The Vikings . . . the men who went across the western ocean to America. But going across space was something so much greater than all those. We haven't got over it yet. I don't know if we ever will."

"We've got to," Peter said, "if we're going to be human beings."

He bent down and kissed her.

"'Bye, Petey," she said. "Give my love to Luara. I hope you'll be very happy. Try to get back here to see us now and then."

"No, Mom, best not to. I've got to make a new life; one that will stand on its own. You understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

The wind was steady from the east. The sand yacht picked up quickly and was soon clipping over the desert at more than thirty knots. Looking back, he saw them waving from the loggia, and saw their figures dwindle into small dots. Soon the ranch itself was a dot, and then lost in the yellow distance.

After half a Martian year Peter still did not know what the Martians really thought of him. He was sure of Luara but the others—the men he worked with and the women of the village—puzzled him. There was no hostility; rather they were friendly, but in a strange impassive way. Walking home now from the fields, in the early dusk of a fall evening, they were singing together one of the high-pitched native songs. He could glimpse melody in it now, where before it had been only a screech to his human ears. Perhaps other understandings would come in time, too.

He shifted the pack onto his other shoulder. He was stronger than he had been, much stronger, but only the human heritage of a body bred for the heavier gravity of Earth enabled him to hold his own with the gliding, almost tireless Martians. The winter would soon be here, and for him it would be a hard one.

The path they were following wound down the side of the hill. Beyond the next spur they would see the village, its lights very sharp against the hastening dark. He waited. The spur—and the whole company of Martians raised their voices in the cry that the sight of their homes always evoked from them.

His home, too. Luara would

be there, standing just inside the door. He knew just how she would welcome him, with pain in her eyes for the tiredness she would sense in him. He was glad that she never said anything, never reproached herself, when he was there, with the hardships of the life he had taken when he married her. But he knew that she did reproach herself.

He wished he could explain to her how unnecessary the reproaches were. All his past life—all that he had given up, family, comfort, prospects—were nothing to the peace and joy he now had. He had tried to explain that to her, in his still halting Martian, but it wasn't easy. And every day he found the work in the fields less arduous. The first few months had been terrible, but the worst was over now. If only he could make Luara see that.

The others went their own way to their homes in the village. His own cottage was on the outskirts; Luara was waiting outside for him, and even in the darkness he felt there was something strange about her—a kind of excitement. The Martians did not display their emotions in a way that humans could easily observe; it was a sign of the closeness that their

relationship had achieved that he could detect it now.

He embraced her, and drew her with him inside the door. The globe of lumin-insects glowed brightly on the table, its soft light flickering out to the pressing stone walls of the tiny room.

She said: "Peeter, it is good that you are home again."

He smiled. "Yes. Very good."

His eyes rested on her. Small for a Martian woman, she was only a couple of inches shorter than he was. Her body had the sinuous grace that they all had, but in her, he felt, it became something more—a rare and compelling beauty. Her eyes were a soft dark blue.

"I love you, Luara," he said.

She rested against him.

"Peeter, was it hard today?"

He shook his head. "We cleared the north slope. Another two weeks and the harvest will be in."

"Then the dancing," she said. "And the rest time."

The rest time, he thought. Five days before the labors began again. He would need that rest.

"It will be good to see you dancing again," he said.

She had been dancing when he first saw her, admitted, as a special favor, to the native festival. The dances were wild

and graceful, and in the flickering white light from the globes, of lumin-insects set round the circle she had been a dark flame that had drawn his eyes, and kept them.

She said: "I shall not dance this year."

He said quickly: "You must! Because I don't? But I only want to watch you. My human body will not let me join you, but I can watch."

She smiled. "No. Not that."

"Then what?"

She said: "Today I went to visit Estro."

He knew Estro vaguely; one of the old women of the village, very tall and quiet.

"She would not believe it at first," Luara said, "but then she was sure."

"Sure of what?"

She smiled again, and he remembered why the women of the village visited Estro. But Luara . . . It wasn't possible.

"It can't be. . . . It can't happen."

"But it has! Estro is quite sure. Towards the end of the winter, he will be born."

He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her towards him.

"He?"

"Of course."

"Of course," he said, and kissed her.

Now that the Martian population trend, recovered from its brief upswing following the first colonization, was back in the decline that would mean the end of the race within a thousand years, two clerks at Nagaha were able to handle the census routines. Of the two, Lief Knutson did his job efficiently and with speed. The pregnancies report came in to him on an afternoon when the belated sirocco common to this part of the planet was throwing dust into Nagaha beyond the power of the extractors to handle. It eddied outside, and drifted into the office.

He whistled briefly at seeing the entry under the column reserved for "Tribe of Father": *Human father*. He called across to Ted Ashton at the other side of the room:

"A cross-marriage and it's pupped."

"Like hell," Ashton said lazily. "You mean she's gone back to her old boy-friends."

"Human standards," Knutson told him. "Martian women don't go on the loose. They never have done. Don't you read your 'Martian Behavior Patterns'?"

Ashton flicked the stereo onto another channel.

"The cross-marriages don't pup, either. Don't you read your 'Study in Martian Biology'? I'll

take the biologists rather than the behavior boys any time. You know I thought of making biology, one time?"

"The only thing you were ever keen on making was outside the curriculum."

He wrote on the form: "Formal notification to Genetics, Washington." Then he threw it over to be snapped by the magnets that clipped onto the iron particles in the paper and drew it down into Ashton's in-tray.

"To you, for action," he said.

Watching the stereo, Ashton said: "To think that little number is a cool seventy million miles away. The colonial life . . . What's a fat pension? It isn't worth it."

It was three Martian months later before he reached the bottom of his in-tray, picked out the form and, after scanning it curiously for a moment, pushed it in the file for Genetics Division.

Estro said: "It will be today," and Peter did not go out to the fields with the others. He sat outside the cottage, his mind busy with the apprehensions of parenthood, the terrors of uncertainty and waiting. He had thought, in marrying Luara, that he was renouncing this. But what was supposed to be impossible was happening now,



only a very little way off both in space and time, and it had taken his beloved into pain and perhaps into danger. He never thought of the child.

It was a good birth. Estro called him in. He saw first that Luara was all right, and then permitted the old woman to show him the child. It looked at him with the steady blind gaze of the new born.

"Strong," Estro said, "and of grace."

The baby had the great chest of its Martian ancestry but it was stockier than the purely Martian babies were, with strong thick legs.

Luara said weakly: "Let me see him."

He held the child to show her.

"You were right," he said. "A boy."

She smiled. "I knew."

From somewhere outside, swelling as the singers came nearer, there was the chanting of the men coming back from the fields. They stood outside the cottage, singing the traditional Martian paean of birth. He smiled back at Luara, and went to the door.

"A boy," he called. "Come and see."

They crowded into the little room. Okron, the leader of the village, knelt down, signifying, by his homage, the dependence

of the old generation on the new. He placed by the child's crib a coat made from the fabric woven from the dried leaves of the tull plant, and a fleecy hood. Wrapped in these, the child would be secure against the worst of the planet's winter.

"Our gifts," Okron said.

"We thank you," Peter replied.

They went, still singing, to their own cottages. It was no more than half an hour later when they heard the noise of a rocket-plane overhead, and then the louder noise of its landing, somewhere near the village. Okron came back a little later.

"Humans," he said. "They wish to see you."

"Let them come in," Peter said.

There were three of them. A Negro was the party's leader.

"Jomo Tangito," he said. "I guess you won't know me though, unless you happen to be a geneticist? No, I thought not. This is Charles Lecourbet, who's the best X-ray biologist in the system; and Ni-Tung, who re-bred Eohippus."

Lecourbet was a little man, looking even smaller beside the bulk of the Negro. Ni-Tung was Japanese, of middle height and quiet reflective appearance.

Peter said stiffly: "Peter Awkright. This is my wife, Luara."

Tangito said, genially sharp: "And this? Your baby?"

"He was only born an hour ago. I would prefer not to have him disturbed."

"But the importance of this," Tangito said, "—it's tremendous. Even if it's . . . from any point of view, it's incredible!"

"Come back tomorrow," Peter said.

"We must see him," Lecourbet said. He spoke in a dry voice, touched with the dialect of France.

"Tomorrow," Peter said.

Ni-Tung looked at him. "We will be very careful of the babe. Not a full examination. Just to see him."

Peter warmed to the genuine sympathy in this man's voice. He took the child, and showed it to them.

Lecourbet said, almost under his breath: "It is true. I would not have believed it. But the balance of characteristics . . ."

"A true cross," the Negro said. "My God!"

Peter took the child back and wrapped it up again.

"You can't have any idea, young man," Tangito said, "of the importance of this."

Peter said: "I've heard . . . that marriages similar to ours have been infertile."

"Have been? Must be! That's what I would have said until

now. Now—" he shrugged—"quite a lot of ideas will have to be revised."

"How did you find us?" Peter asked.

Lecourbet said: "The report went through the usual channels. We had to investigate it, of course." He tittered slightly. "Though, perhaps naturally, we thought we might be on a wild goose chase—that it might be a job for Martian Culture Section, not for us."

Without knowing what Lecourbet meant by the remark, Peter resented it. He felt that it was important not to antagonize these men, though.

"We'll be getting along," Tangito said. His white teeth flashed. "We'll be seeing you again, I hope. You and the baby." He half-turned to go. "Oh, I guess . . ." He found his wallet, and from it pulled out a thousand sterling note. "This should come in useful."

"Thank you," Peter said.

Ni-Tung looked back as the others went.

"He's a handsome son. Look after him."

They heard the rocket engines coughing overhead on the long flight back to Nagaha. Estro went, and Peter and Luara were left alone with the incredible, the ordinary baby.

The biggest building in Nagaha is the one built for Martian Administration; a monument, perhaps, to good intentions. The monument, as commonly happens, had stayed to outlive the purpose of the builders. Somerest Murphy, as head of the Administration, had the great corner office on the top floor. He sat back in his chair, studying the three biologists who were sitting on the other side of his desk.

He said: "As far as I understand it, you claim that one of these cross-marriages has resulted in fertility. I thought it was you people who have been telling us for the past century that that was something that couldn't happen?"

Tangito said: "To the best of our knowledge, it was. Revision of existing theories is something that happens in the best-regulated scientific circles."

Murphy flicked a spoon through the small pool of liquid set into his desk, and a cloud of fragrance-bubbles shivered up through the air, fluorescing in different colors and casting their strange scent round about them.

"So," Murphy said, "we have the added complication of possible half-castes in these wretched cross-marriages in the future. It's annoying." He looked at

them thoughtfully. "I don't quite see that it justifies this ceremonial visit with which you are honoring me. Surely it would have been simpler to send in a written report?"

"No, it's not quite so simple," Tangito said. He glanced at Lecourbet. "Explain things, Charles."

Lecourbet leaned forward. "This child," he said drily, "is the most explosive thing that has happened since space was crossed. The results are impossible to gauge."

Murphy said easily: "I think I know the Martians better than you do. There won't be any explosion. They haven't got the concept of racial pride in their make-up, and the fact that one of their women has had a child by a human isn't going to give it to them. You think he'll lead a Martian revolt when he grows up? Even if he turns out to be Charlemagne, Genghiz Khan and Hitler rolled into one, he won't get the Martians on the move. I know them."

Lecourbet had been listening with a thin smile on his lips. When Murphy finished, he said softly:

"You talk to us, Director, as though we were Martian Culture. We're not. We're Genetics. We don't profess to know how Martians will or will not react to

any given stimulus. But we do have a very good idea of the genetic characteristics both of humans and Martians. On Earth, as you know, we have for some time been sterilizing in cases where unsuitable stocks mated. We know what stocks are unsuitable."

Murphy said sharply: "You can spare me the routine stuff. I know all that."

"Do you know the von Heller factor?" Murphy shook his head. "Von Heller was the best geneticist of the last century, if not the best ever. He made the first charts of genetic characteristics. He lived long enough to be able to include the Martians in his work. I can't go over the work that took him forty-five years, in a few minutes and in language suitable for a layman. All I can tell you is this: the patterns for human and Martian, straightforward and homogeneous in themselves, turn into a genetic nova—an atomic explosion—when they are conjoined. Since then, Von Heller's work has checked in every last detail. There is no reason to doubt this extrapolation, when all the others have come off."

"Strange," Murphy said, "that I haven't heard of this before."

"Why should you?" Lecourbet challenged him. "It's something **people in our field** have always

known but it has remained no more than a technical fantasy—because the unions between Martians and humans were invariably and, apparently, inevitably sterile."

"And now you find they're not? What if you are wrong there. The Martian woman . . ."

Tangito waved him to silence. "We've seen the child. It's a cross, all right."

Murphy flicked more fragrance-bubbles into the air; he concentrated his gaze on their shimmering dance, ignoring the three men. At last, he said:

"Have you any suggestions?"

Lecourbet smiled. Tangito said:

"Not our job. Our job is simply to tell you what has occurred, and the little we know of what it means. As I've said, that is very little. We just don't know—except that we know it is tremendous."

Murphy looked at them. "Society does not like tremendous and unpredictable phenomena. Neither do I."

"Well?" Lecourbet asked him.

Peter said: "I don't believe that. I met Director Murphy once, at a reception in Bartonville. He isn't the kind of man who would murder a child."

Ni-Tung bowed his head. "A human child, possibly, but your

son, in the eyes of him and of people like him, is a Martian. I have told you what we reported to the Director: that your son is likely to grow into a person of incalculable power. It is true that he threatens the stability of the system's society. Under that threat, any action can be made to seem justified."

"But murder!"

"Yes—even that."

Peter looked across the little room to where Luara, who did not understand human speech, was nursing the baby.

"And if I believe you. What can we do?"

Ni-Tung smiled. "I have an old friend, who has a space yacht. He will put down, not here but in the hills. Evelyn's Plateau, twenty kilometers beyond the village of Uskutt, to the north. You must make your way there; and you must start at once."

"An uncle of mine went into the sun in a space yacht. Their generators are barely adequate. It's a risk. And then, where do we go?"

"It's a risk," Ni-Tung conceded. "If you stay here, your child's death is a certainty. Where will you go? There is only one place—to Earth."

Peter laughed bitterly. "To Earth! Do you think they won't know what Luara is—what the

boy is? Or should we apply to be-taken in on one of the reservations?"

"The Earth," Ni-Tung said, "is very big. There are places where you can have hundreds of square miles to yourself. Leave it to my friend."

"And if all this comes off? What do we do then?"

"You are wardens. Wardens of the strange creature that is your child. Guard him well, and try to prepare him for what must come."

"And that is . . .?"

"We don't know," Ni-Tung said gently, "but perhaps we can guess."

The rocket-plane circled over the small huddle of stone huts that was Uskutt, and something parachuted down. The cylinder crashed against the roof of one of the huts, and was brought to the slightly larger building in the middle of the village that was the house of Pellinn, the leader. He read the scroll inside, his brow furrowed, and after a moment passed it to Peter. The message was brief:

*To All Martians*

A child has been born of a human-Martian mating, at the village of Tafassa. This child is genetically undesirable, and it is necessary that it should be eliminated. It has been found, however, that the parents have

removed the child from Tafassa. It is clear that they have taken refuge in some other village. The inhabitants of that village are commanded to detain the fugitives and inform the human authorities.

There can be no refusal of this command. Should the child not be surrendered, the authorities will necessarily fall back on the only alternative, which is to eliminate the possibility of its survival by large-scale action. Should the information required not be received within two days, all male children under half a year old, in villages within a range of fifty truns of Tafassa, will be collected for elimination.

By Order  
Martian Administration.

Peter gave the scroll back to Pellinn.

He said listlessly: "I had not expected that."

Pellinn said: "They place great importance on killing your son."

"Yes."

He looked at the child that lay in its cradle near his feet. There was another cradle on the other side of the room.

Pellinn said: "You must leave early in the morning. We will take you to the plateau."

Peter said: "They will do

what they say. I believe that now."

"Yes," Pellinn said, "that is true."

Peter glanced at the second cradle.

"Your grandson . . ."

Pellinn smiled sadly. "In a sense one is always at the mercy of wickedness. In another sense, not. It is only possible to do what is right."

"No!" Peter said. "We cannot accept that."

"You have no alternative."

The place where the space yacht landed was a green valley in the midst of wooded country. They came out and looked around them. Peter saw Luara straining to hold herself erect against the heavier gravity; his own limbs, after a life on Mars broken only by holidays on the home planet, felt the new strain.

Ni-Tung's friend, a wild cheerful man called Tom O'Connell, gestured towards the surroundings.

"You should manage well here. There's good game; I'm leaving you a Klaberg, and enough charges to last a couple of lifetimes. You can do some cultivating under the spur of that hill; it's safe enough from the kind of aerial surveys they make of this part of the world. Nearest habitation is two hundred kilometers to the north. I think

you will get on all right."

Peter said: "It's difficult to believe what has happened. You have risked a lot for us."

O'Connell pointed to the boxes that he and Peter had unloaded.

"There are your stores—including grain. Risk? I've enjoyed it. The system needs a bomb under it. Tung says your kid will provide it: that's enough for me."

"And now?" Peter said.

"Now I'm going to take off, and spend the rest of my life forgetting you and your family ever existed. I doubt if I'll be alive when the kid grows up. But I hope I am."

They saw the jets flare, and watched the space yacht lift into the air and bucket away to the north. Peter turned to Luara.

"We are alone now."

She smiled and nodded. She held the baby in her arms. He came over and stood beside her.

"What will become of him?" he said softly.

She looked at the child, her face very tender.

"The things will happen that must happen," she said, "but not yet—not for many years."

They looked together at their son.

He was sleeping, and in His sleep, He smiled.

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