

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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NOTHING'S IMPOSSIBLE

by CHARLES L. FONTENAY

illustrated by BOWMAN

The air on Mars was unbreathable, of course. But was it? The powers of the human mind and the human will are unlimited. Man can do anything he *REALLY* wants

MARTHA'S uncle was a member of the Order of the Diegan Brothers. Because the Path of Life he had chosen was the study of Martian desert biology, this House of Brotherhood was at the southeastern edge of the Cynia dome and he had his own private airlock opening out onto the Ausonia Australis Desert.

Martha spent a great deal of her time there during her visit to Mars. Uncle Theodore and his House of Brotherhood affected her soul alike. After the technological hustle of the dome-city or the buffeting of the thin, sand-sharp desert wind, Uncle Theodore's quiet smile and the green shadows of

his garden immersed her in dreamy peace.

"Peace is within the individual," said Theodore when she mentioned this. "Man does not conquer the material world by rejecting it or retreating from it. He must first accept it for what it is, neither good nor evil in itself; then the strength of his own soul will shape the world around him into an extension of himself."

Martha shifted a bit restlessly on the simple, hard-backed bench. She was blonde and sunny, like the quicksilver light cast by a moving mirror in the afternoon gloom of Theodore's stark study room. Theodore sat tranquilly



behind his desk, still toying with a booktape he had been on the verge of projecting when Martha had come in from downtown Cynia a little earlier.

"Somehow, that's a frightening prospect to me," she said. "I don't believe I'd want the world around me an extension of what I am."

"That's because you lack confidence in yourself," said Theodore. "The extension of self to encompass and shape the surrounding world has been a reasonably straight evolutionary path since life appeared on Earth."

He arose and walked to the window that looked out toward the desert, seeming to flow comfortably in the loose, grey robes he wore.

"Of course," he added thoughtfully, "here it faltered and failed short of its goal. Where on Earth the plants and animals were able to change the atmosphere and free themselves, on Mars the canal sage plant must hold its scarce oxygen close to its breast to stave off death."

Suddenly the world returned to Theodore's face. He leaned forward, placing his hands on

the windowsill. His eyes narrowed and he peered out across the garden and through the transparent dome of Cynia.

"It appears I'm about to have more company," he said. "If that's who I think it is, he'll probably come here instead of to the city airlock."

Martha arose and went to his side. In her white blouse, short red skirt and knee-length socks, she contrasted colorfully with the sober grey Brother.

FAR out on the red desert; she saw a lone figure moving a man. The tight little horizons of Mars made him seem farther away, and larger, than she knew he was. The Martian air was thin and clear, but the light of the afternoon sun, a hundred and forty million miles away, was weak; and Martha could distinguish no details of the distant form that flickered against the purple southeastern twilight.

"How can you tell who it is at that distance?" Martha asked.

"I can't, certainly," answered Theodore, caressing his square, smooth-shaven jaw. "It could be one of the Cynia geol-

ogists, returning from an excursion. But, on foot....if I'm right, Martha, you'll see something your friends on Earth won't believe—nor many on Mars who haven't witnessed it. Let's go out and wait in the garden."

Together they left the house. The garden was cloistered by pearly ceramic walls and was verdant with lush grass and silvery soft maples. Primroses and daylilies overhung its paths with colour, for the hot-blooded plants that required Earth's rich sunshine would not bloom here.

Martha followed Theodore, a step or two behind, down the narrow path toward the little airlock. She had been on Mars for an Earth-year now, and in two more 42-day Martian months she would go back to Mars City and catch the spaceship on its return journey to Earth.

This Martian voyage was a long one and an expensive one, but Uncle Theodore had raised her as a little girl and she had wanted to see him once again before his Path of Life ended. Of course, Uncle Theodore was still a vigorous fifty-five, but

a trip to Mars was a major undertaking, which she doubted would be repeated for her.

She had been fortunate. To help defray expenses, she had managed to get an assignment from *Humanitie of Rio* to push its line of terrestrial women's fashions on Mars. Without that windfall, she could not have made the trip.

They reached the airlock and stood to one side of it, looking out through the plastic wall of the city dome. The figure was nearer now, and coming toward the city.

"Who is it?" asked Martha curiously.

"If I'm right....I'm almost sure I'm right, now.... it's the Desert Stalker."

"The Desert Stalker? That's a legend, isn't it?" Martha experienced a weird premonition. She did recall that much, and that the legend was a strange one, but she could not remember what it was.

"You'll see." Theodore's face was turned from her, but she could hear his smile.

Strongly interested now, she watched the approaching figure closely. It *was* someone afoot, striding easily across the

hard-packed sand. That in itself was something unusual. Ordinarily anyone who went out any distance into the Martian desert rode in a big-wheeled, big-tired groundcar, despite the scarcity of fuel. There was no reason for anyone to *walk* in the desert, except perhaps a student like Theodore.

Before he was close enough for her to distinguish any details, she could tell by the walk that the figure was a man and not a woman. The low-level rays of the sinking sun flashed redly from flesh and cloth as from metal, making visibility both more striking and more vaguely defined than it would have been earlier in the day.

Even as the man drew near enough for her to see him more clearly, the sudden Martian twilight illumined the desert with that startling lucidity that made objects stand out in fine, sharp detail as though painted in tempera.

It was then that Martha saw the man wore no marsuit!

A short-sleeved shirt and walking shorts exposed his flesh to the plummeting temperatures outside the dome,

which now must be well below the freezing point of water. No loose coveralls of synthetics protected him from the increasing cold of the Martian night.

His head was naked to the thin, unbreathable Martian air, and the desert wind riffled his hair. No clear helmet clasped a warm bubble of oxygen to his nostrils.

Yet, impossibly, he lived and walked.

THE man came into the airlock. He was tall and powerful. His face was lined and browned by the desert wind, and his hair was black. He carried a bulky pack easily in one hand.

Theodore closed the outer entrance to the airlock and let the air hiss into it. Instantly the Stalker's breath congealed into a jet of white steam that wreathed his head and concealed his face for a moment. Then he stepped through the airlock's inner door and confronted them.

"Welcome, Fors," said Theodore, shaking hands with the newcomer. "Martha, this

is Fors Venturi, the Desert Stalker."

Fors turned to Martha and took her hand. She found her heart at once transfixed by the most electric blue eyes she had ever seen.

"Theodore's niece?" said Fors, his great hand enfolding hers. "I had hoped we'd meet before you left Mars, Miss Bruun. Theodore has spoken of you often.

Together the three of them moved through the garden and into the house, moving easily in the light Martian gravity.

"A little wine for the stomach's sake," said Theodore, taking a treasured bottle from his cupboard. "How long will you stay in Cynia this time, Fors?"

"Several days," answered Fors. "There are some materials I need, and your city-dwellers are close traders."

Theodore poured the wine carefully into three long-stemmed glasses.

"I wish you could see Fors' place out in the desert," Theodore said to Martha, handing her a glass. "It's fabulous. Simple, but fabulous. And no dome. Are you going to let me

study your metabolism this time, Fors?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Fors, with a broad smile. "I'm not one of your desert specimens, Theodore. Besides, I don't want to cloud your pure faith with prosaic scientific explanations."

"Science is the handwriting of God on the searching minds of men," said Theodore quietly. "Scientific explanations do not disturb my faith. They strengthen it."

Fors sipped his wine, and turned his deep eyes on Martha.

"How long have you been in Cynia, Miss Bruun?" he asked.

"Only a little more than a week this time," she answered, a little breathlessly. "I've been here often since I arrived on Mars, though. I've had to travel around from city to city a great deal, and every time my travels brought me near Cynia I've taken a little vacation and come over to spend a few days with Uncle Theodore."

"Cynia is an interesting city," said Fors. "Much more so than Mars City, in many respects. While I'm here I'll

show you some of Cynia's aspects that would be unlikely to attract a dry old hermit like Theodore."

FORS kept his promise. During the next week, he and Martha went out together into the city often. That week stretched into two, and then three, and still Fors remained in Cynia, and still he and Martha saw Cynia together.

He showed her the Crystal Palace, a collection of desert rocks carved by the thin Martian wind into fantastic shapes. She had seen this with Theodore, but Theodore had talked with her of chemical composition and effects, and the tiny plant life that could be found clinging to the different kinds of stones in their natural habitat. Fors spoke of the poetry and beauty of the rocks; in his voice she heard the desert wind keening across the dunes, and in his eyes she saw the sun sparkling from the faceted crags.

They dined and danced at the Cote d'Azur, whose tiered dining terraces sprawled along a blue clay slope in the northern section of Cynia, and Mar-

tha realized as she had not before that the urban life of Mars was not altogether a hard struggle against cold, drought and a hostile atmosphere.

They visited the markets and the compact vegetable farms. At the theatres, they saw plays and films which Martha had seen on Earth five years before, but here and now the acting seemed more competent, the dialogue sharper, the colours of the films brighter. She found this mysterious desert wanderer fascinatingly human, and enjoyed herself thoroughly.

"What do you do and why do you live in the desert?" asked Martha one afternoon as they sipped wine at one of the sidewalk cafes in the city's central park.

"You might say that Theodore and I are colleagues," answered Fors. "We both study desert biology. But Theodore examines and catalogues things as they are. I seek to change them into what they can be."

He smiled a slow smile.

"You might say," he added, "that my ambition is to be an agent of evolution."

They could have been sit-

ting on a sidewalk in a city of Earth, except for the easy Martian gravity and the silver-grey dome that arched far above them. People in light clothing strolled by, others sat at tables and chatted. The trees of Earth grew green in the park, and above their tops reared the buildings of downtown Cynia.

"I've heard speculation," said Martha, "about creating a liveable atmosphere on Mars by importing and propagating enough terrestrial plants. Is that what you're trying to do?"

"That's how a breathable atmosphere was established on Earth," said Fors, "but it won't work here. You see, green plants use sunlight to free oxygen from carbon dioxide on Earth, then use part of this oxygen for breathing at night, just as animals do.

"But Earth's atmosphere is one-fifth oxygen, and there isn't enough carbon dioxide in the Martian atmosphere to make that much oxygen—there's less than one per cent. Besides, water is scarce on Mars, and it takes a lot of water to support lush plant life. That's why the major plants

here are small, stick to the lowlands and hoard the oxygen they make either inside their tissues or under a canopy of tight-packed leaves."

"What sort of course *can* you follow in trying to change things, then?" she asked curiously.

"Alter living things so they can live without oxygen," he answered.

He smiled as he said it, and she could not be sure he was serious. Before she could pursue the matter farther, he changed the subject in a manner that took her breath away.

He laid his hand on hers, and a vibrant current seemed to surge between them.

"You know, of course, that I love you," he said quietly.

Gazing into his deep blue eyes, her lips parted, seemingly suspended in the still vortex of a great wind, she answered without conscious volition:

"I love you, too, Fors."

THAT night was the first evening Martha had spent at home with Theodore since Fors' arrival at Cynia. Fors had to meet a very busy Cynia businessman downtown for

dinner and a discussion of terms on some materials he needed. So Martha shared Theodore's simple fare, and after supper they sat together in the bare-walled study room and talked.

"Fors talks about evolving life that can live in the Martian atmosphere," she said. "It can't be done, can it, Uncle Theodore?"

"I have learned not to say flatly that something can't be done," replied Theodore. "A century ago many men said we could not colonize Mars because of the problems involved in transporting supplies from Earth."

"I know. But what's the composition of the Martian atmosphere?"

"Ninety-six per cent nitrogen, about four per cent argon, less than one per cent carbon dioxide and traces of water vapour and oxygen," said Theodore promptly.

"Nitrogen won't support life, will it?"

"Not as we know it. But are you forgetting that Fors is the Desert Stalker? Are you forgetting he walks the desert himself without a helmet?"

"It isn't possible," she murmured. "There's a trick to it; because he breathes normally, just as you and I, inside the dome. He must have an oxygen supply with tubes going to his nose."

"Fors buys supplies of water and food to take back with him," said Theodore with a quirk of a smile. "But he never buys oxygen supplies, as the dome farmers do."

"You believe that he actually lives out there without oxygen? How could he?"

"If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed," quoted Theodore, "you will say to this mountain, 'Move hence to yonder place,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.' Fors has a greater, deeper faith in himself than any man I've ever known."

"But you can't accept something like this as a matter of faith!" protested Martha.

"I can," answered Theodore quietly. "I happen to believe that a man called Peter actually walked on water until he faltered in his belief that he could."

After Theodore went to bed,

Martha sat up, reading, and waited for Fors to come home. Fors had his own small room in the House of Brotherhood, which Theodore always reserved against his unannounced coming; it was bare and simply furnished, as suited the nature of both men. Martha's room, by contrast, was spacious, and Theodore had obtained for it feminine comforts Martha had not realized could be found on Mars.

Near midnight Fors entered, a pre-occupied expression on his face. His blue eyes lighted on seeing Martha sitting in the study room.

"Fors, I want to talk to you," said Martha, rising.

"Let's walk in the garden," suggested Fors. "I need to get the kinks of business discussion out of my brain."

They went into the garden and sat down together on one of the stone benches. The night sky of Mars beyond the dome could not be seen, for the lights of Cynia dissolved the dome's transparency into a silvery shimmer that cast a faint, reflected illumination over the shadowed garden.

For the first time, Fors took

Martha in his arms. For a star-streaked eternity, she was lost in the wonder of their first kiss. At last she disengaged herself and forced her mind to its quest.

"Fors, you're deceiving Uncle Theodore and everyone else," she said sternly. "You can't breathe without oxygen, any more than any other man. Can you?"

"I can," he answered, smiling down at her. "I do."

"I think you have concealed oxygen tubes running to your nostrils when you walk in the desert," she accused. "If it isn't a trick, why don't you let Uncle Theodore and other scientists study you and test your metabolism and respiration?"

"As to 'other scientists,' I can answer easily. Most of them refuse to believe and want to make tests. But I'm not an experimental animal, and I have work of my own that's more important than proving myself to them. Theodore....well, my refusal to let him make a few studies is a sort of game between us, I think. I expect that one of these days, when I have time,

I'll let Theodore do some experimenting. He should be able to write a paper from it that will make him famous, and perhaps put a few honest, non-conformist minds on the trail I'm following."

"I don't believe you," she said flatly. "It's impossible."

"No more so than fishes on Earth coming out of the water to breathe air millenia ago."

"It isn't the same. Air breathing and water breathing are both oxygen combustion."

"There are energy sources other than combustion," said Fors.

"Don't cite fermentation to me," she snapped. "It isn't efficient enough. Besides, you have only nitrogen to work with in the Martian atmosphere."

"How would atomic energy suit you?" retorted Fors, with a genuine grin.

She stared at him, dumb.

"The nitrogen from the air is bombarded in the cells with hydrogen from the body's carbohydrates," Fors explained. "This provides much more energy than simple chemical combustion, and creates carbon which is deposited for further

use of the cells and helium which is returned to the lungs and exhaled."

"Your body mechanism isn't set up for such a process," she objected. "Besides, you have to have initial energy for such a reaction."

"No body mechanism is needed except the adjustment of the cells. The body cells of man are under the control of man's mind, and they will adjust as the mind of man instructs them. And the energy and guidance for the atomic reaction is channelled to the cells by the mind."

Martha was silent, trying to assimilate this.

"You're thinking," Fors added, "that the mind has no such precise control over the basic functions of the bodily mechanism. It can, if the belief and need are urgent enough. No one really knows the full capabilities of the human mind. Some conservative scientists will admit the authenticity of cases of telepathy and psychokinesis, and yet would react automatically against a new idea such as this one."

"I can't believe you, and yet I do," she said slowly, with a

weird sensation of awe at her own admission. "I understand scientists think there may be many minor mutations since man conquered space and exposed himself to heavier doses of cosmic rays. I suppose one of those mutations could alter the body chemistry to make such an adaptation possible."

"Cosmic ray mutation may have something to do with it," said Fors thoughtfully. "But you're wrong in thinking I'm a rare specimen. It can be done by others. You could do it."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "Uncle Theodore, perhaps, but not I. I don't have that sort of belief in myself."

"Not Theodore, because Theodore is content to remain exactly what he is. No, being nothing more than human is part of Theodore's unconscious penance for being human. But, deep inside, you have a greater faith in yourself than you realize, Martha."

She said nothing, but crept into his arms.

She faced the appalling realization that Fors was but a restless visitor here in this dome-city, this bubble of air that meant life to her. His real

world was the chill sweep of the Martian desert.

His world was a world alien to her. It was a world she could not enter, except as a protected stranger.

And, separated from him forever by the very breath of life, she loved him.

THAT being true, Martha decided she would put Fors out of her heart. It was the only solution. She would return to Earth soon and, with millions of miles between them, she could plunge into the busy hubbub of terrestrial life and mould this love into nothing more than an aching memory.

But if it was to become a memory, she determined it would be a precious one. Martha had the courage to agree with Tennyson that it is better to love and lose than not to love at all. While she was with Fors, she would yield to her love for him without restraint....and, in truth, she was not sure she could have done otherwise had she chosen any other course.

Alas for this scheme of a grand, fleeting passion.... like so many other women,

Martha reckoned without the very definite ideas of her lover.

"I'm going back to the desert tonight," said Fors matter-of-factly two evenings later, as they sat with Theodore in the study room after supper.

The shock of his words congealed Martha's heart.

"Fors, you can't!" she cried in an excess of anguish. "I thought. . . . surely you're going to stay here until I leave for Earth?"

"No, because you aren't going back to Earth. I want you to come into the desert with me."

She almost breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted her, and the automatic feminine reaction to that was that his desire could be guided to conform to her way of thinking instead of his.

"You know that isn't possible, Fors," she said, calmly now. "My body isn't constructed so I can breathe nitrogen as you do. Stay here for a few days longer, and let's make the most of our love while we can."

Theodore looked at her curiously, but said nothing. She had not told her uncle of her

love for Fors, but surely he must have suspected.

"I'm not that much of a defeatist," said Fors firmly. "There's nothing unique in the way my body's constructed. If there were, I probably couldn't breathe this oxygenated air under the dome. I was born as you are, and I adjusted myself through the efforts of my mind. You can, too."

This terrified Martha. She realized that Fors had not made the suggestion merely from idly wishing things could be that way, but was serious about it. She was terrified alike by the recognition that he was inflexible in his determination to leave that night, and by the almost overpowering urge to try to do as he wanted her to.

"Please, Fors!" she cried, ignoring Theodore's sensibilities. "Don't leave! You know I adore you, and I want these last few days with you. Isn't that better than nothing at all?"

Fors arose.

"Come, go through the airlock with me now, Martha," he said quietly. "The night is beautiful in the desert."

"No!" She shrank back against the hard reality of the bench. "Fors, you know I can't!"

Fors looked at her steadily, and there was no change in his expression.

"I must go to my room and pack for the trip," he said, and left them.

Martha looked desperately at her uncle. Theodore smiled gently at her.

"I can't help you, my dear," he said. "You and he are struggling in a world removed from me."

She jumped up and ran after Fors. She caught him in the long corridor. She grasped his arm and he stopped, silently.

"Fors," she urged, "come to my room."

"A woman's body is her ultimate weapon, isn't it?" he remarked. "I can say no, too, Martha."

He turned away and entered his room, shutting the door.

Martha fled to her room. For a while she waited. Then she wept.

SHE left her room and returned to the study room when she began to fear that

Fors would go out into the night without seeing her again. Fors was packed and ready to leave, talking with Theodore.

"Why don't you put on a marsuit and walk a little way into the desert with Fors?" suggested Theodore.

Martha nodded mutely. She went to the locker in the corridor and pulled on the airtight suit. She returned to the study room, carrying the mars-helmet under her arm.

"I could build a private dome, as the farmers in the lowlands do, and you'd be protected under that," Fors said to her as the three of them walked together through the garden. "But I won't. I love you, Martha, and you're the only woman I've known with the mind and heart to adjust as I have done. That adjustment is the future of humanity on Mars, and my life is tied to that future. As much as I want you with me always, I can't take you on any terms other than living in my world with me."

"At least give me credit for realizing you're right about that," she answered in a low voice. "I wouldn't go with you

on any other terms, Fors.”

In the airlock, she donned her helmet. Theodore closed the inner door and exhausted the air from the chamber. Martha and Fors stepped out into the Martian night together, she in her protective suit, he exposed to the cold and rarified air.

The desert stretched away before them, bleak and chill and beautiful. As they walked away in long, easy strides, arm in arm, the dome-city dwindled behind them. Around them was vast silence, a sea of sand that stretched to incredibly near horizons under a deep violet, star-gemmed sky.

Cynia was a will-o'-the wisp on the northern horizon when Theodore's voice sounded in the earphones of Martha's helmet radio.

“I think you'd better come back now, Martha, if you aren't going on with him,” said Theodore.

Martha stopped, and Fors halted at her tug.

“I must go back,” she said.

“Take off your helmet, Martha,” he said, his voice coming blurred to her through the helmet.

“Fors, I can't. Oh, I can't.”

“Try.”

She shook her head, biting her lip, fearful.

Fors put out his hands and touched the helmet clamps. She grasped his wrists to stop him, but her grip was limp. He unfastened the clamps and his hands dropped to his sides.

“It's up to you,” he said.

She looked at him, standing there, breathing the desert air easily. Trembling, she put up her hands and lifted the helmet, hearing the air of Earth hiss out as the seal was broken.

Her lungs collapsed. She gasped, and the hostile air of the desert was sucked in like a poisonous gas. She was dizzy. She staggered and tried to cry out, but no sound came.

Frantically, she jammed the helmet back on her head and fumbled the clamps tight. The blessed oxygen pumped back into her body.

Fors looked at her with blue eyes.

“If only you loved me enough to believe....” he said sadly.

He turned and strode away,

his figure fading into the southern darkness.

Martha watched for a long time, but he did not reappear. Her shoulders slumped tiredly, and she turned back toward the distant city and began walking.

Above the bubble of light that was Cynia, bright Phobos moved visibly across the sky, casting shifting shadows on the desert. Deimos was a bright more-than-star hanging in the northeast. The desert was a beautiful realm of crystal fantasy, until it dissolved in her tears.

MARTHA hoped against her intuition that Fors would come back before she left Mars. She hoped he would come back and go back to Earth with her, that he would agree to settle down and live with her in Cynia, that he would consent to build a dome in which she could live with him in the desert.

Yet she knew that if he did any of those things, both of them would lose something irreplaceable. Fors had set his foot firmly on a strange path, and to divert him and cage him

would destroy what he was. As it had been since time began, it would be wrong for the man to yield and adjust himself to the ways of the woman.

So the weeks passed empty, and the day came when she stood at the Cynia airport, west of the city dome, and embraced Theodore for the last time. In a few hours she would be in Mars City, boarding the G-boat that would take her to the spaceship back to Earth.

"I wish I could stay, Uncle Theodore," she said. They talked by helmet radio, for here they were under no dome.

"And not just because of me, either," commented Theodore with a smile.

"No," she admitted. "But this is the only thing I can do, isn't it?"

"Only you can answer that," replied Theodore.

She climbed aboard the broad-winged plane. The pilot sealed the door behind her and let air sing into the cabin. Both removed their helmets.

She was the only passenger and there was no co-pilot, for this plane normally carried only freight. The pilot, a freckle-faced young redhead,

winked at her and started his engines.

The plane raced down the runway and lifted slowly, heading southeastward over the desert. Far below and behind, as they climbed, she could see the tiny, waving figure of Theodore dwindle and vanish.

"Why are we going in this direction?" she asked.

"I have to take advantage of every wind to get airborne in this thin air, ma'am," answered the pilot. "When we get high enough, I'll swing it back toward Mars City."

Minutes later, still climbing slowly southeastward, there was a rasping cough, and the ship shuddered and vibrated with an ominous rumble. The pilot's hands raced frantically over his control board.

"Helmet on, ma'am!" he exclaimed urgently. "Something's wrong. We're going to have to crash-land."

She clamped the helmet on her head. The pilot was too busy fighting the controls to don his.

The plane turned and tilted, and out of her window Martha caught a glimpse of Cynia, a distant pinprick in the sunlight

miles behind them. Then the nose went down abruptly, she pitched forward against her seat belt, and blackness hit her with the stunning impact of an explosion.

When consciousness returned, she was lying on the sand. Fors was bending over her, massaging her hands. Some distance away lay the crumpled wreckage of the plane.

"The pilot's dead," said Fors. "You don't seem to be hurt, except for bruises."

"How did you get here?" she asked wonderingly, sitting up.

"This isn't far from my place," said Fors. "I was doing some work in the desert, and the plane crashed not five miles from me. If it had been on Earth, it probably would have burned you up inside it before I could reach you."

"Well," she said, "the pilot reached Cynia by radio before we crashed, I think. Copters ought to get here before long."

"Yes," said Fors. "You can go back, and the airline will get you to Mars City in time to make the spaceship. Or you can stay here with me."

She shook her head. It ached abominably.

"We talked that out before," she said. "Nothing's changed."

Fors lifted an eyebrow.

"Take a deep breath," he commanded.

She did so, and favoured him with a puzzled look. The air was sweet and rare as wine inside her helmet, but it should be. Marsuits carried enough oxygen for several days.

Fors put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him, wishing this were not their last hour together, wishing she had not seen him again since she must but leave him once more.

His fingers were caressing her hair and the back of her neck and she tilted her head back gratefully against their loving pressure.

Caressing her hair! Through a helmet?

She gasped, and her hands flew to the back of her head. Her marshelmet was shattered. The entire back half of it was gone.

"It was that way when I found you," said Fors gently. "Perhaps you had to be unconscious to lose your fear and free your mind. You've been breathing the desert air since the crash."

She looked at him and smiled. She breathed deeply. The air was fragrant and clean, like the scent of clover.

With firm fingers, she unclamped the useless helmet and hurled it out across the sand. She put her arms around Fors' neck and turned her free lips up to his.

THE END