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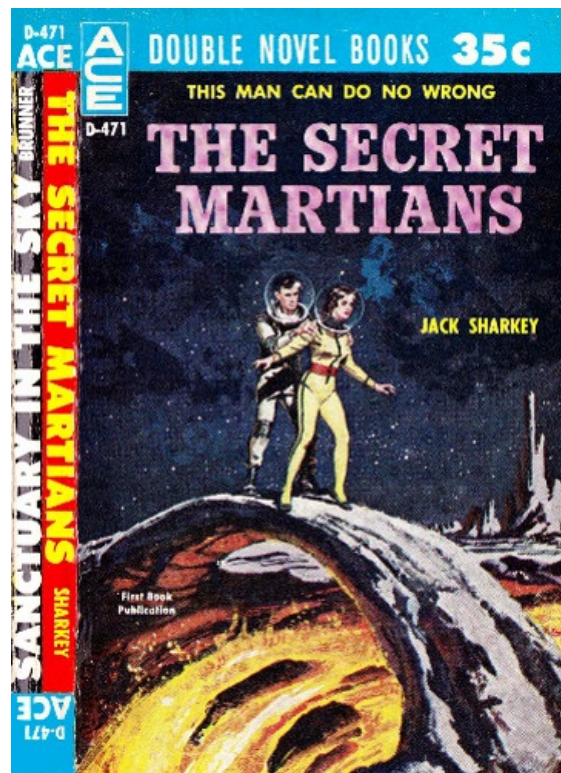
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET MARTIANS ***



THE SECRET MARTIANS

by JACK SHARKEY

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MASTER SPY OF THE RED PLANET

Jery Delvin had a most unusual talent. He could detect the flaws in any scheme almost on sight—even where they had eluded the best brains in the ad agency where he worked. So when the Chief of World Security told him that he had been selected as the answer to the Solar System's greatest mystery, Jery assumed that it was because of his mental agility.

But when he got to Mars to find out why fifteen boys had vanished from a spaceship in mid-space, he found out that even his quick mind needed time to pierce the maze of out-of-this-world double-dealing. For Jery had become a walking bomb, and when he set himself off, it would be the end of the whole puzzle of THE SECRET MARTIANS—with Jery as the first to go!

Jack Sharkey decided to be a writer nineteen years ago, in the Fourth Grade, when he realized all at once that "someone wrote all those stories in the textbooks." While everyone else looked forward variously to becoming firemen, cowboys, and trapeze artists, Jack was devouring every book he could get his hands on, figuring that "if I put enough literature into my head, some of it might overflow and come out."

After sixteen years of education, Jack found himself teaching high school English in Chicago, a worthwhile career, but "not what one would call zesty." After a two-year Army hitch, and a year in advertising "sublimating my urge to write things for cash," Jack moved to New York, determined to make a career of full-time fiction-writing.

Oddly enough, it worked out, and he now does nothing else. He says, "I'd like to say I do this for fulfillment, or for cash, or because it's my destiny; however, the real reason (same as that expressed by Jean Kerr) is that this kind of stay-at-home self-employment lets me sleep late in the morning."

1

I was sitting at my desk, trying to decide how to tell the women of America that they were certain to be lovely in a Plasti-Flex brassiere without absolutely guaranteeing them anything, when the two security men came to get me. I didn't quite believe it at first, when I looked up and saw them, six-feet-plus of steel nerves and gimlet eyes, staring down at me, amidst my litter of sketches, crumpled copy sheets and deadline memos.

It was only a fraction of an instant between the time I saw them and the time they spoke to me, but in that miniscule interval I managed to retrace quite a bit of my lifetime up till that moment, seeking vainly for some reason why they'd be standing there, so terribly and inflexibly efficient looking. Mostly, I ran back over all the ads I'd created and/or okayed for Solar Sales, Inc. during my five years with the firm, trying to see just where I'd gone and shaken the security of the government. I couldn't find anything really incriminating, unless maybe it was that hair dye that unexpectedly turned bright green after six weeks in the hair, but that was the lab's fault, not mine. So I managed a weak smile toward the duo, and tried not to sweat too profusely.

"Jery Delvin?" said the one on my left, a note of no-funny-business in his brusque baritone.

"... Yes," I said, some terrified portion of my mind waiting masochistically for them to draw their collapsers and reduce me to a heap of hot protons.

"Come with us," said his companion. I stared at him, then glanced hopelessly at the jumble of things on my desk. "Never mind that stuff," he added.

I rose from my place, slipped my jacket from its hook, and started across the office toward the door, each of them falling into rigid step beside me. Marge, my secretary, stood wide-eyed as we passed through her office, heading for the hall exit.

"Mr. Delvin," she said, her voice a wispy croak. "When will you be back? The Plasti-Flex man is waiting for your—"

I opened my mouth, but one of the security men cut in.

"You will be informed," he said to Marge.

She was staring after me, open-mouthed, as the door slid neatly shut behind us.

"*W-Will* I be back?" I asked desperately, as we waited for the elevator. "At all? Am I under arrest? What's up, anyhow?"

"You will be informed," said the man again. I had to let it go at that. Security men were not hired for their loquaciousness. They had a car waiting at the curb downstairs, in the No Parking zone. The cop on the beat very politely opened the door for them when we got there. Those red-and-bronze uniforms carry an awful lot of weight. Not to mention the golden bulk of their holstered collapsers.

There was nothing for me to do but sweat it out and to try and enjoy the ride, wherever we were going.

"You are Jerry Delvin?"

The man who spoke seemed more than surprised; he seemed stunned. His voice held an incredulous squeak, a squeak which would have amazed his subordinates. It certainly amazed me. Because the speaker was Philip Baxter, Chief of Interplanetary Security, second only to the World President in power, and not even that in matters of security. I managed to nod.

He shook his white-maned head, slowly. "I don't believe it."

"But I am, sir," I insisted doggedly.

Baxter pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes for a moment, then sighed, grinned wryly, and waggled an index finger at an empty plastic contour chair.

"I guess maybe you are at that, son. Sit down, sit down."

I folded gingerly at knees and hips and slid back into the chair, pressing my perspiring palms against the sides of my pants to get rid of their uncomfortably slippery feel. "Thank you, sir."

There was a silence, during which I breathed uneasily, and a bit too loudly. Baxter seemed to be trying to say something.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've called—" he started, then stopped short and flushed with embarrassment. I felt a sympathetic hot wave flooding my own features. A copy chief in an advertising company almost always reacts to an obvious cliché.

Then, with something like a look of relief on his blunt face, he snatched up a brochure from his kidney-shaped desktop and his eyes raced over the lettering on its face.

"Jerry Delvin," he read, musingly and dispassionately. "Five foot eleven inches tall, brown hair, slate-gray eyes. Citizen. Honest, sober, civic-minded, slightly antisocial...."

He looked at me, questioningly.

"I'd rather not discuss that, sir, if you don't mind."

"Do you mind if I do mind?"

"Oh ... Oh, well if you put it like that. It's girls, sir. They block my mind. Ruin my work."

"I don't get you."

"Well, in my job—See, I've got this gift. I'm a spotter."

"A what?"

"A spotter. I can't be fooled. By advertising. Or mostly anything else. Except girls."

"I'm still not sure that I—"

"It's like this. I designate ratios, by the minute. They hand me a new ad, and I read it by a stopwatch. Then, as soon as I spot the clinker, they stop the watch. If I get it in five seconds, it passes. But if I spot it in less, they throw it out and start over again. Or is that clear? No, I guess you're still confused, sir."

"Just a bit," Baxter said.

I took a deep breath and tried again.

"Maybe an example would be better. Uh, you know the one about 'Three out of five New York lawyers use Hamilton Bond Paper for note-taking'?"

"I've heard that, yes."

"Well, the clinker—that's the sneaky part of the ad, sir, or what we call weasel-wording—the clinker in that one is that while it seems to imply sixty percent of New York lawyers, it actually means precisely what it says: Three out of five. For that particular product, we had to question seventy-nine lawyers before we could come up with three who liked Hamilton Bond, see? Then we took the names of the three, and the names of two of the seventy-six men remaining, and kept them on file."

"On file?" Baxter frowned. "What for?"

"In case the Federal Trade Council got on our necks. We could prove that three out of five lawyers used the product. Three out of those five. See?"

"Ah," said Baxter, grinning. "I begin to. And your job is to test these ads, before they reach the public. What fools you for five seconds will fool the average consumer indefinitely."

I sat back, feeling much better. "That's right, sir."

Then Baxter frowned again. "But what's this about girls?"

"They—they block my thinking, sir, that's all. Why, take that example I just mentioned. In plain writing, I caught the clinker in one-tenth of a second. Then they handed me a layout with a picture of a lawyer dictating notes to his secretary on it. Her legs were crossed. Nice legs. Gorgeous legs...."

"How long that time, Delvin?"

"Indefinite. Till they took the girl away, sir."

Baxter cleared his throat loudly. "I understand, at last. Hence your slight antisocial rating. You avoid women in order to keep your job."

"Yes, sir. Even my secretary, Marge, whom I'd never in a million years think of looking at twice, except for business reasons, of course, has to stay out of my office when I'm working, or I can't function."

"You have my sympathy, son," Baxter said, not unkindly.

"Thank you, sir. It hasn't been easy."

"No, I don't imagine it has...." Baxter was staring into some far-off distance. Then he remembered himself and blinked back to the present. "Delvin," he said sharply. "I'll come right to the point. This thing is.... You have been chosen for an extremely important mission."

I couldn't have been more surprised had he announced my incipient maternity, but I was able to ask, "Me? For Pete's sake, why, sir?"

Baxter looked me square in the eye. "Damned if I know!"

2

I stared at him, nonplussed. He'd spoken with evidence of utmost candor, and the Chief of Interplanetary Security was not one to be accused of a friendly josh, but—"You're kidding!" I said. "You must be. Otherwise, why was I sent for?"

"Believe me, I wish I knew," he sighed. "You were chosen, from all the inhabitants of this planet, and all the inhabitants of the Earth Colonies, by the Brain."

"You mean that International Cybernetics picked me for a mission? That's crazy, if you'll pardon me, sir."

Baxter shrugged, and his genial smile was a bit tightly stretched. "When the current emergency arose and all our usual methods failed, we had to submit the problem to the Brain."

"And," I said, beginning to be fascinated by his bewildered manner, "what came out?"

He looked at me for a long moment, then picked up that brochure again, and said, without referring to it, "Jery Delvin, five foot eleven inches tall—"

"Yes, but read me the part where it says why I was picked," I said, a little exasperated.

Baxter eyed me balefully, then skimmed the brochure through the air in my direction. I caught it just short of the carpet.

"If you can find it, I'll read it!" he said, almost snarling.

I looked over the sheet, then turned it over and scanned the black opposite side. "All it gives is my description, governmental status, and address!"

"Uh-huh," Baxter grunted laconically. "It amuses you, does it?" The smile was still on his lips, but there was a grimness in the glitter of his narrowing eyes.

"Not really," I said hastily. "It baffles me, to be frank."

"If you're sitting there in that hopeful stance awaiting some sort of explanation, you may as well relax," Baxter said shortly. "I have none to make. IC had none to make. Damn it all to hell!" He brought a meaty fist down on the desktop. "No one has an explanation! All we know is that the Brain always picks the right man."

I let this sink in, then asked, "What made you ask for a man in the first place, sir? I've always understood that your own staff represented some of the finest minds—"

"Hold it, son. Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. We asked for no man. We asked for a solution to an important problem. And your name was what we got. You, son, are the solution."

Chief of Security or not, I was getting a little burned up at his highhanded treatment of my emotions. "How nice!" I said icily. "Now if I only knew the problem!"

Baxter blinked, then lost some of his scowl. "Yes, of course;" Baxter murmured, lighting up a cigar. He blew a plume of blue smoke toward the ceiling, then continued. "You've heard, of course, of the Space Scouts?"

I nodded. "Like the old-time Boy Scouts, only with rocket-names for their various troops in place of the old animal names."

"And you recall the recent government-sponsored trip they had? To Mars and back, with the broadly-smiling government picking up the enormous tab?"

I detected a tinge of cynicism in his tone, but said nothing.

"What a gesture!" Baxter went on, hardly speaking directly to me at all. "Inter-nation harmony! Good will! If these mere boys can get together and travel the voids of space, then so can everyone else! Why should there be tensions between the various nations comprising the World Government, when there's none between these fine lads, one from every civilized nation on Earth?"

"You sound disillusioned, sir," I interjected.

He stared at me as though I'd just fallen in from the ceiling or somewhere. "Huh? Oh, yes, Delvin, isn't it? Sorry, I got carried away. Where was I?"

"You were telling about how this gesture, the WG sending these kids off for an extraterrestrial romp, will cement relations between those nations who have remained hostile despite the unification of all governments on Earth. Personally, I think it was a pretty good idea, myself. Everybody likes kids. Take this jam we were trying to push. Pomegranate Nectar, it was called. Well, sir, it just wouldn't sell, and then we got this red-headed kid with freckles like confetti all over his slightly bucktoothed face, and we—Sir?"

I'd paused, because he was staring at me like a man on the brink of apoplexy. I swallowed, and tried to look relaxed.

After a moment, he found his voice. "To go on, Delvin. Do you recall what happened to the Space Scouts last week?"

I thought a second, then nodded. "They've been having such a good time that the government extended their trip by—Why are you shaking your head that way, sir?"

"Because it's not true, Delvin," he said. His voice was suddenly old and tired, and very much in keeping with his snowy hair. "You see, the Space Scouts have vanished."

I came up in the chair, ramrod-straight. "Their mothers—they've been getting letters and—"

"Forgeries, Fakes. Counterfeits."

"You mean whoever took the Scouts is falsifying—"

"No. *My* men are doing the work. Handpicked crews, day and night, have been sending those letters to the trusting mothers. It's been ghastly, Delvin. Hard on the men, terribly hard. Undotted *i*'s, misuse of tenses, deliberate misspellings. They take it out of an adult, especially an adult with a mind keen enough to get him into Interplanetary Security. We've limited the shifts to four hours per man per day. Otherwise, they'd all be gibbering by now!"

"And your men haven't found out anything?" I marvelled.

Baxter shook his head.

"And you finally had to resort to the Brain, and it gave you my name, but no reason for it?"

Baxter cupped his slightly jowled cheeks in his hands and propped his elbows on the desktop, suddenly slipping out of his high position to talk to me man-to-man. "Look, son, an adding machine—which is a minor form of an electronic brain, and even works on the same principle—can tell you that two and two make four. But can it tell you why?"

"Well, no, but—"

"That, in a nutshell is our problem. We coded and fed to the Brain every shred of information at our disposal; the ages of the children, for instance, and all their physical attributes, and where they were last seen, and what they were wearing. Hell, everything! The machine took the factors, weighed them, popped them through its billions of relays and tubes, and out of the end of the answer slot popped a single sheet. The one you just saw. Your dossier."

"Then I'm to be sent to Mars?" I said, nervously.

"That's just it," Baxter sighed. "We don't even know that! We're like a savage who finds a pistol: used correctly, it's a mean little weapon; pointed the wrong way, it's a quick suicide. So, you are our weapon. Now, the question is: Which way do we point you?"

"You got me!" I shrugged hopelessly.

"However, since we have nothing else to go on but the locale from which the children vanished, my suggestion would be to send you there."

"Mars, you mean," I said.

"No, to the spaceship *Phobos II*. The one they were returning to Earth in when they disappeared."

"They disappeared from a spaceship? While in space?"

Baxter nodded.

"But that's impossible," I said, shaking my head against this disconcerting thought.

"Yes," said Baxter. "That's what bothers me."

3

Phobos II, for obvious reasons, was berthed in a Top Security spaceport. Even so, they'd shuttled it into a hangar, safe from the eyes of even their own men, and as a final touch had hidden the ship's nameplate beneath magnetic repair-plates.

I had a metal disk—bronze and red, the Security colors—insigniaed by Baxter and counterembossed with the President's special device, a small globe surmounted by clasping hands. It gave me authority to do anything. With such an identification disc, I could go to Times

Square and start machine gunning the passers-by, and not one of New York's finest would raise a hand to stop me.

And, snugly enholstered, I carried a collapser, the restricted weapon given only to Security Agents, so deadly was its molecule-disrupting beam. Baxter had spent a tremulous hour showing me how to use the weapon, and especially how to turn the beam off. I'd finally gotten the hang of it, though not before half his kidney-shaped desk had flashed into nothingness, along with a good-sized swath of carpeting and six inches of concrete floor.

His parting injunction had been. "Be careful, Delvin, huh?"

Yes, parting. I was on my own. After all, with a Security disc—the Amnesty, they called it—such as I possessed, and a collapser, I could go anywhere, do anything, commandeer anything I might need. All with no questions asked. Needless to say, I was feeling pretty chipper as I entered the hangar housing *Phobos II*. At the moment, I was the most influential human being in the known universe.

The pilot, as per my videophoned request, was waiting there for me. I saw him as I stepped into the cool shadows of the building from the hot yellow sunlight outside. He was tall, much taller than I, but he seemed nervous as hell. At least he was pacing back and forth amid a litter of half-smoked cigarette butts beside the gleaming tailfins of the spaceship, and a fuming butt was puckered into place in his mouth.

"Anders?" I said, approaching to within five feet of him before halting, to get the best psychological effect from my appearance.

He turned, saw me, and hurriedly spat the butt out onto the cement floor. "Yes, sir!" he said loudly, throwing me a quivering salute. His eyes were a bit wild as they took me in.

And well they might be. An Amnesty-bearer can suddenly decide a subject is not answering questions to his satisfaction and simply blast the annoying party to atoms. It makes for straight responses. Of course, I was dressing the part, in a way. I wore the Amnesty suspended by a thin golden chain from my neck, and for costume I wore a raven-black blouse and matching uniform trousers and boots. I must have looked quite sinister. I'm under six feet, but I'm angular and wiry. Thus, in ominous black, with an Amnesty on my breast and a collapser in my holster, I was a sight to strike even honest citizens into quick examinations of conscience. I felt a little silly, but the outfit was Baxter's idea.

"I understand you were aboard the *Phobos II* when the incident occurred?" I said sternly, which was unusual for my wonted demeanor.

"Yes, sir!" he replied swiftly, at stiff attention.

"I don't really have any details," I said, and waited for him to take his cue. As an afterthought, to help him talk, I added, "At ease, by the way, Anders."

"Thank you, sir," he said, not actually loosening much in his rigid position, but his face looking happier. "See, I was supposed to pilot the kids back here from Mars when their trip was done, and—" He gave a helpless shrug. "I dunno, sir. I got 'em all aboard, made sure they were secure in the takeoff racks, and then I set my coordinates for Earth and took off. Just a run-of-the-mill takeoff, sir."

"And when did you notice they were missing?" I asked, looking at the metallic bulk of the ship and wondering what alien force could snatch fifteen fair-sized young boys through its impervious hull without leaving a trace.

"Chow time, sir. That's when you expect to have the little—to have the kids in your hair, sir. Everyone wants his rations first—You know how kids are, sir. So I went to the galley and was about to open up the ration packs, when I noticed how damned quiet it was aboard. And especially funny that no one was in the galley waiting for me to start passing the stuff out."

"So you searched," I said.

Anders nodded sorrowfully. "Not a trace of 'em, sir. Just some of their junk left in their storage lockers."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really? I'd be interested in seeing this junk, Anders."

"Oh, yes, sir. Right this way, sir. Watch out for these rungs, they're slippery."

I ascended the retractable metal rungs that jutted from a point between the tailfins to the open airlock, twenty feet over ground level, and followed Anders inside the ship.

I trailed Anders through the ship, from the pilot's compartment—a bewildering mass of dials, switches, signal lights and wire—through the galley into the troop section. It was a cramped cubicle housing a number of nylon-webbed foam rubber bunks. The bunks were empty, but I looked them over anyhow. I carefully tugged back the canvas covering that fitted envelope-fashion over a foam rubber pad, and ran my finger over the surface of the pad. It came away just slightly gritty.

"Uh-huh!" I said, smiling. Anders just stared at me.

I turned to the storage lockers. "Let's see this junk they were suddenly deprived of."

Anders, after a puzzled frown, obediently threw open the doors of the riveted tiers of metal boxes along the rear wall; the wall next to the firing chambers, which I had no particular desire to visit. I glanced inside at the articles therein, and noted with interest their similarity.

"Now, then," I resumed, "the thrust of this rocket to get from Mars to Earth is calculated with regard to the mass on board, is that correct?" He nodded. "Good, that clears up an important point. I'd also like to know if this rocket has a dehumidifying system to keep the cast-off moisture from the passengers out of the air?"

"Well, sure, sir!" said Anders. "Otherwise, we'd all be swimming in our own sweat after a ten-hour trip across space!"

"Have you checked the storage tanks?" I asked. "Or is the cast-off perspiration simply jetted into space?"

"No. It's saved, sir. It gets distilled and stored for washing and drinking. Otherwise, we'd all dehydrate, with no water to replace the water we lost."

"Check the tanks," I said.

Anders, shaking his head, moved into the pilot's section and looked at a dial there. "Full, sir. But that's because I didn't drink very much, and any sweating I did—which was a hell of a lot, in this case—was a source of new water for the tanks."

"Uh-huh." I paused and considered. "I suppose the tubing for these tanks is all over the ship? In all the hollow bulkhead space, to take up the moisture fast?"

Anders, hopelessly lost, could only nod wearily.

"Would it hold—" I did some quick mental arithmetic—"let's say, about twenty-four extra cubic feet?"

He stared, then frowned, and thought hard. "Yes, sir," he said, after a minute. "Even twice that, with no trouble, but—" He caught himself short. It didn't pay to be too curious about the aims of an Amnesty-bearer.

"It's all right, Anders. You've been a tremendous help. Just one thing. When you left Mars, you took off from the night side, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, I did, sir. But how did you—?"

"No matter, Anders. That'll be all."

"Yes, sir!" He saluted sharply and started off.

I started back for Interplanetary Security, and my second—and I hoped, last—interview with Chief Baxter. I had a slight inkling why the Brain had chosen me; because, in the affair of the missing Space Scouts, my infallible talent for spotting the True within the Apparent had come through nicely. I had found a very interesting clinker.

4

"Strange," I remarked to Chief Baxter when I was seated once again in his office, opposite his newly replaced desk. "I hardly acted like myself out at that airfield. I was brusque, highhanded, austere, almost malevolent with the pilot. And I'm ordinarily on the shy side, as a matter of fact."

"It's the Amnesty that does it," he said, gesturing toward the disc. It lay on his desk, now, along with the collapser. I felt, with the new information I'd garnered, that my work was done, and that the new data fed into the Brain would produce some other results, not involving me.

I looked at the Amnesty, then nodded. "Kind of gets you, after awhile. To know that you are the most influential person in creation is to automatically act the part. A shame, in a way."

"The hell it is!" Baxter snapped. "Good grief, man, why'd you think the Amnesty was created in the first place?"

I sat up straight and scratched the back of my head. "Now you mention it, I really don't know. It seems a pretty dangerous thing to have about, the way people jump when they see it."

"It is dangerous, of course, but it's vitally necessary. You're young, Jery Delvin, and even the finest history course available these days is slanted in favor of World Government. So you have no idea how tough things were before the Amnesty came along. Ever hear of red tape?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't believe so. Unless it had something to do with the former communist menace? They called themselves the Reds, I believe...."

He waved me silent. "No connection at all, son. No, red tape was, well, involvement. Forms to be signed, certain factors to be considered, protocol to be dealt with, government agencies to be checked with, classifications, bureaus, sub-bureaus, congressional committees. It was impossible, Jery, my boy, to get anything done whatsoever without consulting someone else. And the time lag and paperwork involved made accurate and swift action impossible, sometimes. What we needed, of course, was a person who could simply have all authority, in order to save the sometimes disastrous delays. So we came up with the Amnesty."

"But the danger. If you should pick the wrong man—"

Baxter smiled. "No chance of that, Jery. We didn't leave it up to any committee or bureau or any other faction to do the picking. Hell, that would have put us right back where we'd been before. No, we left it up to the Brain. We'd find ourselves in a tight situation, and the Brain after being

fed the data, would come up with either a solution, or a name."

I stared at him. "Then, when I was here before, I was here solely to receive the Amnesty, is that it?"

Baxter nodded. "The Brain just picks the men. Then we tell the men the situation, hand over the Amnesty, and pray."

I had a sudden thought. "Say, what happens if two men are selected by the Brain? Who has authority over whom?"

Baxter grimaced and shivered. "Don't even think such a thing! Even your mentioning such a contingency gives me a small migraine. It'd be unprecedented in the history of the Brain or the Amnesty." He grinned, suddenly. "Besides, it can't happen. There's only one of these—" he tapped the medallion gently—"in existence, Jerry. So we couldn't have such a situation!"

I sank back into the contour chair, and glanced at my watch. Much too late to go back to work. I'd done a lot in one day, I reasoned. Well, the thing was out of my hands. Baxter had the information I'd come up with, and it had been coded and fed to the Brain. As soon as the solution came through, I could be on my way back to the world of hard and soft sell.

"You understand," said Baxter suddenly, "that you're to say nothing whatever about the disappearance of the Space Scouts until this office makes the news public? You know what would happen if this thing should leak!"

The intercom on Baxter's desk suddenly buzzed, and a bright red light flashed on. "Ah!" he said, thumbing a knob. "Here we go, at last!"

As he exerted pressure on the knob, a thin slit in the side of the intercom began feeding out a long sheet of paper; the new answer from the Brain. It reached a certain length, then was automatically sheared off within the intercom, and the sheet fell gently to the desktop. Baxter picked it up and swiftly scanned its surface. A look of dismay overrode his erstwhile genial features.

I had a horrible suspicion. "Not again?" I said softly.

Baxter swore under his breath. Then he reached across the desktop and tossed me the Amnesty.

"I hope you know what you're doing," said Baxter at the gleaming glass doorway of the spaceport. "Why a man who has absolute authority should choose to ride public transportation when he could have his pick of the fleetest government ships on Earth—"

I didn't tell him it was because of little details like stereovision, autobars, and, not least of all, comfort, that I had chosen to ride the *Valkyrie*. She sat waiting even now, far out in the center of the landing strip, two hundred towering feet of silver, crammed with all the luxuries engineering ingenuity could put aboard her. I had, thanks to a government credit card, a private cabin. I intended to enjoy myself, this trip.

I'd managed to convince Baxter that it was less likely the public would suspect there was anything amiss if I went to Mars incognito, with the Amnesty worn under my clothing, for use only in emergencies. An Amnesty-bearer arriving on Mars in a government ship might cause talk. Disastrous talk.

Baxter was rattling on and on, giving me the names of my contacts on Mars for the seventeenth time, and I was giving him perfunctory nods as though I was paying attention, though I was actually watching the other passengers leaving the check-in desk. After all, I'd be in space with them for almost two days. You never know what might develop.

The co-rider I had in mind was a girl, with hair like iridescent cornsilk, and a figure that made the stereovision starlets look 2-D in comparison. She had her back to me, but even before she turned around, I knew she was beautiful. It was just the way she stood there, facing the passenger-check robot. She—well, she *stood* like a girl who is beautiful.

Then she turned around, and I gave my instincts an A plus.

Her eyes were the deepest of blues, actually a purple tone, and they were wide, serious and shining. There was a certain determination about the set of her jaw that I liked, and her lips were like soft red velvet. A man could kiss those lips and sink slowly into warm crimson seas; lose himself in the heated softness of their gentlest pressures.

"Delvin!"

Baxter's voice shattered my reverie, and I tore my eyes from the girl, though the after-effects of dreaming left my mind in confused fragments. "Huh?" I said, looking at his face and almost failing to recognize it.

"I said—" Baxter's voice was impatient and over loud,—"that you had best, in the interests of open-space safety, not flash that Amnesty while you're aboard the *Valkyrie*. Passengers have a way of working themselves into a panic that is almost an uncanny gift! They'll all start suspecting their neighbors of treason, or worse, and—"

But I wasn't hearing his diatribe any more. As he'd spoken that first sentence, the girl with the shimmering cornsilk hair had been passing within a few feet of us, and I'd felt, rather than

actually seen, her slender shoulders stiffen beneath the blue silken fabric of her blouse. And she'd hesitated for a moment in midstep, as though she were going to turn about and see which man in the universe was the one to whom the Amnesty had been given.

I watched her move out into the sunlight, crossing the field in brisk but dainty strides. Any second now, I told myself. She thinks she hasn't been seen. She's getting far enough away so that—Aha! Now!

Halfway to the ship, the girl turned, apparently busily concerned about the clasp of her handbag, as though it had come open without warning. I kept my head turned, to look as though I were watching Baxter. But my eyes were still on her. She looked at me. Then she turned and went on toward the ship.

"Had to see who I was!" I said to myself. "So now she knows I've got the Amnesty. And so—And so, *what?*"

5

Since antigravity, artificial gravity, and low-thrust take-offs were still in the realm of science-fiction, even the luxury liners like the *Valkyrie* had to bed their passengers down in shock-absorbing couches until the ship was free of gravitation. So it wasn't until we'd achieved escape velocity from Earth that I saw the girl again.

I'd decided to wander into the lounge and try to locate her. It would be an easy task if she were present, what with her startling good looks. But it turned out to be even simpler than that.

She came to me.

I was just easing myself out of my couch, when my cabin door opened and closed. And locked.

That last part intrigued me even before I turned about. I was wondering what sort of menace I had to meet, and bewailing the fact that the collapser was still in my luggage, when I saw who my visitor was. I started to smile, but the smile left as I saw the saw-edged steak knife in her hand.

"Listen, whoever you are!" she said. Her voice was low, angrily intense, but still a pleasure to hear, somehow.

"I'm listening, I assure you!" I said, politely. "A voice like yours doesn't caress these tired old eardrums every day."

She accorded my compliment a smile, but it was a bleak one, and there was a certain wry lift to her left eyebrow. "Very suave, I'm sure," she said. "But I'm not in the mood, thank you. Now, you just sit down on your bunk and behave, and—"

"Mind if I get a cigarette?" I asked, gesturing toward my traveling case. I tried to be casual about it, but I must have failed. I lose my head around women, as I've said.

"I'll get them for you," she said, waving the knife's glittering blade at me. I moved away and sat on the edge of my bunk. She flicked the clasp open, and spread the two halves apart. There were two shirts and some underwear in the case, plus the collapser. Not a cigarette to be seen. She looked at me, narrow-eyed.

"I don't smoke," I explained weakly.

"You Amnesty-bearers!" she grated between even, white teeth. "Ready to destroy everybody with impunity, aren't you! You wouldn't even wait to find out what I wanted!"

"I haven't said a word," I pointed out delicately.

"You lied about the cigarettes," she accused.

"How would you treat a stranger who burst into your cabin with an unsheathed knife?" I said, exasperated.

She looked down at the knife, and reddened. "Maybe I was a bit abrupt about this. It's just that—" Her face suddenly crinkled up, and her deep blue-violet eyes burst into tears. Then the knife fell to the carpet, and her face was buried in her hands. I leaned forward and removed the knife from within her reach, then took her by the shoulders.

She whimpered hopelessly, between shuddering sobs, "Am I under arrest?"

"Depends," I said. "Depends entirely on why you came in here like this. And what my possession of the Amnesty has to do with it. And how," I added, puzzled, "you seemed to know so much about Amnesty-bearers and their vile dispositions!"

She took her hands from her face, streaked with tears, and said, with a shy grin, "I was guessing at that part. I just kind of assumed they'd all be pretty intolerant. Who wouldn't be, with all that power?"

"Well, *I* wouldn't for one," I said defensively. "I only bite when I'm bitten."

She found a handkerchief somewhere and began sopping up the wet spots from her complexion; a complexion, I noted happily, that did not come off with water.

"Have a chair," I said, and rang for the steward. "I hope you drink?"

"Not a lot," she admitted. "But I could use one right now."

"Good," I said, watching her as she poised gracefully on the chair before my cabin's private stereo set. "By the way, my name's Jerry. Jerry Delvin."

She flushed scarlet again, and said, "Mine is White."

"First name?" I asked. She paused. "What is your first name?"

She looked at the carpet. "Snow," she said softly.

"For real?" I said. "Like with the dwarfs?"

She nodded, as one who'd been over the same conversational ground many wearisome times in the past. "Mother was a Walt Disney fan, back in the Age of Movies."

I shook my head, and rang for the steward again. "I think we both could use a drink."

Later, the puzzled steward departed for the dining salon to return the steak knife which Snow had "accidentally" picked up. We sipped our drinks in mutual silence for a minute or two, regarding one another over the rims of our tumblers. To me, Snow was looking better by the minute. I even had a momentary thought of flashing the Amnesty at her to see if those red velvet lips could fulfill in a tactile way the promise they made visually.

But instead, I said, "Tell me, do you always attack Amnesty-bearers with the nearest weapon you can lay hold of?"

Snow laughed musically, shaking her head. "I didn't mean to come in at full threat, Jerry," she said softly. "I just wanted some sort of defense in case—Well, Amnesty-bearers think they can ask *anything* of a person, and—"

She left the explanation unfinished, but I found myself glad I hadn't tried pulling rank for a fast romance. "I'm very curious to know just what you did come in here for, Snow. Or did you just want a peep at the Amnesty? I saw you react when Baxter let it slip back at the spaceport."

"Is that who that was? Chief Baxter, of International Security?" she exclaimed.

I realized I was blurting things, and sighed, "Damn, I'm talking too much."

Snow's eyes gave me the once-over, and she tilted her head to one side, curiously. "You know, Jerry, you don't look like a government official. You seem to be just an average man."

I thought of my dossier and frowned. "Not quite average, I'm afraid. I can be hopelessly confused by women."

Snow digested this, then shrugged. "Like I said, you seem to be just an average man."

I laughed. "I guess I'd better explain."

I told her all about my erstwhile job at Solar Sales, and my mental bloc regarding females. When I finished, she was fighting a grin. It was a losing fight. The grin won.

"If I'd known that, I'd have skipped that steak knife and just entered in a bikini," she said.

"You wouldn't have to go even that far," I told her. "One friendly wink of your big blue eyes and I'd be putty."

Snow raised her eyebrows appraisingly. "Hmmm. I'll have to remember that in the future." It was in fun, but I caught a tinge of serious consideration in it. It gave me an uneasy feeling, a feeling that brought me sharply back to my main query, from which I'd been sidetracked a few moments before.

"But you still haven't told me why you came in here."

"To find you. I figured that if an Amnesty-bearer was on his way to Mars, there was big trouble. And I think I know what the trouble is, but I need some of the answers you can give me."

"What do you want with government information?" I said, trying to be stiffly formal. "And what makes you think I'd give it to you?"

"Two reasons," she said, answering my last question first. "I can simply wink a big blue eye—unless you've been pulling my leg—and get all the information I desire."

"That's only one reason," I said carefully. "What else makes you think I'd tell you the information?"

Snow eyed me soberly, and her face hovered between grim determination and fathomless concern. "My brother Ted is one of the missing Space Scouts."

6

"Don't pretend," Snow said. "I know. The last two letters from Ted convinced me something was wrong. He never wrote those letters."

I thought of Baxter's agents sweltering to turn out perfect facsimiles of children's letters, all for nothing. I sighed, and determined to make one last effort to keep the secret a secret. "You're imagining things. Sometimes, when a person is in an alien environment—which you must admit a

strange planet is—their outlook changes a bit."

She was staring at me, her eyes disconcertingly steady, just waiting for me to complete my lie, hardly listening to me. I gave it up and stopped. Snow, seeing I was through, unclasped her handbag and handed me a letter.

I read it through. When I was finished, I looked at her with what I hoped was a noncommittal expression.

"See what I mean?" said Snow. "Three *I*s in *really*, and terrible spellings of *ancient* and *Martian*. But words like ruins and civilization come through perfectly. It's an obvious attempt on the part of someone to deceive me. I just know something's wrong. That's why I drained my savings account and took this flight. I've got to find out what's happened."

"You could have gone to the police." I suggested lamely.

"I did." Snow's voice was cold and flat. "They laughed at me, said I was imagining things. I don't really blame them; all I have to go on is a hunch. That, plus the fact that Ted didn't say anything in our special code."

I closed my eyes and groaned. She would have a special code with her brother! "Sure he didn't simply overlook it?" I tried.

Snow's face was solemnly earnest. "In one letter, by the longest stretch of the imagination, possibly. But not two in a row." She leaned forward, her eyes housing desperation. "So when I learned that you, an Amnesty-bearer, were aboard, I just knew it had to be connected with whatever happened to Ted. There is something wrong, isn't there!"

I hesitated, wondering what to do. This thing was a tightly kept secret, one which I'd sworn to keep. On the other hand, Snow had the most devastating blue eyes. I shifted in my position and felt cold metal bump lightly against my chest beneath my blouse. I'd forgotten about the Amnesty. Hell! I was the most influential, powerful person in the universe, wasn't I? If I wanted to plaster the secret across the face of the moon, no one had the authority to say no. Not even Baxter, however purple he might turn at the idea, could tell me not to do anything! And hadn't I been picked by the Brain? Didn't that mean that my instincts in this thing would be the correct ones?

I took one more look into her deep blue eyes and decided that even if it was the most disastrous thing to do, I was going to tell her the truth.

"It depends on what you mean by *wrong*," I said.

Snow's brow crinkled. "Then the boys have vanished?"

I nodded, and she went deathly pale. "But don't worry," I said quickly. "It may not be as bad as we think."

"What!" she gasped. "Fifteen little boys missing on an alien planet, and it may not be bad? Are you out of your mind?"

"If you'll calm down a bit and let me explain." I suggested.

Snow leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "Go ahead," she said resignedly.

I told her about my being picked up at work by the Security Agents, of my meeting with Baxter, and of my investigation of *Phobos II*. She listened that far in silence, then could hold back no longer.

"But what did you find in those lockers? And what does the takeoff thrust and the dehumidifying system have to do with the boys' disappearance?"

I smiled reassuringly at her. "Listen, Snow. Baxter, myself, and probably you, too, have one reaction in common about the boys' vanishment from a ship in space. Our very first word on the subject is an incredulous 'Impossible.' Of course, we're using it in the colloquial sense; that of 'I don't believe it!' But if we take it in its literal sense, we'll be absolutely correct. Such a thing *is* impossible."

Snow opened her mouth, but I shushed her unspoken words with a wave of my hand. "I know, you're about to spout something about magnetic grapples and mid-space boardings, or even about long distance teleporting rays—none of which have as yet, so far as we know, been invented—or some such rot. But what are the arguments against these two solitary possibilities?"

"As to the first; Anders, the pilot, would surely have noticed another ship in his vicinity. The meteorite warnings would have begun jangling when the ship was still hundreds of miles away. And if it could, somehow, evade the signalling devices, Anders would still have heard the ship make contact. You can't drive up in a spaceship big enough to hold at least fifteen normal-sized boys, besides your own crew, and just not be noticed!

"So we come to the second, and only other, possibility: Were the boys kidnapped by some ultrasuper teleportation beam? The answer, of course, is a resounding, 'Hell, no!'"

Snow frowned. "Why?"

"The thrust, Snow, that's why. If that weight were suddenly removed from the ship—boys of Space Scout age usually run to an average weight of one hundred pounds, or, in this case, a total of about fifteen hundred pounds—if that weight had suddenly become missing, then Anders' fuel consumption, remaining the same but with less mass to thrust, would have made him overshoot Earth. This, however, did not happen. In fact, the gauges in the pilot's compartment plainly show

that the ship's mass was, on landing, within a fraction of an ounce of its takeoff mass. Therefore, no mass at all was lost in space except that expended by the consumption of fuel."

Snow shook her head, bewildered. "But that doesn't make sense!" she cried. "If they weren't taken off the ship in space, and they weren't aboard her when she landed, then—" All at once, she got it, and sat back with a sharp gasp.

"Exactly," I said. "They never even left Mars."

"But you said that this man Anders had seen to it that they were all aboard before takeoff."

"Which I have no doubt he did. But the civilian mind skips a few details when it thinks over his report. They see him look at the boys, nod, then go up front and press the starter button. It doesn't happen quite that simply. There are a lot of other things to be done. Anders had to go into the pilot's cabin, strap himself in place, check the gauges which showed his course, mass, fuel supply, thrust control, oxygen-nitrogen mixture, and a million and one other things. He had to check the last and most important dial examined before takeoff; the one which told him that each of the fifteen takeoff racks in the ship were occupied."

"But—" Snow cut in, bewildered, leaning forward.

"Let me finish." She set her mouth and sat back again. "He had to know that, because takeoff thrust on a human being *not* snugly in his padded rack would probably squash him to pieces against a bulkhead. So there had to be something in those racks in order to fool Anders into thinking that the scouts were still aboard; something which, by the time Anders had maneuvered the ship into its flight vector, would be gone without leaving a trace, or not much of a trace, unless one were actually looking for it."

"What?" asked Snow, fascinated.

"Ice," I said. "Hunks of ice in every one of the fifteen bunks. Ice which the temperature control unit would commence to melt immediately."

"But that would mean ice blocks of hundred-pound weights! They couldn't melt so fast. Wouldn't Anders be likely to come back to the racks and find them still there?"

"Not," I said, "with the efficiency of the temperature control system. Sharp deviations from comfortable levels in a spaceship can be disastrous. So the thermostat in the ship is set for a rigid fifty-five degrees, and it's built to keep the interior heat at that level. Put fifteen-hundred pounds of ice on board, and the heat in the rack cabin goes up, trying to get the temperature back to its correct level. The ice, lying there melting, absorbs the heat swiftly. So more heat is pumped into the room. Well, figure fifteen minutes before all the ice was liquified. More than enough of a margin of safety."

"Safety for whom?" Snow asked.

"For whoever didn't want Anders finding any evidence of how the disappearance was accomplished. About an hour passed between takeoff and the time he checked the cabin. You must remember that Anders had to maneuver the ship free of Mars' gravity, set his course for Earth, and then make a final check of all his equipment before going back into the ship proper. That takes plenty of time."

"But how could you figure this out?" Snow asked, her eyes wide with interest. "And where did the ice come from?"

"From the night side of Mars," I said. "Where the temperature drops below zero as soon as the sun has gone down. Remember, the ship was in a landing berth, and had just been prepared for a takeoff. The technicians would have moved away to be clear of the blast. In fact, they'd all be inside their shacks, having coffee against the chilly weather they'd been exposed to. All it took was someone bright enough to get hold of the water tank, and to spray the water into any handy container where it would freeze solid in a few seconds. Then the chunks of ice were substituted for the boys in the bunks, and Anders took off with no one but himself on board."

"You reasoned this out?" Snow said, incredulously. "How?"

"My gift for spotting, which I told you about. Once I knew that the boys could not have been kidnapped from space, and that something had to be making up for their mass aboard the *Phobos II*, I tried to think of *where* this something could be kept. It wasn't in the open, nor in any of the storage space. Therefore, it had to be within the bulkheads. But what could go within the bulkheads? Only water which had been taken from the air to keep the humidity down. And yet this water had to remain—without a container, mind you—in the fifteen racks at takeoff time so that Anders' dial would register them as all being securely in place before he pressed the starter. So in what form could water sit on a bunk without a container?"

Snow smiled helplessly, "Ice, of course. You make it sound almost idiotically simple." Then her face fell. "But it's only a theory, isn't it! Or is it?"

I shrugged. "It seems borne out by a few things, Snow. When I entered the *Phobos*, I checked beneath the canvas covering on one of the takeoff racks. There was grit there, which is a little unusual on a military vessel, with their one-track-mindedness about things being spic and span. And water running through canvas, taking along the dirt that even a military white-glove inspection can't find, leaves behind a residue of grit."

"It still doesn't seem enough," she said wistfully, as if begging me to prove my theory correct for her peace of mind. I was glad to oblige.

"There's more. Water weighs in at 62.4 pounds per cubic foot. So, fifteen hundred pounds of water would occupy approximately twenty four cubic feet; the exact surplus found aboard the *Phobos II*, in the bulkhead tubing."

Snow looked startled, but still unconvinced. "To kidnap fifteen boys, without Anders noting even the slightest sign of a struggle or disturbance...."

I nodded. "Right. It is odd, isn't it! This bothered me, too, until I checked the contents of those storage lockers."

"Oh. I'd forgotten about that!" she exclaimed. "What did you find?"

"Roughly, without going into precise itemization, there were bottles of space sickness capsules, clean handkerchiefs, toothbrushes, packets of soap and the like."

"And the like?" Snow remarked. "What likeness is there between those things?"

I smiled happily, and told her, simply, the clinker I'd spotted at once on seeing those items: "They're all items which small boys hate with almost apocalyptic fury. But I did not find such things as jackknives, candy, chewing gum—Shall I go on?"

"You mean that whoever kidnapped the boys took along the things which the boys wanted?" she asked, her lovely voice making an unbelieving squeak on the last word.

"I mean," I said softly, "that I believe the Space Scouts left the *Phobos II* of their own free will."

7

By evening of the following day we were in descent toward Marsport; a slow planet-circling downward spiral with a steady braking by the nose jets, lest we hit the atmosphere too fast and burn up. Even a thin atmosphere like that of Mars was no fun to enter at interplanetary speeds.

Snow, looking through the viewport beside her chair in the lounge, sighed gently and turned her lovely gaze back to my face. "I wish—" she began softly.

I laid my hand upon hers. "We've been over that, Snow. You must return to Earth. You haven't a chance of finding those boys. Hell, if you had, the Brain would have picked you. And I, with the Amnesty, can go anywhere, do anything, get results in a hurry."

"But if I came with you...." she pleaded in a tense whisper.

I shook my head, with finality. "I've told you over and over. You wreck my spotter's instinct, Snow. If you're with me, I'll never be able to locate those boys. I'll miss even obvious clues."

"You weren't so fuddleheaded yesterday when you told me how you'd reasoned out the real facts about the disappearance," she accused.

"Hell, your presence affects my thinking, not my memory! Come on, now, see it my way, will you?"

I stood up. "It looks like good-bye for a while, Snow."

She faced me, solemnly. "Yes, it does. You'll be careful, won't you? And you'll let me know if—if—"

"I promise. Before I let Baxter know, even!"

We stood like that a moment, scarcely a foot apart, and I fought an impulse to take her into my arms. Then, with no warning, she flung her arms about my neck, and I had my first taste of those red velvet lips.

Then she was gone from the lounge. I glanced at the wall chronometer, and began to move toward my cabin in a hurry. Less than five minutes till set-down. I entered at a dead run.

I'd barely lashed myself to the rack when the landing thrust began. However, I'd taken two antipressure tablets, as per the instructions posted in the room, and I was comfortably unconscious even before the pressure began to grow.

When I awoke, there were two men in red and bronze uniforms standing over my rack. They didn't seem very pleased to find me there. One of them had my bag open, and was holding my collapser in his hand, and the look he was giving me wasn't the cheeriest I'd ever seen.

"What are you guys doing here?" I demanded. In speaking, I tried to gesture. That's when I became aware of the cold steel manacles on my wrists. "What the hell?"

The one with the weapon hefted it thoughtfully in his palm. "Don't you know it's a death-penalty offense to have possession of a collapser, chum?" he said.

The other one, not waiting for my answer, began undoing the straps across my body, and assisting me to my feet.

"Say, look, what do you guys mean by coming here and—"

"We were alerted," said the first man. "By an Amnesty-bearer."

I simply stared at him for an unbelieving instant. Then I said, "You're crazy! There's only one Amnesty in existence, and—"

With horrible clarity, I recalled Snow's impassioned farewell in the lounge, and the way her hands had darted about; my neck.

I brought my manacled hands up to my blouse and felt frantically for the red and bronze disc. The Amnesty was gone.

"Come along, now," said the one who'd helped me up.

"Where are we going?" I demanded.

"You're to be held incommunicado," he said, "until the Amnesty-bearer returns. Come along, now. We haven't got all day!"

"Day?" I said, and looked toward the viewport. Sure enough the glaring Martian sunlight was pouring into the cabin. "But we were landing on the night side," I said, confused.

"You did," said the one with the collapser. "Only it was arranged that you'd stay asleep for a while, till we could get here."

"Arranged how?" I choked furiously. Then I remembered the capsules I'd taken. I looked toward the instruction posted on the inside of the cabin door. Now that I was in no great hurry, I could see where someone had, with ordinary pen and ink, gone over the numeral 1, and made it into a passable 2. Someone, I thought bitterly, with shimmering cornsilk hair and red velvet lips!

"Now, just a minute, you guys, I can explain." I said.

"Stow it," said the one with the gun. "Come on, get moving."

"When Chief Baxter hears about this—" I growled.

He laughed. "You know Baxter has no authority to over-ride an Amnesty-bearer's orders!" Once again, he motioned with the collapser in the direction of the door.

"Well then, boys," I said, in as threatening a tone as I could muster, "let your fat heads chew on this for a while: the girl who has that Amnesty stole it from me! You just get hold of Baxter and verify it. Because if you don't, there are going to be two slightly-used Security Agent's uniforms for sale!"

They looked at each other, frowning. Then the one with the gun scowled. The other guy paled. "Say, Charlie, what if there is something to his story? What do you think we ought to do?"

Charlie blinked and thought hard. Then a smile crossed his face. "Nothing," he said. "We were given orders by an Amnesty-bearer, and all we have to do is carry them out to be in the clear."

"Oh, yeah?" I grunted. "Five'll get you ten Baxter thinks differently!"

The one who wasn't Charlie hesitated, and his grip, hitherto vise-tight on my upper arm, went suddenly slack. "Disobeying an Amnesty-bearer is unprecedented," he said carefully.

"So is the theft of the Amnesty!" I shouted in exasperation.

The other one looked at Charlie. "Maybe we ought to call Baxter, just in case."

"In my book," Charlie muttered, "that's not holding a guy incommunicado!"

"The hell it's not," I snorted. "I won't communicate with him. You two guys do it. Do it any way you can square it with your sense of duty. Either tell Baxter you have a man in custody by the name of Jerry Delvin or that the Amnesty is in the possession of a blue-eyed blonde girl, and see what he says!"

Two hours later, I was facing the image of a purple-faced Chief Baxter on an interplanetary videoscreen. "Sorry to be so long, Delvin," he said apologetically. "But I'd left orders not to be disturbed. Anyway, I've given the men instructions to return the collapser to you, and an authorization permit for it, in case you meet any more agents."

"Which heaven forbid!" I growled. "No red tape with an Amnesty. Ha!"

"Uh. Yes. So you can continue with your search, Delvin. Have you found anything interesting?"

"Full report when I get back, Baxter," I said. "Right now, I have a date with a beautiful blonde."

"A date?" he choked out. "But—"

"Signing off," I said, and cut the circuit. I belted the collapser into place around my waist, and started off for the city proper. Somewhere in Marsport there was a lovely blonde girl named Snow White, who could do anything, anything at all, and get away with it. Anything but one thing. She couldn't get within a foot of me again! Not if I had anything to say about it.

Marsport, the largest—if you excluded the prospecting encampments within a hundred-mile radius of the place—city on the Planet, had grown fast, from the time of its founding in 2014. Originally simply a mining site for the Tri-Planet Refining Corporation, it had spread backward from the area of the original mines in a rough circle, beginning with the monotonous quonset huts of the miners, and modulating in its move toward the perimeter to smart iron-and-adobe structures. Some of these, thanks to the less-than-half Earth's normal gravity, as high as fifteen stories.

The planet, barely half the diameter of Earth and a tenth of Earth's mass, was a minerologist's paradise. The rusty red sands of the Martian desert were almost pure ferrous oxide, a source of both iron for the profitable refineries and oxygen for the inhabitants of Marsport.

Going Los Angeles one ridge better, Marsport was completely circumscribed by high crimson hills, and this natural bowl formation, plus oxygen's heavier-than-air-density, allowed the city to be filled with breathable atmosphere, much as tobacco smoke can lie surging gently within an ashtray if the air in a room is still. This made planetary wind-storms a hazard.

Outside the hills, of course, the air was thin, cold and barely able to support life, being comparable to the biting cold air atop Mount Everest. Human lungs could not breathe it for long without freezing. Naturally, there was a high casualty rate amongst the prospectors, despite their pressurized metal huts and oxygen masks. But uranium, as it had been since the advent of the atomic age, was enormously well-paying to the one miner in twenty to find any in Mars' body breaking hinterlands with its roasting dry heat of day and blood-freezing cold by night.

And then there was parabolite.

This mineral, found in abundance beneath the Martian sands, was, theoretically, worth ten times its weight in gold to the people who might mine it. I say theoretically, because no one had as yet found a way of getting any ore. Paradoxically, the feature which made parabolite so vitally desired was the same feature which prevented anyone from mining it: it was totally indestructible.

The name had been given it by the scientists who studied the three solitary fragments of it found small enough for shipping back to Earth. There was just no way of chipping a piece loose for analysis. The name was due to the oddly shaped molecules which made up this mineral. All of them seemed to be joined atomically into perfect parabolas, no matter which way you came at them. Which meant, in effect, that when anything was brought to bear against the substance, pressure which struck one end of the parabolically curved molecules was retransmitted by the other end, back to the thing putting pressure on it. Result: it "hit back" with a violence equal to that applied to it, and sustained no damage whatsoever to itself. Chemicals were tried when pickaxes had failed, but the substance was inert. It gave no sign of reacting either to hydrofluoric acid, which could eat its way through glass, or to aqua regia, which could eat through anything else.

They even tried using the collapsers on it. These deadly weapons, which worked by the simple process of killing the attraction between the protons and electrons, could, in the briefest time, reduce anything to less than dust. The electrons spun away in a blinding blue-white flash, and the stripped-down protons, being less than atomic in size, fell silently down into the heart of the planet, leaving a virtual nothingness where the object had been.

But on parabolite, even these mighty weapons were useless. Oh, they had found that training a battery of them on a chunk of parabolite, for a period of days, with an enormous drain of power keeping the weapons firing continuously, did get results. The overall mass of the chunk was reduced by one-millionth of a gram. Which was less than useless, because not only was that amount completely impractical to obtain, but it was not even obtained, thanks to the collapsers' destructive potency. It was merely destroyed.

And so, vast acres of this fortune-making mineral lay all about the planet, as common as sandstone was on Earth. And no one had any idea of how to get any of it, not even the natives.

Yes, there were natives, of a sort, on Mars. Strange beings, albeit friendly, made up, except for a fraction of a percent, of sugar.

They were crystalline, these beings, covered over with prisms of bright red sugar that gave them, with their scuttling gait and long pointed tails, the appearance of man-sized lizards. A lot of their metabolism was a mystery to us, but we did know that they, like plants on Earth, lived by a sort of modified photosynthesis.

At first thought, this seems strange, since we are used to green as the primary necessity in a photosynthetic metabolism. But it made sense when you remember that foliage looks green because the green rays of the sun are reflected, and the red rays absorbed. Since a crystal passes only the rays which correspond to its color-structure, they did quite well, photosynthetically. Air and water were their chief foods, of course. The water they inhaled through rubbery-looking hollow tongues which extended a good two feet from their wide, dragon like mouths. The distance was a necessity, due to their exteriors, which, as I've said, were made of red crystalline sugar. They could take water on the inside, but it was fatal on the outside.

The first men on Mars had felt pretty silly standing guard over their encampments with water pistols. But the sugarfeet, as they came to be called, proved friendly enough in a nonobsequious way. They seemed, on investigation, to be the Martian equivalent of cats.

By that I mean that they must have been the self-sufficient pets of the Ancient Martians. They tended to be standoffish and annoyingly smug, but not menacing in any way. After all, why should

they be menacing? We had nothing they wanted. Our food was useless to them, as were our clothes, gold or anything else in the way of possessions. They liked our water, of course, but long evolution in the Martian deserts had kept their physical need for this commodity down to a minimum. The average sugarfoot drank about a pint of water per week, which was no menace to us, even when we'd first landed and water was in short supply.

But of the Ancients, they could tell us nothing, any more than an alien landing on a depopulated Earth could find out about men from an alley cat. We knew there had been intelligent life, though. There were remnants of buildings still to be seen half-buried in the rust-red sands, and bewildering little artifacts for which no conceivable use had as yet been convincingly postulated. There was one thing, though, that bothered us about these buildings and artifacts.

They were made out of parabolite.

How had the Martians carved, or molded, or otherwise affected the shape of this indestructible mineral? We had no idea.

Marsport had a population of about one hundred thousand families, averaging five people to a family, so it was a good-sized city for Snow to hide herself in.

On the other hand, I wasn't absolutely sure just why I was looking for her. After all, I didn't really need the Amnesty. A collapser carries a lot of weight on its own. And an Amnesty's power was only in proportion to the esteem in which an approached individual held the authority of the World Government.

The more I thought of it, the more I wondered why I was so determined to find Miss Snow White. She'd only be a hindrance to me, really, what with short-circuiting my spotting technique. And a man on a mission of such grave importance wouldn't simply seek out a girl because she had cornsilk hair and red velvet lips, would he? Well, would he?

As I thought all of this, I was striding swiftly along Von Braun Street, the main thoroughfare, ignoring the stares of passers-by as they spotted the golden collapser belted about my waist. Passing a small bar, I happened to glance in through the window. And there was her photograph on the stereo over the bar. The men along its polished metal length were staring at her with interest.

Curious and puzzled, I turned back and went inside the bar to hear what was being said about her.

"Shoot to kill! Repeat: Shoot to kill!" said the announcer's voice from the speaker. "She is not to be obeyed under any circumstances. The Amnesty is a forgery. Repeat: A forgery."

I found myself leaning weakly against a wall by the door as the sense of the message came home to me. Baxter had lost no time making up for my stupidity in losing the Amnesty. He didn't dare admit it had been stolen, because Amnesty-bearers, like myself, were considered by the populace to be intelligent, and very clever. It wouldn't do to weaken public opinion of IS.

But to kill! From Baxter's viewpoint, it made sense. If she were simply shot down, then she couldn't mention the fact that it had been stolen, either.

As a patriot, I should have been happy to see my government operating with such efficient dispatch. For some reason, I was not happy at all. I thought of those soft warm lips pressing gently upward upon my own, albeit in the act of deception, and felt suddenly sick inside.

"Something for you, buddy?"

I looked up. The bartender, his voice mirroring the polite caution with which people spoke to collapser toters, was down at my end of the bar, by the doorway, his face strained into a nervously hearty anxiety to please.

Irritably, I leaned forward to rasp a negation into his face at close range, and then I decided to create no more ruckus than I had to. "Okay," I grunted.

"Yes, sir," he said, spinning about and commencing to do dexterous things with the flashy array of bottles behind the bar and a tall frosty mixer.

"Down the hatch," he smiled, setting the glass of shining chartreuse liquid before me.

I nodded, and took a sip. It was good, whatever it was. It was a little nose-tingling, like a stinger, and yet there was something, a not unpleasant bitterish aftertaste. The glass fell from my suddenly numb fingers and shattered loudly on the bar. I tried to get up, and couldn't.

The floor of the bar was warping, tugging at me. I was unconscious halfway down.

My first awareness was the whine of the converters, audible everywhere in Marsport, if not by ear, then by the soles of one's feet. Their thundering dynamos plunged potent destructive rays against the Martian sands, leaving in their wake invisible fountains of nascent oxygen and shimmering puddles of orange-white molten iron. They went on day and night without ceasing, partly to keep the mining companies on Earth from losing their franchises with Tri-Planet, but primarily to keep the Marsport populace from tumbling down in the streets with cyanosed lips

and glazing eyes, as the breathable atmosphere sloughed away over the hilltops.

So I knew that I was in Marsport, at least. But not much else. My hands, when I tried to move them, proved to be bound, and tightly, at that. My fingers felt swollen and numb when I tried to flex them. There was something, a hood, a sack, a cloth, over my head, fastened about my throat, impairing my breathing slightly and my vision altogether.

I found, though, that I could move my legs, but it was little help when I wouldn't know where they were carrying me if I chanced using them. For all I knew, I was lying on my back atop a precipice. Moving about could be disastrous.

So I lay still and spent my time wondering why that bartender should have slipped me a mickey.

It was senseless, in a way. I mean, even granting that there was some sort of inimical agency here attempting to forestall investigation of the missing Space Scouts, how did they know that I was the proper Amnesty-bearer? Or that there was an Amnesty-bearer around? And, knowing this, how would they know that I'd turn into that particular bar?

The thoughts were too confusing, so I gave them up, and just lay there in darkness, worrying. And not, strangely enough, about my fate, but about Snow's. Security Agents were keen-sighted and perfect shots. And a collapser beam wasn't choosy about what it annihilated.

I'd come to while lying on my back, but had chanced turning over on my face to get my body weight off my hands. A little life seemed to be oozing back into my thickened fingers. I tried the cords on my wrists again, but they were still taut and firm. Then one of my fingers found the loose end of the cord, and felt its surface. It was one of those nylon ropes with a steel wire center. I gave up trying to undo it.

How long had I been lying wherever I was, anyhow? I had no means of knowing. It might have been an hour, a day, or merely minutes. How far behind Snow's trail had I fallen thanks to this damnable delay? And did she know she was being hunted?

I shifted over onto my right hip to feel if my collapser holster were still in place. Something pressed back against me, but it had too much give to it. The holster was there, all right, but it was empty.

Obviously, I couldn't do anything else until I could see. I tried catching at the hooding material with my teeth, but it was stretched tautly across my features, and evaded them with maddening efficiency. On reflection, I saw that this was the reason I hadn't smothered. Looser cloth would have leaped easily to block mouth and nostrils against my unconscious breathing. I wondered if the tautness was an over-sight, or purposely done to ensure my staying alive.

That took me about three seconds to figure out. If I was still alive, then they wanted me for something further. If they hadn't, then the cord binding the hood to my neck would have been used as a simple, efficient garrote.

If my hands could reach the neck cord, though, I might be able to untie it, and then try my hand cords with my teeth.

Slowly, I managed to slide my knees forward until I was resting solely on kneecaps and chin. Then I twisted, stretched, and tugged with my arms until the binding cord slipped over my rump and slid to the backs of my knees. My chin, from all the weight on it, felt as though it had been kicked by a fullback, but I ignored the pain and flopped awkwardly over onto my side, then rolled carefully onto my back, with my ankles somewhere over my face.

Now came the rough part. I found myself, in the next five minutes of torture, wishing I'd done more toe-touching exercises in my erstwhile sedentary life. The cord slipped down as far as the tendons behind my heels, but would budge no further, no matter how I strained. With my boots off, I might have made the last inch or so, but they were on, and had thick durex heels. It was going to be a struggle.

When it happened, it happened all at once. I was wrenching at my bonds, gritting my teeth and pulling, despite the binding agony that flared in my wrists. And then I smacked myself in the face with my own hands as my feet jackknifed back to the ground. I lay there panting awhile, then started feeling about my neck for the end of the cord fastening the hood in place.

My fingers, thicker than ever after my struggles, were almost without the power to feel as I fumbled them against the knot in the cord. In their bloated state, they were just slightly more manageable than sausages.

I let them work by touch, and kept my mind away from what they were doing, lest I begin to scream in frustration at their bumbling efforts. Then something slipped and gave way. The bottom folds of the hooding cloth fell open from my throat. I fairly tore the thing from my head and looked around me.

There wasn't much light to see by, just a pallid gray glow in the air, but I could tell I was in a cellar of some sort. The walls had that dusty look to them, and there was a flight of stone stairs going up toward a door, under which seeped a dim sheet of light. I started looking around for some other way out. There was none visible, although I couldn't see too much outside the area where that dim light struck and diffused before vanishing into darkness.

I licked my lips, took in some deep draughts of air, then began dulling my incisors on the wrist cords. The knot, unfortunately, was on the ulnar side of the wrists, just behind the little fingers. The only way I could get at that was to bend my hands tightly up to my neck, as though I were about to choke myself, and work over the underside of my wrists. It was awkward as hell, but

finally that cord, too, dropped away, and I was free.

Well, relatively free. I didn't know how my chances were of getting out of that cellar or whatever it was.

While it was probably only setting myself up for a return to my bonds, I decided to do the obvious thing and head up that flight of stairs.

But before I did so, I scouted around for some sort of weapon. On a pile of empty crates I located a pair of shears, the sort used to snip through the metal tape that binds bulky crates like those. It wasn't much, and was clumsy to hold, but it was all I had, so I took it along with me.

Creeping up the stairs, I found the door locked from the outside, but it was a handle-or-key operated lock, the kind that can be opened from the inside by simply turning the knob. Apparently my captors were less concerned about me getting out than they were about anyone else getting in. It figured, though. I was supposed to be unconscious, hooded, and bound.

Shutting the door behind me, I found myself in a corridor, not itself lighted, but getting light from somewhere at the far end. As I moved cautiously down its length, I was thankful for the treeless Martian topography which had occasioned all edifices being built of metal and/or stone. There wasn't a chance of my making the floor creak.

I arrived at the end of the corridor, and paused behind the edge of an open door, through which the light came streaming.

And there were voices, too. Voices, and odd clacking noises.

Gingerly, I lowered myself all the way to the flooring and peeked around the very bottom of the door frame, below, I hoped, the eye level of anyone in that room.

It was, I saw, the bar in which I'd been mickeyed. But long opaque blinds were latched in place over the windows and glass door, and the people in the place didn't seem to be customers. Some of them were seated on the barstools, and some on the bar itself. Others occupied tables and chairs along the wall opposite the bar. All were facing the area between the bar and the tables, in which was set another table. There was a man seated at it. A man, and something else.

It was this something else which was emitting the clacking noises I'd heard. I looked with fascinated horror at its long, flare-nostrilled face, and rheumy-looking wide-set eyes. It had no hair, nor could I discern anything like ears, until it turned its head and I saw the hole just behind the back edge of the cruelly-toothed jaw. The overhead light, as this creature turned its head, glinted red off squarish conical scales, and I realized with a little shock that I was seeing my first sugarfoot.

Seen in the flesh, as it were, it looked considerably more menacing than the photos I'd seen of it back on Earth. At that cosmic distance, I could believe that it was docile, albeit standoffish, and was, while not a friend to man, at least an accepted neutral. But looking at those eyes and teeth, I decided the Public Information Bureau on Earth was full of beans. That damned thing looked dangerous!

As I watched, it made some more clacking noises, and the man beside it, whom I recognized as the bartender, frowned and clacked something back. His sounds didn't have the same snapping quality to them, but I couldn't doubt they were conversing in some language. Which language just had to be the sugarfoot's.

And that was another thing the PIB on Earth hadn't mentioned. Contact between man and sugarfoot was supposed to be impossible, except in the form of rudimentary gestures. They were supposed to be able to learn to follow certain Earth words, if you dinned them at them often enough. But that was all. Now, here was an Earthman talking to one! It'd make interesting news for Baxter when I got back.

If I got back.

The bartender, in the course of his speech, pointed at something on the table before him and shook his head. I raised up slowly on my hands from my prone position, and got a glimpse of the object under discussion. It was my collapser, goldenly glinting in the incandescent light.

Just from following the bartender's gestures and facial expressions, I began to gather some of what was going on. I didn't know why, but they seemed to be dickering over possession of the weapon. And unless I misjudged the man's now-and-then pointing in the direction of where that stone cellar lay, I, too, was on the auction block.

The way I figured it, this sugarfoot wanted me, and it wanted the collapser. The bartender seemed willing enough to surrender me, but was nixing a deal on the weapon.

The drawn blinds and the men's lowered voices indicated that it must be nightfall. I'd started out into Marsport at midday. The rotation of the planet is only fractionally different from Earth's, so that meant that at least six hours had gone by since my capture. But a bar closing down at sunset, just when its business would begin picking up, would look pretty suspicious, so I could figure on probably another six hours, putting the time at somewhere past midnight.

I wished I could leave with the collapser, but I had my doubts that I could cross the floor of that room to snatch it from the table without being grabbed by someone. I shook my head and withdrew back into the corridor to think. No point in risking my life to get that weapon back, when I could simply slip out some other way and alert IS. A team of agents could reduce the bar to a sparkling crater in seconds, along with the men, sugarfoot and collapser.

It wouldn't be quite as glorious as acting the hero by myself, but it'd be considerably safer. I got back to my feet and started inspecting the rest of the corridor, seeking a less populated exit than the one onto Von Braun street.

Back the way I'd come, there was only the door to that cellar. I doubled back toward the other door by the bar itself, ducked down low, and scuttled past it on my hands and knees. No outcry came from the room, just the vociferous clacking noises, and an occasional mutter from one of the surrounding men. I figured I'd made it okay. The corridor bent, just past that doorway, and ended in a window. It was open. I stuck my head out and looked around.

Something was glowing just beneath me, something that reflected almost intolerable heat against my face when I looked down at it.

A river of liquified iron, ten feet wide, ran along a bed carved into the rocky soil. It was a good five feet between the bottom of the window and the sullen smolder of that hellish stream, but my face and throat felt already parboiled. Before ducking back into the relatively cooler temperature inside the corridor, I shot a glance toward the source of this impassable moat, and understood why it was there.

About two miles along this radiant river, I saw the towering metallic hulk of the converters, their shimmering molecule-blasting rays leaping from a multi-noded sender plate to a cup-shaped receiver. And, silhouetted against the black velvet night sky, above and between these deadly twins, was a monster escalator, carrying ton after ton of rich red Martian sand to a point in space directly above the flashing beam, and spilling it downward through the raw energy below.

Where the sand—pure ferrous oxide—struck the beam, I could not look without daring blindness, so violent were those disruptive reactions. But just above it, a silvery cloud arose and dissipated itself; the freed oxygen, enriching the atmosphere in this gigantic crater that was Marsport. And below it, a cataract of burning metal sprayed downward into an enormous vat, the sides of which were spouting a continual flow of this dangerous liquid into troughs which spread out in a fanlike pattern that must have encompassed the entire city.

It took me a few minutes of thought, but I figured it out, as I drew back through the window from the heat. It was not enough that the converters could supply the citizenry with breathable air. The planetary temperature at night was below the level at which a man could live, save with the most cumbersome, demanding precautions, such as are demanded by arctic exploration on Earth.

And so, instead of merely letting the metal cool into ingots before it was shipped where it was needed, it was channeled through the city, passing behind all the buildings where alleys would normally be, and warming the environment so that going into the night air would not mean sure death by freezing. I could not see the far end of the trough, but I knew that beyond the city limits the troughs would converge, and iron would be cooled, shaped and shipped.

It was ingenious, and something I'd never run across in my readings about Mars. But then, I was never much of a space exploration fan. However, ingenious or not, it was a crummy trick on me, really. I hadn't a chance of passing through that rushing inferno outside.

That left me one way out: through the front door.

Hefting the wirecutter in my hand, and breathing a silent prayer, I moved back to that open doorway.

Things, when I peeked out, seemed no more advanced. Man and sugarfoot were still clacking away at one another, neither side giving ground. However, the other men round about were showing signs of restlessness.

"Whyn't ya just blast him, Jim, and forget it?" suggested an oldster just over to my left.

Jim, the bartender, faced the other men with a black scowl, furious at the interruption. "You keep your mouth shut, Barry! You know these things can understand a little English!"

The older man, Barry, subsided with a sullen look at Jim, and I turned my gaze there to see what would happen next. I'd quite overlooked the fact that Jim's looking toward Barry had sent his eyes in the general direction of the corridor, and that I was leaning my fool head around the doorway. Jim was looking right at me, his mouth wide open.

"Hey!" he cried, leaping to his feet and pointing with such violence that his chair crashed to the floor. "He's loose!"

I took a step back, as the entire roomful of men jumped up and turned to face me. My mind leaped about, like a fish flung alive onto a skillet, trying to make some sensible decision. Should I chance flinging myself over that red hot river outside, or rush back to the deadend of the cellar? Neither course seemed very profitable, somehow.

But my time was running out. After the first startled pause at seeing me there, the group came at me in a rapid scuttle, hands outstretched to take me.

So none of them ever saw what I saw, facing into the room. The sight they missed was one which sent me diving to my left, to fall prone on the corridor floor, hugging the raw stone there and clamping my eyes shut.

I heard that terrible throbbing buzz in that bar room, and then my skin prickled and stung as an eight-foot segment of the wall above me vanished into a cloud of white sparks.

When I at last lifted myself carefully for a look, the sugarfoot was gone. Gone with the collapser I'd seen it snatch up from that table when Jim's guard was down.

And the men were gone, too. Gone with most of the wall, half the bar, and a large quantity of chairs and tables.

A collapser is nothing to fool with.

The sugarfoot must have flicked it on and sent the blue-white beam in a sweeping curve that turned everything it touched into hot protons and electrical energy. He'd turned it off, however, as soon as the last man vanished from his ken.

I realized with a sick feeling of shock that a second's more energy would have dissolved the back wall, and I would have been buried beneath a flood of molten iron.

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When I got outside, there was no sign of the sugarfoot along the street. In fact, there was no sign of anyone. Marsport, despite the caloric values of the heating troughs is still pretty chilly at night. I gathered no one went out much, or that this was a slack night for the local merchants, because even the stores were closed, and the public stereovision auditorium was shut down, too.

It was eerie, walking down that rocky street, with no sound but that of my durex heels smacking the ground. To left and right, dark shuttered windows moved by as I advanced. My nose still felt irritated by the good whiff of ozone it had inhaled when the sugarfoot cut loose with the collapser, and I was rubbing the tip of it with the back of my wrist when I saw a figure down the street, facing toward me.

It seemed to be a man, but his figure was lost in the deep shadows thrown by the eye-searing glow of the distant converter. I kept moving toward him, but slowed my pace. There was something in his attitude that I didn't like. He was waiting there for me, I realized with a small shock. And I sensed his intentions weren't the best possible.

While moving toward him, I started darting my eyes about me, to see if there were some way of getting off the street. But the buildings were all side-to-side with one another, and shut tight. I could, of course, hurl myself through the glass front of one. But assuming I didn't brain myself on the blinds in the process, what then? All these places were backed by that infernal molten river. There'd be no escape. And then my eyes saw something that sent brazen alarm bells clanging through my nervous system. In the entrance of one store, the glass curved at a forty-five degree angle to my line of movement, and, reflected in its depths, I could see the broad avenue behind me.

It was filled with creeping figures.

I spun about with an involuntary cry, and looked at them, head on. It was a group of men, armed with rude weapons, mostly clubs, but a few glittering knives. And they were obviously after me.

As soon as they knew I'd spotted them, they left all pretense of stealth, and came at me in a run, brandishing their weapons.

I staggered back one frightened step, then turned and ran down the street like a madman. Not one of them, however, was making a sound. Only their heavy footfalls told me they were still in earnest pursuit as I stumbled up the street toward that solitary waiting figure in the shadows. It was like a nightmare; the relentless pursuers chasing one down an endless avenue with no turnoff.

My ribs ached with panicky breathing, and my vision was swimming giddily as I came to where the solitary figure stood. "Here we go," I said to myself. "Now he steps out and stops me. And I'm too winded to put up a fight."

As I came nearly abreast of the figure, it stepped out into the blue-white glow that glared from the converter. Brilliant light coruscated over glassy scales as it moved out into the avenue in a queer scuttling motion.

The sugarfoot! I knew it was the same one. My collapser was still clutched in its three-fingered hand. Blindly, I shot my arms in front of me to wrest the thing from its grasp, but it simply tossed the gun into its other hand, and with the free hand caught me by the collar and held on.

Then a humming blaze filled the avenue for a split second, and I got my second whiff of ozone that night. The sugarfoot released me, and I fell to the street panting. I managed to lift my head, and look back toward where my pursuers had been. They were gone.

I raised myself on my hands, and looked up into the scaly face of my rescuer, wary and alert. But the sugarfoot had lowered the collapser, and wasn't menacing me with it.

"Why did you kill those men?" I asked, bewildered.

It flickered out a horrible-looking tongue that resembled a segment of hollow rubber tubing, and made some clacking noises. I shook my head. The thing ceased making noises, and tried sign language instead. It pointed toward where the men had been, then pointed at me.

"You mean," I said slowly, "you annihilated those men simply because they were after me?"

The thing didn't change expression—I didn't really see how it could, what with its rigid crystalline structure—but it gave a slow nod. It seemed to have difficulty doing it, as though it weren't used

to that particular form of expression.

"But why?" I said, getting to my feet and staring at the creature. "Why go to these lengths to protect me? Is there something special about me?"

Again the ponderous nod. Then the sugarfoot pointed at me, and pointed at its head. I simply shook my head. It did the action again, patiently.

"Because I'm smart?" I choked, not really thinking this was the case.

The lumpy red head moved from right to left and back to center again.

"Then what?" I demanded.

It looked about, suddenly, then pointed to the ground and shook its head again.

"Not here, you mean?"

The sugarfoot nodded, then raised a hand and beckoned.

"You want me to come with you; is that it?" I said.

It nodded, with less patience, and moved off a few paces. When I didn't go with it, it turned to face me again, and gave its head a questioning tilt.

"Because," I answered its unspoken question, "I don't know if I can trust you, that's why."

It stared at me with its wide-set eyes for a second, then pointed to the empty space in the street, then to the collapser, and nodded.

"I—I should trust you because you didn't use the collapser on me? Because if your motives were bad, you would already have destroyed me?"

The sugarfoot nodded violently.

"Unh-uh!" I said, backing off. "Not a chance. You tell me why, and maybe I'll come along. But not before." Even as I said it, I felt regret for my own irrationality. Were its intentions even the best, it could certainly not prove them to me, or even demonstrate its reasons with the language barrier between us.

It stood there, looking at me, apparently thinking hard. We seemed to be at an impasse. I didn't want to go with it. On the other hand, I didn't want it to go off and leave me with the most baffling mystery of my life unsolved. I had to know why it had spared me, and what it wanted.

But an alien, on a strange planet, with that dragonish form, and the shark-mouth full of teeth, not to mention a thick three-foot tail ... I couldn't bring myself to trust it.

At that moment, there was a shout down the street, and a flashing light. Someone was coming. Probably, I realized an instant later, the Security men from the rocket field. They had a gadget there that could not only spot, but track down, any use of atomic energy in the region. And there had been, within ten minutes of each other, two such uses of that all-annihilating collapser.

The sugarfoot took a step backward.

"Hold on," I said. "These guys are okay. Maybe, after I get a tranquillizer, I'll be more in the mood for coming with you. If you'll just wait a moment."

But the sugarfoot was having none of it. It gave me an angry glance, then, before I could dodge, it grabbed my arm. I went to pull away, then saw that it was trying to tell me something. The fingers not holding my arm were indicating my wrist. It took me a second to catch on.

"Wrist—wristwatch?" A swift nod. "Time of some sort?" Another. "You—You'll come for me at a later time?" A very brief nod, then a surprisingly friendly clasp of those clawlike fingers on my shoulder.

Then, with a bound that took my breath away, the sugarfoot sprang upward from the street and landed on the rooftop of one of the nearby stores. It landed running, and as I watched, it reached the rear of the store and took a soaring leap out over the molten river between it and the next rooftop. Then it vanished into the blackness beyond the trough alley. I turned to await the arrival of the Security men.

11

Charlie and the other Security Agent, whose name turned out to be Foster, sat stolidly listening as I recounted events since I'd last seen them.

"You say," Charlie interrupted with a frown, "this here sugarfoot told you why he didn't shoot you down?"

"Not quite," I said. "He didn't seem to have the time. But he said he'd see me l—"

"Look, Delvin, that's not what I mean. Everybody from Mars to Venus knows that the sugarfoots are dumb animals. So I'd like to know what you're trying to hand us."

There was something funny in his tone. As though he were saying, not "It can't be true," but, "It's not supposed to be true, and that's the way things stay!"

I paused, considering. I'd had a hard time for a while, when I was first picked up. But I'd been able to get myself brought, by the men who found me, to Charlie and Foster, after giving Charlie's name and describing the two. They'd identified me, and gotten me off the hook for the damage to that bar. It was damage possible only by a collapser. And I, of course, had been picked up wearing a collapser holster.

But from the time I'd been left with them, there was a bothersome something about their attitude; an impatience, as though they had something to say to me, or even do to me, but had to hold off until I was through.

"He told me by sign language," I said. "He made a gesture, and I interpreted it. Nothing baffling in that, is there?"

Foster gave me a half-lidded stare, as though suppressing anger. Then he said, "Tell me, Mister Delvin. Just what is the sign for 'I must go now, but I'll see you at a later time'?"

I took a deep breath and controlled myself. "Look, I was picked for this job because I have a gift for interpretation, or deduction, or whatever you want to call it."

"If you're such a hotshot figure-outer," Charlie snapped, "how come you didn't get suspicious when that bartender was forcing free drinks on you? Any sap would've expected a mickey with the guy acting like that!"

"The reason," I said, stiffly, hating to admit my mental weakness, "is that at that particular moment, the picture of Miss Snow White was on the stereo. That's why! I—I don't function properly when there are women about."

Charlie and Foster exchanged a look, and both shrugged: I felt a hot blush of embarrassment and anger burning upon my face. "And that's the story!" I finished stubbornly.

Charlie heaved himself lazily to his feet. "What do you think, Foster?"

Foster, emulating the same lazy motion, looked thoughtful for a second, then nodded. "I think that's all we're going to get. Come on, let's stash him away."

"Stash me away?" I cried indignantly. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're going into a nice cell, buddy," said Charlie, an ugly smile on his face. "And you'll be let out when the time comes. So quit your bellyaching and come on. It'll be easier if you don't try to get rough."

"You can't arrest me," I said. "I'm—or, I should be—the Amnesty-bearer!"

It was as if they hadn't heard me.

"Come on, come on," said Foster, crooking a finger at me.

"You guys can't pull this kind of trick!" I said. "When Chief Baxter hears about this—"

Charlie and Foster threw back their heads and laughed.

"W-what's so funny?" I asked, a dreadful inkling growing inside my mind.

The door opened and a third security man walked in. It was Chief Philip Baxter. He gave me a tolerant smile.

"They're laughing, Delvin," he said smoothly, "because I gave the order for your arrest."

The cell was of cold Martian stone, and had no window. I sat, miserable, on the thin cot provided for me, and pondered all that had happened to me in the last few days. None of it made the slightest sense to me. Not my selection by the Brain, nor my arrest by Baxter's men. It was crazy!

Baxter, when I'd demanded to know the reason for his duplicity, had merely said, "You've served your purpose." And then Charlie and Foster had taken me away, their collapser muzzles forming unarguable persuaders against my spine.

I didn't even give a moment's consideration to thoughts of escape. I was in a Security prison, and a maximum-security Security prison at that. The door to my cell was a massive foot-thick stone which swung into place on ponderous hinges, and sealed by making a half-twist in the circular entrance. Air was provided through vents, vents which could be closed off if the prisoner showed signs of aggressive tendencies. A few hours without air made most men pretty docile.

I wondered how long I'd sit there before they fed me. Or if they would feed me at all. Hell, no one knew I was on Mars. My last contact with my regular associates had been my good-by to Marge at the office. For all anyone knew, I'd been arrested for anarchy, or something. I knew, with a cold sinking feeling, that no one would even ask about me. Security had taken me, Security was good for the country, and Security never made mistakes. Topic closed. Jerry Delvin written off as an uninteresting memory.

There seemed to be nothing to do but think, so I did a lot of it.

I noted with chagrin that they hadn't removed my belt, or socks. I could, if I so desired, escape my fate by simply knotting them into a cord, and passing one end through the overhead air grillwork and the other about my neck. Maybe that was the reason why they hadn't taken them. I had a distinct feeling, a served-my-purpose feeling, that whether I died by my own hand or of claustrophobia made little difference to Baxter and his boys.

I folded my hands behind my head and sank back onto the hard cot, puzzling over everything that had happened to me.

The Brain selects me as the key figure in the finding of the missing Space Scouts. Fine, so far. Just what my duties are, it doesn't say, but I'm the man for the job, whatever it is. Okay.

So Baxter hands over the Amnesty, I get a preliminary lead from Anders, the pilot of the Scouts. I take off for Mars to find the kids, who seem to have left of their own volition. Swell. Only, a cute blonde by the unlikely name of Snow White filches the Amnesty, and nearly has me tossed in prison. Except that Baxter, still on my side, gets me loose. I take off looking for Snow, and get mickeyed in a Martian bar. Then—

Then things start getting confusing.

I get loose and come upon a sort of council of Earthmen, dickering with a sugarfoot, a supposedly dumb animal, for me and my collapser.

I get spotted, the men try to snatch me, and they all get vaporized by the sugarfoot, who runs off. I follow, and next thing, another mob is on my heels. Same bit with the sugarfoot. Zzzzzzorp! No more men! Only this time it doesn't run off. It dallies a bit, and tries to get me to go somewhere with it. Why it has suddenly decided to take me along, I don't know, because it had the opportunity much earlier, when it made its first massacre.

However, I decline the invitation, and, like a good boy, report all events to Security. Upshot: I am stashed in a solid rock cell, possibly never to emerge alive.

I lay there pondering these facts. One thing seemed clear: I didn't know the angles. What was Snow's angle? Or Baxter's? Or the sugarfoot's? Or the mob's?

Hell, what was mine?

I snorted and sat up, rubbing my neck. I had a headache coming on, and it felt like the start of a migraine, an occupational hazard with ad men. I tried rotating my head on my neck, a good relaxer for those tensed neck muscles. And then I noticed that I was perspiring like mad, and that my throat felt hot inside.

With a sick apprehension, I sprang up and thrust my nose near the grill on the wall. Nothing. I tried poking a finger between the latticework. It was stopped by a metal plate.

The air-supply grill was sealed off. In that tiny cell, I had maybe two hours more of breathing time. After that—Well, I wouldn't be feeling my oxygen-starvation headache any more.

I sat down on the cot once more and scowled at the floor. I was tired of puzzles, but even this didn't make sense! Why take the time and trouble to smother me?

A collapser could wipe me off the slate in seconds. No annoying corpus delicti cluttering up the premises. Not even a bit of fingernail left, nothing to incriminate the murderers. So they smother me.

But why kill me, for heaven's sake? It couldn't be to keep me from telling what I knew! I didn't know a damned thing. Except that Baxter, motive unknown, must have left Earth immediately after I spoke to him on that interplanetary hook-up. Or was it interplanetary? Come to think of it, he could've been in the next room when I talked to him. Damn. It was baffling.

Why he hadn't simply told me that it was no use, and sent me back to Earth, I couldn't figure out. He could have made all sorts of reasonable excuses for my not continuing in my search for the missing boys, and I'd have swallowed any one of them. Instead, he locks me up, throws away the key, and turns off the air supply.

What did I know that I could communicate to people back on Earth? What knowledge did I have that was a menace of some sort to Security? Or, to be more near the truth, to Baxter?

The only interesting fact I'd stumbled on was—

But maybe that was it: the fact that the sugarfeet were something other than what Earth had claimed. That one I'd met was certainly no dumb animal. He had a language; I'd heard that bartender talking to him. That put him a few steps ahead of cats and dogs. Maybe a lot further.

But what difference did it make if the sugarfeet were or weren't dumb animals? I didn't care one way or the other. And I was pretty representative of an Earthman, wasn't I? Who'd care, anyhow, if it turned out the sugarfeet were nearer human than had been supposed?

Well, I knew the who, if not the why.

Baxter obviously cared tremendously. Which deduction left me approximately nowhere.

The air seemed to be getting staler by the minute. I found I could breathe better lying flat on my back, not even using enough energy to remain in a sitting position.

My skin was clammy with sweat from head to foot, my windpipe felt like someone had just given it a brisk toweling with a hot doormat.

I thought desperately of pounding on that impervious stone door, in the chance that my suffocation was an over-sight on their part. But I knew in my heart it wasn't.

I held myself on the cot, fighting that deadly tug of irrational emotion. If I was going to suffocate, I wanted to do it with as little pain as possible.

My lungs, though were telling me a different story. They had that "time to go up for air" feeling,

the hideous pre-strangulation hot wave that floods through the ribs, begging, and then ordering, the swimmer to head to the surface before his lungs rip apart.

I fought the feeling, breathing faster to keep that dull nudging from becoming a full-scale command. But it was harder and harder not to fling myself at that bare store and try, in the last few minutes of life, to dig my way free with my fingertips.

And then, with my eyes burning in my own perspiration, and tongue half-protruding between gaping lips, I felt that stinging, prickling sensation along my limbs.

Then a blinding blaze of blue-white sparks showered me, and I jumped to my feet in fright.

The wall opposite the cell door was raggedly missing, its three-foot slabs of granite jutting wildly into the area where their companions had just been. And there was air; cold, chilling air, terribly thin to breathe. But it was air, and I leaped through that gap like a madman, flooding my hot lungs with the elusive draughts of black Martian night.

I staggered, dizzy at the sparseness of the atmosphere, and then a tight clamp closed upon my arm and kept me from falling. A three-fingered clamp.

I looked into the glittering face of the sugarfoot. It had the collapser in its free hand, and its eyes were locked on mine. It was waiting for me to say something.

"Brother," I said, managing a grin, "I would love coming with you, no matter where!"

Surprisingly, it shook its dragon head, and made gestures toward my blouse, then an upward movement of its arms.

"You want me to take it off?" I said, in bewilderment. "But I'm half frozen already."

The sugarfoot was adamant. Again it pointed to the blouse, and did that slip-it-over-your-head motion.

I gave up fighting it. The creature was obviously not inimical to me. Even if it were, I thought, I owed it something for pulling me out of that stone coffin.

Hoping pneumonia was less painful than outright suffocation, I obediently tugged it, loose from within my belt, and slid the thing over my head and off.

The sugarfoot took it from me, turned it inside-out, and held it out close to my face for inspection, in the dim criss-cross lighting of tiny Phobos and barely larger Deimos, as they scurried across the cold black sky.

I stared stupidly at the inside surface of the blouse, the black one which Baxter had insisted I wear, and then I caught the glint of reflected moonlight where there should have been plain shirt material. Tiny metallic filaments had been woven into the garment, too light and flexible for the wearer to feel them, but strong enough not to break with constant flexing.

I nodded, and handed the blouse back to the sugarfoot. "I see them. Wires," I said. "But what does it mean?"

The sugarfoot pointed toward the Security prison, which at this point of the topography was on the outside of the hills which surrounded Marsport. Security had burrowed into those hills to make themselves an escape-proof dungeon. Even though I was out of it, I hadn't yet, in the real sense of the word, escaped. It was easily twenty below zero, and the air was thin as the inside of a vacuum tube.

I was dizzy, and sick, and barely able to keep from falling, but I made myself ask, "What's the blouse got to do with the prison?"

The sugarfoot pointed to the prison, the blouse, and made a circular gesture with his finger.

"The prison...." I said slowly. "It—It tracks the shirt around!"

A nod. Then the sugarfoot turned its head and, extending that hollow tongue, produced a shrill piercing whistle through the vibrating tip. I heard a scrunching sound on the rocky hillside where we stood, and then the damndest little beast hove into view. It was about the size of a burro. But it had six legs, no visible head or neck, and was covered with spiky hairs that seemed more like lengths of straw than anything else I could think of. This ambulant bale of hay approached us, and halted before the sugarfoot. The sugarfoot whistled again, and from somewhere in the front—I assume it was the front—of this creature, a claw-tipped tentacle wormed out through the hay, and took the blouse from the sugarfoot's hand. A third and final whistle, and the thing, clutching the blouse, went off down the hillside with remarkable speed, heading toward the open desert that lay sullenly gray beneath the moonlight. It had that busy-busy-busy ant-motion to it, the front and rear legs on one side moving forward simultaneously with the middle leg on the opposite side, then a swift, jerky reverse and the other trio of legs moved forward, giving it a strangely graceful—awkward wriggling gait. But it was fast, damned fast. Within a minute, it was out of sight.

I swayed woozily, and hung onto the sugarfoot's shoulder for support. "Blazing a false trail, huh?"

It didn't answer, but reached out for me, and swung me up into its powerful arms, as a man carries a child. It clacked something which I took to be a term of reassurance, and then, holding me tightly so I wouldn't get jounced to death, it took off in a leaping bound in a direction at right angles to that taken by the hay-bale creature. It jolted me a little, but the cold and lack of enough oxygen had taken its toll of my stamina. I passed out before the third bound.

And when I awoke, there was warmth and air, and a comfortable bed beneath me. And I was

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I forgot I was supposed to be mad at her. Instead of chewing her out for her sneak-thievery, I grasped her soft little hands, and murmured, "Are you okay?"

"Miraculously," she said. "I hadn't got twenty yards into town before my face and name were being blazoned on every stereo in Marsport. Things were a bit rough for a while."

I propped myself up on my elbows, the better to see that lovely face, framed in a halo of silky pale yellow hair, and said, "What happened? How'd you escape? What's with these mobs and sugarfeet, and—And where are we, for pete's sake?"

"Whoa, boy!" she laughed, pressing me back onto the bed, her hands lingering on my chest for a delicious moment before she sat back again. "You've been very sick, whether you know it or not. Here, take a look."

She picked up her handbag from the floor, took out a small mirror, and held it in front of my face. I took one look, then shut my eyes. My face was the cheery color of porcelain, with purplish eyelids and gray lips.

"What hit me?" I sighed, opening my eyes again.

"Oxygen-starvation, exposure, and near pneumonia. I thought you were dead when Clatclit carried you in here. You've been sleeping for nearly thirty-six hours."

"Clatclit?" I said. "Is that the ambient hunk of dextrose who blasted me out of stir?"

"Let's not be colorful," said Snow, deprecatingly. "You owe your life to him, you know."

"I know," I said. "That was the ad man in me coming through. But look, my mind's a whirlpool of confusion. Could you please tell me what's been going on here, anyhow?"

"Lie back and rest," said Snow, "and I will."

I burrowed deeper into the warm coverlet, sighed, and kept my eyes on her lovely face. In the midst of her discourse, I even sneaked a hand out and laid it gently over her own. It was smartly slapped, without rancor, and I withdrew it from active duty for a while.

"Well, first thing, I'd like to apologize for that dirty trick I pulled back on the *Valkyrie*," Snow said. My heart turned over, and I felt an idiot grin of forgiveness spreading across my ghastly features. I found it quite impossible to stay angry with the girl. As I've said, something happens to my brain when around women.

"Accepted," I croaked.

"I knew that you'd have no trouble getting away from those Security men I sent," she said smilingly.

"Then why did you send them?" I asked.

"To keep them from asking me any questions," she said, with a small shrug. "For all I knew, they were expecting a man with the Amnesty. However, knowing that just having it carried a lot of weight, I gave them the order to pick you up as soon as they approached me at the customs booth."

"And if they hadn't believed me?" I complained.

"Well," she said carefully, "I suppose I'd have sent them a note, or something, telling them to release you."

"Thanks for the kind thought," I muttered.

Snow ignored my minor irritation, and went blithely on.

"My next move was to go to the Port Authority, and find out just where the *Phobos II* was berthed before takeoff. I thought that Ted might have left me a clue of some sort."

"You sound as if he were expecting you to traipse up here after him," I said, dubiously.

"He wouldn't count on my coming, if that's what you mean. But Ted's a good kid. I've practically had to raise him myself. He knew I'd worry if I didn't hear from him. He couldn't know, of course, that IS would send forged letters to the relatives of the missing boys. So I assumed that, if he had the chance, he'd leave a clue of some kind for me, in case I did come."

"An assurance of sorts, you mean?"

"Something like that. Like 'I'm okay, Snow, so don't worry,' or some such message. So that's what I looked for at the rocket berth."

"Just a minute," I interrupted. "I used to be a boy, once, myself, and while I didn't have any sisters of my own, I knew a lot of buddies who did. The last thing in the world they'd expect would be for their sister to follow them into danger! Hell, they'd feel like sissies if they had to count on a sister for aid."

"I—" Snow hesitated. "I'm not what you'd call the typical sister, Jerry."

"Oh?"

She blushed prettily. "When you have to raise a brother, you have to learn a lot of things, if you're going to bring him up fairly normally. I had to teach him to play ball, to box, to ski, to—Well, I was more like a father to him than anything. So Ted, knowing my more belligerent side, would just about figure I'd come storming up here to find him."

"I don't know," I pondered aloud. "If you and Ted have this friendly relationship, why the hell would he put you to all this trouble? It seems like a lousy thing on his part to go wandering off without a word."

"It would be," Snow agreed, "unless there was a mighty important reason for his going. And it wasn't without a word."

"Then you did find a message?" I exclaimed.

She nodded. "After a few minutes' inspection of the berth, I found it scratched onto one of the supporting beams."

"Funny IS didn't spot it," I remarked.

"It's in our special *code*, silly!" Snow said. "To anyone else, it'd look like hen scratches."

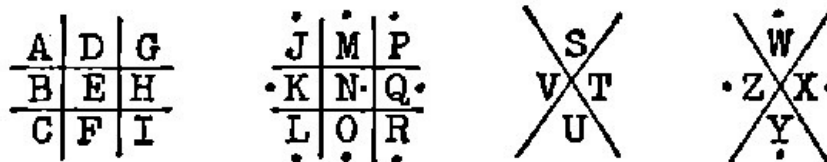
"Just what is this code of yours?" I asked, curious.

Snow looked at me a moment, frowning.

"I'll carry the secret to my grave." I said generously.

She laughed, then, and said, "All right, Jerry. Just a second."

From her handbag, she took out a small address book and a pencil, found a blank sheet at the back, and drew the following diagrams:



"See?" she said. "It's very simple, really. You just remember the position of each letter in its portion of the diagram, and draw the corresponding shape instead of the letter; a square for E, square-plus-dot for N, an L-shape for G, same with a dot for P, an inverted V-shape for U—"

"I get it," I said. "Gad, it looks positively runic when you write that way."

Snow put the address book back into her bag. "So that's what I found scratched onto that supporting beam. The message said, simply: Snow I am all right find Clatclit the sugarfoot and he will explain."

I stared at her. "Not a very easy task he set, was it?"

"Nothing easier, as it turned out," she said airily. "Of course," she admitted, when I gave her a cold stare, "I didn't know it was easy, at the time. I was actually pretty much bewildered. I mean, I thought, like everybody else, that sugarfeet were like cats or dogs."

"So how'd you accomplish locating him?" I said.

She grinned. "I went into Marsport, went up to the first one I saw—they're as common as pigeons around the town—and said, feeling like a damned fool, 'Clatclit?' Instead of the blank-eyed stare of uncomprehending nonintelligence which I expected for my efforts, the thing looked to left and right, I guess to insure that no Earthmen were watching, then beckoned to me and started waddling off. Still feeling like an idiot, I followed it. It led me back toward the airstrip. For a while, I had the stupid impression that it was going to point me out the spot from which the boys had vanished, and that I'd be right back where I started."

"So what happened?" I demanded impatiently.

"Back of the berth where the *Phobos II* had been, there was a slope, the beginning of the hills that surround Marsport. I followed the sugarfoot partway up the slope to a sort of cave mouth, and it gestured that I should go inside."

"Okay, okay," I prodded. "You went inside, and—"

Snow shook her head. "No, I didn't. If *you* were on a strange planet, would you go into a cave after a red-scaled creature that looked like a pint-sized dragon?" She added, matter-of-factly, "Besides, there was a sign in front of the cave mouth, telling Earth people that it was forbidden to enter any of the many Martian caves that lay on the hillsides. It seems they're old volcanic tunnels, and wind like labyrinths into the planet. Some of the earlier colonists vanished there,

you know."

"Ye gods!" I growled. "What did you do, then? Leave the sugarfoot standing at the cave mouth like an untipped bellboy?"

"More or less," she admitted. "It seemed to want to take me with it, but I begged off as politely as possible, and went back into town. Only, when I got there, the first thing I saw was my own picture on the stereo screen outside the public auditorium."

"With shoot-to-kill commands ringing into the street," I nodded. "I suppose you swooned away on the pavement?"

Snow gave me a black look. "Mister Delvin, I do not swoon!"

I shrugged. "Just as well. Marsport has no pavement, anyhow."

"Ho ho," she said. "Do you want to hear the rest of this, or not?"

"Sorry," I said. "Go on."

"Well, there didn't seem to be anything else to do then, but to get out of town, fast. I hadn't been spotted, yet. I guess my picture had only just gotten onto the screen. So I hurried back to where that cave mouth was, and the sugarfoot was still there, waiting for me."

"He does sound like an untipped bellboy at that," I remarked.

Snow ignored this, and continued. "Well, I went into the cave with him. After all, getting eaten by a dragon has no worse end result than getting hit with a collapser-bolt."

"The process is a bit more painful, though," I said.

"I took that chance," Snow said. "I had to. So I followed it for what seemed miles of slippery tubular tunnels—knowing, and it scared me stiff, that I'd never find my way out without a map—and it led me here, where I met Clatclit."

"And where, by the way," I said, "are we?"

"Darned if I know," said Snow. "We're at present in a room off one of those tunnels I mentioned. The sugarfeet have been wonderful, helping you. Especially in bringing water for you; they're deathly scared of the stuff."

"I would be, too, in their case," I said. "It'd be like toting around a carboy of sulphuric acid."

"Well, anyhow, you're alive," she said, "and that's something. But as for Ted—" her voice faltered.

I looked up, startled. "He's not dead?"

"D—? Oh, no. At least I hope not!" she said. "I only meant that, while I've located Clatclit, I can't figure out either his gestures or his—pardon the expression—words."

"He understands English, even if his vocal apparatus can't form it," I said. "Why don't you just ask him yes-and-no questions? He nods easily enough."

"I did that," she sighed. "I asked if Ted were alive, and he nodded. Then I asked to be brought to him, and he spread his hands. I said, 'Does that mean you don't know where Ted is?' He seemed stymied; he nodded, then shook his head immediately. You figure that one out!"

I tried hard. Nothing happened inside my head. It was filled with the picture of Snow, her lips slightly parted, her violet eyes anxious, her hair like a misty golden corolla.

"I can't. Not with you around. Remember?" I said, helplessly.

She stood up from my bedside. "Then close your eyes, or something, Jerry! I'll stand here, quiet as a mouse."

"Well," I said, doubtfully, "I'll try."

I shut my eyes and tried to convince myself that Snow wasn't anywhere about. I couldn't do it.

"No use," I sighed, opening my eyes again. "I can feel you here."

"I guess the only thing to do is send Clatclit in to see you, and stay outside myself," she said.

"Good idea," I said. "Send him around with a lunch, though, will you? I've gone all hollow inside."

Snow smiled, and left through a rocky archway.

I lay there looking about me. With Snow in the room, I hadn't paid attention to my less stimulating environment. Now I found myself gazing over dark crimson walls, smooth and glossy looking. The room was just a bubble in the rock, about ten feet in diameter, with an artificially leveled floor.

Light came from a narrow ridge that ran around the walls near the top, a sort of ledge covered with fuzzy stuff that glowed pallidly white.

I threw back the coverlet and eased myself to my feet, and was grateful to find my trousers folded neatly upon a small hump of rock that probably served a sugarfoot as a stool. I slipped them on hurriedly, then investigated the stuff on that ledge.

It seemed to be a kind of crumbly dry fungus, not unlike the stuff found in dead logs on Earth, the phosphorescent foxfire. But it was a lot brighter, and also gave off a detectable amount of heat, too, which explained why I wasn't still turning blue.

I left off looking at the heaps of fungi, and went to the archway for a look. Beyond the room, the

cave dissolved into a riot of diverging tunnels. I decided to stay put, rather than risk getting myself entombed in some pahoehoeal cavity, and succumbing to the fate Baxter had planned for me.

And besides, those tunnels were black as oil, further off from the chamber I was in. My feet might find me a quick shortcut to the center of the planet, in that treacherous gloom.

Sugarfeet, I decided, could either see in the dark, or else they carried a handful of that white-glowing fungus with them when they went for a stroll.

I went back to the cot, and sat down to wait for Clatclit's appearance, passing the time by struggling back into my durex boots. I felt a bit more competent, once trousered and shod, than I had felt while lying beneath that coverlet in my shorts. A man without his pants is only half a man, somehow.

From the corridor, there came a series of sharp, regular clicks, and then Clatclit waddled in. When not going full speed, in that gravity-defying bound of theirs, the sugarfeet moved rather clumsily, like an old sailor rocking down the street on legs trained to fight a rolling deck. I think it was the tail's weight that accounted for that lumbering gait. It was fully as long as the legs, and nearly as thick, except where it dwindled at the end to a solitary prismatic red spike. I rather judged that that four-inch crystalline dagger came in handy during a fight.

Clatclit made a gesture with both hands, and clacked something at me. His attitude and inflection were unmistakable.

I gave him the Earth equivalent of the gesture, raising my right hand in a sort of lazy wave. "Hello, yourself," I said. "Snow seems to be having trouble communicating with you."

Clatclit nodded, and seated himself on that stool.

"What's this about her brother Ted?" I went on. "She asked if you knew where he was, and got a yes-no answer."

The nod again.

"Do you know where he's at?" I persisted.

Clatclit made the same yes-no motion with his nubby head that Snow had described. I thought it over.

"You know, *in a way*, where he is, but not *specifically*?"

Violent nods, three of them.

"Ah, so that's it!" I said. "Let's see. Can you take us to him?"

The yes-no business again.

"You can take us to a point, but no further, maybe?"

The violent triple nod.

"Is there danger?"

Three nods.

"To you?"

Headshake.

"To me and Snow, then?"

Headshake.

"Ah! To *Ted*."

Nods.

"How about his companions? Are they in danger too?"

Yes.

"From whom?" I said, forgetting our limitations.

Disgusted stare.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Uh ... from Baxter?"

A rocking of the head from side to side. This was a new one. I wrinkled up my forehead, puzzling it out.

"Baxter's a danger in general, you mean, but that's not the danger you meant, right?"

Nods again.

"Okay, then, let's see who's left.... Danger from Earthmen, like those mobs who came after me?"

Negative.

"Surely not danger from me or Snow?"

Negative.

"From—from you Martians?" I choked, bewildered.

The head rocked from side to side.

"Danger.... Danger from sugarfeet?"

A very violent negative.

"But from *Martians*?" I queried, blinking.

A slow, positive nod.

"But there are no Martians but you sugarfeet. Unless—" An icy cold hand grabbed my adrenal glands and squeezed, hard. "The Ancients!" I gasped, in horror.

A triple yes.

"Then they're not extinct!"

A disgusted stare.

I realized he couldn't answer till I rephrased that one, or I'd be stuck with wondering if he meant yes, they are, or yes, they aren't. "Are they extinct?" I said.

Headshake.

"And they've got the boys!"

Nod.

"And they're inimical to man, in some way!"

Violent negative.

I stared, confused, into Clatclit's lizardy eyes.

"They—they aren't dangerous to man?"

The sideways rocking motion.

"They're a danger to some men—Baxter's men!"

A nod, but with a kind of hesitation about it.

"But also to the boys?" I marvelled.

The yes-no motion.

"Under certain conditions, they're a danger to the boys!"

Yes.

"These conditions; do they have anything to do with Baxter?"

Yes.

"Hmmm...." I leaned back on my hands on the cot, and studied Clatclit's face, thinking hard. "Could it be that these Ancients want something with regard to Baxter, but that the boys' safety is the price of it?"

A jump up from the stool, a laughably Earthlike clap of the hands, and a triple series of very positive nods. Clatclit sat down again, a much happier sugarfoot than when he'd entered.

"But," I protested, "Baxter, from my last contact with him, isn't the sort who'd care about the boys, right?"

Nods.

"Well, then, for pete's sake," I protested loudly, "over whose heads are the Ancients holding the safety of the boys?"

Clatclit extended a ruddy talon directly at me, and then aimed it toward the corridor outside.

"Me and Snow?" I cried, standing up. "They're trying to force me and Snow to do something for them, and making the boys' safety the price of it. Why, that's—that's criminal!"

In my rage, I'd taken a step toward Clatclit, not even thinking of the fact that his crystalline constitution would be an easy match for my fists. Genially, though, Clatclit leaned back on the stool, widened his already wide eyes, and, pointing two index fingers at his chest, shook his head from side to side.

"What?" I said, not getting it. Then, "Oh, I see. It's not your fault what the Ancients have done. Yeah, you're right. Sorry, Clatclit."

He shrugged off the apology, and waited for more of my investigative monologue.

I dropped back to sit on the edge of the cot, and let him wait a while, while I tried to figure the whole mess out. Then I remembered something, and looked up at him.

"Clatclit, back in Marsport, when I first met you, I asked why I had been chosen, and you indicated that you'd tell me later. Why was I chosen?"

Clatclit just stared, uncertainly.

"You know what I mean. Why was I the one you didn't blast with that collapser? And why'd you go off without me the first time, but want to take me along the second?"

A very disgusted stare.

I slowed down and fed him questions one at a time.

"Back at that bar, you blasted the other men, then left without me. Why?"

Clatclit pointed to himself, then to his cranium, then to me, then made a palms-down hand-spreading gesture.

"You ... thought ... I ... negation—You thought I'd been blasted, too! Except that I'd flattened out behind that wall, and you couldn't see me behind the remaining bottom section. You originally meant to get me out of there alive?"

Nods, vigorous.

"And you thought you'd goofed with the collapser, and gotten me, too!"

Nods.

"So what happened in the street? How'd you happen to stick around?"

The talon went to his earhole, then he spread his hands wide, in a gesture of "many-ness," and waited hopefully.

"You heard a lot of—what? Oh! You heard those men coming up the street, and stuck around to see what was up. But I didn't hear them, and I was closer. In fact, they were sneaking after me."

Clatclit pointed to his ears and nodded, then indicated mine and shook his head.

I got it then. Supersensitivity. It made sense. Just as man's ears, accustomed to use in air, are even more receptive to sounds in a denser medium, as, for instance, underwater, where sound waves are more powerful; so the sugarfeet's ears, built for use in the rarefied Martian atmosphere, could hear all the better in the heavier air of Marsport.

"Okay, so you heard them, saw me, and came to the rescue. Fine. Now, the big question: Why? What is so special about me, Clatclit?"

He stood up and made the same strange gesture he'd made the night on Von Braun Street. Alternate pointing to his head, then to me.

The "me" part was easy enough, but the other.... I tried a series of likely meanings.

"That motion to your head, Clatclit. You mean I'm the head of something, the investigation, for instance?"

Negative.

"I'm intelligent?"

A pause, then the yes-no motion.

"You mean I am, but that's the wrong answer. Hmmm. Very tactful of you, Clatclit. You could have given me a no on that one."

Clatclit showed a friendly array of deadly-looking teeth. I interpreted this as an evidence of camaraderie, so I just grinned back.

"Okay, Clatclit. Let's see. It has nothing to do with my brain power?"

A wild light came into his eyes, and he seemed ready to crack out of his glittering pelt, so agitated did he become. Apparently, I'd hit on something, but he didn't know what sort of signal to make.

"I'm getting warm?" I said.

Clatclit stared, and I realized that, even knowing and understanding colloquial English, he might still have missed a few of the slangier expressions.

"That is," I said, "I'm close to the answer?"

Nod.

"Something to do with brain power?"

Vigorous nod.

"Mine?"

Negative.

"Baxter's?"

Negative.

"Anyone's?"

I got the yes-no and a climactic shrug. Clatclit was apparently stuck for a response.

I tried to figure it out. Brain power, but not mine, not really anyone's, and yet, in a way, someone's. Then I jumped up and faced him, elated.

"The Brain! The composite brain of International Cybernetics!"

Clatclit emitted something that sounded very much like a sigh of relief, and nodded.

I thought back to his head-then-me gesture. "Then you mean I was rescued because I was the man chosen by the Brain?"

Three brisk nods.

Now I was really confused. I shook my head at Clatclit, and said, "I give up, friend. I'm out of questions you can answer."

He gave me a curious look, an expectant look.

"The only question I can think of is 'Why should Mars be interested in me just because I was selected by the Brain back on Earth?' And that's a tough one to do in pantomime."

Clatclit rose up proudly on tiptoe, as if stubbornly denying the slur I'd cast on his miming abilities. He looked hurt, and I felt like a crumb.

"Okay, friend. Try. But I don't guarantee I'll get it."

Clatclit stood a moment in thought, then pointed upward.

"Up? Out? Above?" I said. All received negatives. "It's no use, Clatclit, I can't—Oh, all right, once more. Uh ... away up?"

Nod.

"Earth?" I said, excitedly.

Nod.

"Well, what about it?" I said.

Clatclit pointed up to Earth, then to me, and shook his head. Then he pointed down, to Mars, I guessed by association, and to me again. This time he nodded.

"Earth-me-no. Mars-me-yes," I said mechanically. "Earth-no-*what?*"

Talon to head.

"Earth-me-no brain?" I choked out. "The Brain did not select me?"

Side-to-side motion.

"Not exactly? Well, then—No, that's crazy!"

Clatclit looked a question.

I laughed wearily and sank back onto the cot. "All I get, chum, is the ridiculous impression that Mars was behind the Brain's selecting me back on Earth—"

I sat bolt upright, slightly stunned.

Clatclit was nodding.

13

An hour later, when Clatclit had gone off to do whatever it is that sugarfeet do when they're not playing charades with Earthmen, I joined Snow in a so-so luncheon she'd been able to put together with the help of a few of our dragonish friends. It seemed to be mostly a species of watery tumble-weed, plus a smattering of rubbery white cubes that tried hard to taste like mushrooms, but failed. I was trying to be light and casual.

"We may be poisoned, you know," I remarked, chewing valiantly on a mouthful of the stuff.

"It's quicker than starving," she observed, continuing to eat. "If we don't eat, we're sure to die, but—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. If we do, we've got a fifty-fifty chance of survival. Too bad you don't carry sandwiches in that all-purpose handbag of yours."

"I do," she said, calmly. "But they're all enjoyably gone, thank you. I couldn't wait forever for you to come out of your coma."

"Thanks loads," I muttered, chomping doggedly on a stubborn white cube, and wishing I didn't have to tell her what I knew.

"So tell me more about what Clatclit said," she urged, washing down her alien meal with a cupped rock filled with clear but alkaline water.

I shrugged, and let the rest of the vegetation sit where it was. Until I grew a lot hungrier, it was safe from my alimentary system for a spell.

"As I see it, Baxter is a menace to the Ancients. They, as a self-protective gesture, decided to get an Earthman up here who could find the fact of their existence, and make it known to Earth. Then a meeting between Earth and Mars can be arranged, and we can come to some sort of peaceful co-existence. Right now, Baxter's in the dastardly position of being able to destroy the Ancients with no one back home even knowing there was anyone to destroy, see?"

"All but how they got hold of you."

"They exerted some kind of influence—heaven only knows what kind of technology they possess—and it triggered the Brain, back on Earth, into selecting me. Then the sugarfeet, who are, by the way, not servants of the ancients, but another distinct race, were used as go-betweens. First one to spot me got the hand-painted ashtray, or something. Who knows? But anyhow, they selected me, and—"

"Jery," said Snow, crinkling up her brow, "how did they know that you even existed?"

"I guess I could have put that more clearly; they didn't know there was a *me*, a Jerry Delvin. But they knew what qualifications such a man must have, and so they influenced the Brain to choose such a man when Security tried to find a solution to the mystery of the missing Scouts."

"Who are missing only in order to create a mystery so that the IS people would use the Brain to select the man whom the Martians had gimmicked the Brain to fake." Snow shook her head, and shut her eyes. "It's got my head going in circles, Jerry!"

I grinned at her. "Okay. We'll take it from the top. Baxter, for reasons yet unknown, is a menace to the ancients. In a manner yet unknown, also. Their plight must come to the attention of the peoples of Earth. With me so far?"

She nodded impatiently.

"Okay, then. So what would make the people back home sit up and take notice of little old Mars? Well, how about swiping the Space Scouts? It's a great plan, really. Not only are Earthmen suckers for a child in trouble, but these particular children are representatives of every civilized nation on our planet. So they are swiped."

"Jerry...." Snow tried to interrupt.

"I know. The kids left of their own free will. I'll get to that in a minute."

She bit her lip and kept still, and I went on.

"Baxter, sensing the hand of the Ancients in this, makes a good countermove. He keeps the Earth people under the impression that all is well with the kids. This, of course, cannot go on for too damned long; he's got to find those kids and fast. So, unwittingly following the plan set up by the ancients, he feeds the known data into the Brain. However, they've geared the Brain to react to that particular data by selecting a man who will not conform to Baxter's standards—that is, a man who would have assisted Baxter's race-destruction plan—but one who will be able to size up the situation and act on it in a manner beneficial to the Martians."

"How can you be so sure of this?" Snow demanded.

"I'm not, for pete's sake!" I snapped. "Remember, I had to dredge all this information out of Clatclit by tortuous questioning. A lot of it I had to conjecture, to fill the gaps. But hell, it fits, doesn't it?"

"I'm sorry," Snow said, contritely.

"Okay, okay," I said, relenting. "Pardon me for biting your head off. Where was I?"

"Acting beneficial to the ancient Martians."

"Ummm. Yeah, okay. So I'm picked. Baxter is a little surprised when I show up, since I just don't look the race-annihilating type, I guess, but he has to follow what the Brain selected, since he has no other way of getting to those missing kids. Still with me? Okay. However, unknown to even Baxter, there is a third contingent at work: Neo-Martians."

"Those men who tried to kill you," said Snow.

"Right. These are the characters who want to team with the Martians against Earth, and make this planet the ruling one in the solar system."

"I don't understand their motivation at all."

"It's—Well, it's a little like the feelings of the early colonists in New England toward King George. They're off here on a new planet, but they're still paying taxes to Earth, and—At any rate, they want to be a separate country. Not all the Neo-Martians feel this way, just a disgruntled few. But it's always those few groaners who seem to run things, because the other people, in their neutral way, don't take any action against them.... Hell, I don't want this turning into a lecture on political science. Let me go on.

"When the news hits the stereotypes that a girl with a forged Amnesty is on the loose in Marsport, these people show a lot of sense. Since the customs office wouldn't let you off Earth with such a thing, and the customs people here wouldn't have let you bring one onto Mars, they know it must be the real McCoy. But if real, why this to-do about shooting to kill? Obviously, you've taken the Amnesty from the real person who should have it. Now, they don't know me from Adam, but they put the word out all over town to keep watch for anyone who might be the actual Amnesty-bearer. I qualify."

"How?" Snow asked, narrowing her eyes with interest.

"First, I'm a stranger. Secondly, though not in a Security uniform, I'm toting a collapser, which means—unless I have the approval of IS—the death penalty. I've carried it openly, so they know I haven't stolen it anyplace. Okay, I'm a stranger who has an in with Security, a collapser on my belt, and the word is out that an Amnesty-bearer minus the Amnesty is in town. What would you do if you were a Neo-Martian and I walked into your bar?"

"I'd slip you a mickey," Snow said sweetly.

"Uh.... Yeah, okay." I muttered, declining an urge to snarl something back at her. Besides, she had a cruel blow coming.

"But why did they want you?" Snow demanded.

"Honey—" I said, before I could catch myself. But she hadn't flinched, so I decided to let the appellation stand.—they don't know the Scouts are missing! As far as Marsport is concerned,

those kids took off in the *Phobos II*, see? So what do you suppose they decide the Amnesty-bearer is after?"

Snow's eyes widened into violet pools, and she exclaimed, finally getting the point, "Them!"

"At last a light dawns in that lovely skull," I sighed. "They figured I was here to round up the rebels among the Neo-Martians and stash them in that lousy prison I was blasted free of. So they lock me in that cellar, and have a meeting to decide what's to be done. Only, Clatclit, knowing I'm the guy the ancients have been waiting for, can't let these men keep me. So he goes to the meeting, too."

"But wouldn't the rebels be surprised at a sugarfoot—"

"Dearest girl, the rebels are well aware of the fact that sugarfeet are more than just dumb animals. Clatclit tells me that they're counting on the sugarfeet for support, if it even comes to open battle. Why do you suppose that bartender went to the trouble of learning that gosh-awful clacketty language of theirs?"

"But why would the sugarfeet join with them?" Snow asked. "Aren't they friendly, on the neutral side?"

"Unh-uh," I said. "Not in the way you mean. The sugarfeet, from planetary sympathies, are on the side of the Ancients. The Neo-Martians were anti-Earth, hence, anti-Baxter. So Plan A of the Ancients was a joining of forces between sugarfeet and rebel Neo-Martians. It was a slim chance, but they needed allies. Clatclit tells me that this thing's been growing for nearly a year, now. But a few weeks ago, what happens? Up to Mars come these kids, who are not only good emotional contacts with Earth, but with all the powerful nations. The ancients immediately scrap the first scheme, and switch to Plan B, the one we're currently enmeshed in."

"So that's why Clatclit was dickering for the collapser at that meeting you eavesdropped on!" Snow exclaimed.

"Sure," I said. "The rebels wanted that collapser for purposes of duplication. Its mechanism is one of Security's best-kept secrets. Only now, the Ancients don't want to help the rebel cause, so Clatclit was instructed to get that thing from them at all costs. He did. You know the cost."

Snow shuddered. "All those men—poof! Just like that!"

"Honey, this is war," I sighed sadly. "And you and I are the key figures in it, whether we like it or not."

"I think I'm all clear except on the one point: Why did the boys leave the *Phobos II* willingly?"

"Male children, especially that brother of yours, love intrigue and adventure and secret codes. Clatclit and his ruby-red friends, knowing they'd pique the kids' curiosity, let them know that they were more than dumb animals. This, being in direct conflict with all they'd been taught back on Earth, put them in the enviable position of being 'in the know.' And kids are quick to pick up new tongues, too. I have no doubts that within three hours those kids knew more of the sugarfoot language than I'll learn in a lifetime. Here, they were told, was their chance to be heroes. Plan B was told to them, and the part they must play in it. What kid wouldn't go along with a chance to take part in a real-life adventure? And so, after leaving the evidence that they'd apparently vanished in space—Clatclit tells me this was one of the boys' idea; nice kids we grow on Earth!—leaving this baffling trail, they tramped off after the sugarfeet into the cave, like the happy youngsters following the Pied Piper."

I slowed down. This was the part I didn't want to say.

"And?" Snow said, sensing my distress, and going tense.

"And they wound up neatly jailed by the Ancients," I said. "The Ancients had made sure to select a man—me—that could be coerced by threats to those poor kids."

"You mean if you don't do what they want...?" Snow said, but couldn't complete the sentence.

"The kids pay," I finished for her. "So, tell me, lady, what's my move?"

"I don't know," she said, kind of startled, as if just beginning to realize the desperation of our situation. "I'm not sure who's right or wrong in this, Jerry."

"Neither am I!" I said bitterly. "Baxter's a stinker, but he does represent Earth, of which I'm currently in favor. The rebels may be violent, but they have a few points in their favor, too. And the Ancients—"

Snow looked at me, expectantly. "The Ancients?"

"Them I hate," I said suddenly. "I don't like their slip-and-slide loyalties, Snow. They were the friends of the rebels, sure—until they thought of a better plan. Then the rebels were calmly forgotten. Or vaporized, when necessary. Right now, they're on my side, what with ordering my escape, and protecting me from Baxter. But it's only for so long as I serve their ends. Then it's good-by, Jerry Delvin!"

"Then—" Snow arose, a slim hand going to her throat—"we don't know for sure if the boys are alive!"

I shook my head, solemnly. "We don't know it at all."

Clatclit came lumbering into the chamber, and paused to survey the remnants of our meal. He pointed to me, then to Snow, then made the palms-down outward gesture and looked questioningly.

"Yeah," I said. "We're finished, Clatclit. Thanks."

He nodded, then beckoned to me, and pointed toward the tunneled gloom beyond the archway.

"Come with you?" I said. "Come where?"

He pointed down.

"Downstairs?" I asked.

Furious glare.

It was nearly impossible to think, with Snow sitting right there across from me, but luckily my memory came through with what that gesture had meant the last time he'd used it.

"Mars?" I said softly.

Side-to-side motion of the head.

"Something like Mars. The Ancients!"

Brisk nods.

Snow got to her feet, apprehensive.

"It's all right," I said. "Remember. So far, they want me alive. I don't have to worry unless they think up a scheme that doesn't need me."

"No, Jery, I'm coming with you!" she said, clutching my arm. Those smooth little fingers bit in like dull teeth. She must have been better at sports than her pupil, Ted.

"Snow, the way I see it, this is going to be dangerous."

Her fists went to her hips. "And by what omniscience are you certain that I'll be safe back here?" she queried.

She had me there. The sugarfeet were being buddies at the moment. However, a quick change of plan, and Snow might end up vaporized, gnawed, or just left to starve in this devious labyrinth.

"Okay, come along," I sighed. "But hold my hand."

"I won't get lost," she protested.

"That wasn't the reason, honey," I grinned at her.

Her eyes flashed a moment, and her nostrils made a perfunctory flare. Then she smiled, surprisingly shy, and slipped her hand into mine. "For moral support," she said.

"Nice rationalizing," I said, but she didn't pull away. Together, we followed Clatclit out of the chamber.

And that's when I learned the primary function of that red spike at the tip of the tail. No sooner were we away from the fungus-lighted chamber, than that tiny trylon began to glow, first pale pink, then a brighter scarlet, and finally a brilliant yellow-orange. We followed that bobbing tailtip like the *ignis fatuus* through the bowels of Hell. Snow's grip on my hand grew a little tighter as we progressed along the slippery red rock of the nearly circular passage.

"A regular candy-coated firefly," I joked, to lighten her mood. "What'll they think of next!"

She didn't answer.

"Bad joke?" I asked.

"No ... it's—Did you notice, Jery? We're going *down*."

We did seem to be descending, at that. I could imagine Snow's mind conjuring up tons of planet pressing down on us without warning.

"Not down," I said to her. "Downer. If it sets your mind at rest, we just took off from a place way below ground. If the roof didn't fall in there, it probably won't up ahead."

"How do you know that?" she asked, her curiosity taking the place of her trepidation, which was what I'd hoped for.

"The air," I said. "We were breathing in that chamber, remember? For the air to be that plentiful, we just had to be far under the ground, already. The atmosphere grows denser as one descends, you know; like on the canal bottoms."

"I've never been on a canal bottom," she said.

"Come to think of it, neither have I! I must have read that someplace."

We followed Clatclit and his magic taillight a few more yards, then Snow said, "You don't have to kid around to buck me up, Jery."

"Oh, yes I do," I disagreed sincerely. "For some reason or other, my main worry at the moment is for you. So if I can keep you happy, I'm happy. See?"

"Uh-huh," she said softly. Her hand pressed mine more tightly for a brief moment. "Thanks."

"If you think you can repay my efforts with a mere word of gratitude," I said in a villainous whisper, "you have lots to learn about men, poor child."

"Jery, don't joke any more. I'm frightened, really frightened," she said, her voice trembling.

"Okay," I said, and left off. I didn't tell her, but my own pulsebeat wouldn't have qualified me for a hero medal, either. Then, up ahead in the blackness beyond Clatclit's glowing tail spike, I heard a dull roaring.

A few hundred yards further on, the roar was louder, and I could feel it through the soles of my boots.

"What is it, Jery?" Snow whispered.

"It sounds like water!" I said. "Like more water than I thought there was on this whole spaceborne Death Valley!"

"Jery!" Snow's fingers dug into my palm. "If this is the way to the Ancients, then this must be what Clatclit meant when he told you he could only take you so far and no further!"

"Sure it is!" I exclaimed excitedly. "A child could have figured it out. What else but water could impede these rock-hard things!"

Clatclit was slowing his pace and moving more carefully. Then, not ten feet in front of him, the fiery glow of his tail tip was reflected from a million foaming, shifting wet surfaces. He took another few courageous steps, then halted, pressed back against the curve of the tunnel wall.

He'd averted his gaze from the raging torrent beyond him, but his outstretched hand still pointed in that direction. I felt a cold wet spray on my face, and saw, with a little shock, that some of the glittering facets of Clatclit's scaly hide were already becoming pocked and eroded.

"We'll have to go fast," I said, releasing Snow's hand only to clutch her arm tightly against my side. "If we take too long, our luciferous friend here will be a sticky red puddle. And I don't intend crossing that in the dark!"

"*That*" was a jagged ridge of rock that continued forward from where our segment of tunnel ended, scant feet beyond Clatclit's cowering form. It was glistening with pools of black water and wet froth, flung up there by the raging river that passed less than a foot beneath its slightly arched surface. The torrent rushed angrily from somewhere in the hollow blackness to our right, leaped and sprayed past the natural bridge of rock, barely two feet wide, that lay before our feet, and then—

My stomach grew sick at the sight just to the left of the bridge.

The vaulted tunnel which contained this black Martian river dipped and dropped. The river, just beyond our frail bridge, was a black cataract falling into the heart of the planet.

"Jery," Snow said, shivering. "Hold me. Hold me tight, or I'll never get across that!"

"It's all right," I said, with a calm tone that surprised the hell out of me. "Here." I got directly behind her and ran my hands along the undersides of her forearms, gripping them tightly midway to her wrists. "Now, just walk as I direct you, Snow. Close your eyes if you want. I won't guide you wrong."

"I trust you, Jery," she said softly.

"Okay then, honey." I kept my voice gentle, soothing. "Left foot forward. No, a bit more. There! Okay, now the right foot." She swayed a little in my grasp, on the first slippery section of that dangerous arch of rock. "Easy! That's it, honey, you're doing fine. Now your left. Ah! Okay. And then the right. Swell."

Step by nightmare step, we crossed the arch, Snow moving her feet blindly forward in exploratory shuffles, and I, forgetting my own danger in my concern for her, moving steadily with her, eyeing each spot on that rock ahead of her feet for safety. The light grew dimmer by the minute as we crept further and further from Clatclit.

I wondered how long I could have stood in a spray of liquid caustic or acid, holding a light for some friends.

Then the last step was made, and without my knowing how it happened, Snow was tightly in my arms, facing me now, her silky hair against my cheek, her arms locked about my waist.

"Easy, baby, easy." I mumbled into her ear. "We've arrived, we're okay. Just relax."

She turned her face up to mine, and I forgot to speak. Suddenly my mouth was down on hers, hard, my arms crushing her against me. We clung like that for a dizzy moment, then broke apart.

"Snow," I gripped her wrists and held her there, staring at me. "Snow, darling, if we ever get out of this alive—"

"I know," she breathed. "I know, Jery. I love you!"

I kissed her again, gently, this time. Then we started off down the tunnel, away from Clatclit's light. I hoped he wasn't melted beyond repair. I knew, though, after that shattering exchange of affection with Snow, that I sure was!

Behind us the light vanished. I looked back, but could discern neither Clatclit, nor the rock bridge, nor the torrent.

"I guess we feel our way from here on in," I remarked.

"No," said Snow, halting close beside me. "There, up ahead, Jerry! A light."

Together we moved down the tunnel. The light grew in intensity. Then we'd reached the lighted area. We were face to face with a peculiar red-bronze stone wall. No other tunnels led off from where we stood. There was no direction we could go from there except back toward that perilous underground cataract.

"Could we have come the wrong way?" Snow asked. "Maybe we missed a turnoff back there in the tunnel where it was darker."

"No," I said. "I had my hands feeling the walls all the way from the bridge onward, until we could see our way. This must be the right place."

Then on a sudden instinctive hunch I turned to Snow. "Got a lipstick in that handbag of yours?"

She looked at me blankly, but nodded, and produced the slim metal tube for my inspection.

I took it from her fingers, slipped off the cap, and twirled up a half-inch of the glossy red wax. "Now let's see if I'm right about this wall," I said, and made a streaking motion across the rough surface with the lipstick.

The end of the wax cylinder came away a bit disturbed by its apparent contact with the surface before us, but the wall held no trace, no mark, not even a smudge. I saw the little curls of sheared-off wax falling down the face of the wall to the floor of the tunnel.

I handed the lipstick back to a bewildered Snow.

"Just as I thought," I said. "That, honey, is the rock known as parabolite. The toughest, most impervious substance in the solar system. Nothing marks it, scratches it, or even budges it. We couldn't get past here with an intercontinental size collapser!"

"But Jerry, look!" Snow cried, pointing at the wall. I looked. The flat wall of parabolite, the impervious mineral, was going slowly concave in the center. I took hold of Snow by the shoulders, and pulled her back from that rapidly deepening hemisphere, expecting—I don't know *what* I was expecting. But I was scared speechless.

The thing bulged back away from us until its diameter was equal to that of the tunnel itself, and then, before my hypnotized gaze, the deepest section of the ruddy mineral gaped, like a hole suddenly pricked in the side of a bubble. The remainder of the parabolite wrenched violently away from the opening, leaving us a clear gateway into—

Into a vast chamber of eye-disturbing metal, that shifted and shimmered in some mind-chilling fashion that made me want to turn and run with Snow back down that black tunnel behind us.

"Come in, Jerry Delvin," said the voice of an *ancient Martian*.

15

Snow and I stepped into the great gleaming chamber. I was very much disconcerted when the wall behind us contracted suddenly back into place. Wherever we were, we were there until the Ancients decided to let us out.

"Who is the person with you?" said a voice. It had a frowning note to it, but I could not discern the source of the words anywhere in that silver-white blur of metal universe that spread away from us in all directions.

"She—" I said as boldly as possible, feeling like an escapee from Fenimore Cooper—"she is my woman!"

Silence. Then, "She will be allowed."

"Allowed to what?" I demanded.

"Allowed to be," said the voice, without emotion.

Snow's fingers nearly went through my hand.

"Well, thanks," I said, figuring politeness wouldn't hurt. I held tight to Snow, supplementing our hand grip with an arm-in-arm lock. We took another step forward. "Where are you?" I asked.

"You must come forward," said the voice.

I took another step, then another, then came to a startled halt.

As if materializing out of the air, the Martian was before me. I stared at him, stupified.

"What's the matter, Jerry? What is it?" Snow said. Then she looked where I was looking, giving a little scream.

"It's all right, honey," I said, with hollow courage. "He's a little impressionistic, but—"

"He?" she cried, clinging to me. "That—that thing?"

I looked at her, mystified, then back at the sort-of man I was standing before. He made my head spin a bit, what with apparently seeing him from front view and both profiles simultaneously, but he was mannish looking.

"This guy, the Martian, honey," I said. "Maybe you didn't take enough steps forward."

"She cannot see me as you see me, Jerry Delvin," said the Martian. "Her eyes only convey to her a fantastic whirl of hideous light and dark shapes. She, along with most others of your race, cannot apprehend my form as you can. This is why you were chosen, Jerry Delvin."

"That's crazy," I protested. "You're there, aren't you? You reflect light into the eyes, right? Why can't she see you?"

"The human eye is not the animal eye," said the Martian. "An animal eye sees only meaningless shapes; animals use all their senses to identify objects. But the human eye sees concepts, Jerry Delvin. Where an animal merely discerns eyes, feeding apparatus and breathing vents, the human eye sees a face. Actually, there is no such thing as a face."

It was true enough, in a way, that the human eye tended to group otherwise unrelated objects into concepts of non-actual reality.

"So how come I can see you, and she can't?" I reiterated.

"You are gifted to see true," said the Martian. "Your mind apprehends concepts where it has previously expected to find none. You relate what you see, and correctly. As in the case of your deriving so much information from your conversation with Clatclit. Another man would not have succeeded in that."

I shook my head, confused. "But I—I see you!"

"No, Jerry Delvin. Your mind sees me. Your eyes alone could not possibly view me since I am never entirely here to be viewed. Your eyes see one part of me, then another, then another and another. But your mind rejects the idea that I am four separate entities, and sees me as I am, a unit."

"You're here, you say, but you're not here, too?" I choked, feeling positively giddy.

"I am not a three-dimensional creature," said the Martian. "We whom you call the Ancients are existing in four dimensions."

"I thought Einsteinian physics says that *time* is the fourth dimension," I said slowly.

"It is not *time*," said the Martian. "It is *place* that is the fourth dimension. What is *here*, Jerry Delvin? Or *there*? Remember, there is no *here* or *there* except in relationship to something else. If only one small globe of rock comprised existing matter, Jerry Delvin, where would it be?"

"It—That's silly. *One* thing can't be anywhere!" I said. "It'd just be floating in a void." Trying to picture such a void made my brain whirl. I gave it up.

"I'm glad you understand," said the Martian. "Very well, then. We, your Ancients, are existing in a perfect *here-ness*, of which you can have no concept at all. We are living in not *a* location, but in *location* itself."

"It's no use," I said. "I can't even picture it."

"You're not supposed to," said the Martian, with a mechanical smile of contempt. "Even your mind, Jerry Delvin, cannot fathom the magnitude of our being."

"Hold on a minute!" I said, changing the subject. "Clatclit told me that you expected to compel my cooperation by keeping the Space Scouts your prisoners unless I obeyed you."

"That is correct, Jerry Delvin. And so, our desire is that you—"

"Damn it!" I exploded. "Stop taking so much for granted! Before I even scratch where it itches to please you guys, I want to see those kids! And in damned good shape, too!"

Snow held onto my arm and trembled. This was it. Now we'd know for sure if the boys were all right.

The Martian looked exasperated, but then he reached an arm out from himself—I couldn't tell exactly, without getting a blinding headache, just which way his arm went, left, right, up or down. But he reached away from himself in some direction or other, and the next moment, the shimmering blur of metallic flooring between him and us gave way to a red-bronze platform of parabolite which rose like a sluggish elevator on close-intervalled narrow rods of the same mineral. Then, as the apparatus halted, I realized that these rods were more than just supports for that slab of rock. They were bars.

And huddled together in this escape-free cage, I saw the fifteen missing Space Scouts.

"Snow!"

One of the boys, his hair as raven as Snow's was blonde, tore away from the group and rushed over to the bars, jamming his arms between them to reach out for her.

"Ted!" Snow cried, and rushed over to him. It was kind of awkward, embracing with the bars in the way, but they did it anyhow.

"Ted, dear Ted! Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he said, with a note of uncertainty. "Yeah, I guess we are. Only, I was almost giving up on you."

"Have you," the Martian's icy voice cut into the reunion, "seen quite enough?"

"Hold your horses!" I hollered at him through the cage. "She hasn't checked him for broken bones, yet!"

The Martian, whether out of patience or alien incomprehension of my sarcasm, left the cage where it was, and stood waiting.

"I knew you'd get my message, Snow!" said Ted eagerly, quite forgetting his doubts of a few seconds before. "I just knew it. When do we get out of here, hey? We want to go home!"

Apparently adventure lost its tang when the cage had first been lowered into the—the whatever it was that served us as a floor. The other boys had come up to the bars, now, all of them looking at Snow with longing, as the next best thing to a human-type mother.

"Oh, you poor kids," Snow sobbed suddenly. "Have they been feeding you? When did you last wash your face, Ted?"

"They don't feed us at all!" Ted said sorrowfully. "It's been weeks now since we ran out of candy, and—"

"Jery Delvin!" the Martian's voice interrupted imperiously. "Before that look on your woman's face erupts into some more of her tiresome vituperation, will you explain to her what a metabolic stasis is?"

"Sure," I said, folding my arms. "As soon as you explain it to me!"

The Martian seemed to be gathering himself for a cry of utter exasperation. Then he caught hold of himself and said with rigid calm, "We merely have held the children within a field of radiation that obviates the necessity of their taking alimental nourishment."

Snow looked over her shoulder at me, wonderingly.

"He means, honey, that they fixed it somehow so the kids didn't need to eat. I guess it was simpler than running a catering service."

"Didn't need to eat!" she exploded. "Doesn't that blob of black sparklers know that growing boys need food to grow!"

"There's no need to be redundant!" said the Martian.

"To what?" she cried, standing back from the cage to glare at him the better, with arms akimbo. The Martian took this golden opportunity to let the cage drop suddenly back out of our ken. The shimmering blur of metallic luster was once more at our feet.

"Oh!" she cried, stepping forward and staring down. "Ted! Teddy!"

"Jery, Jery, Jery," Snow murmured tearfully, turning about and burrowing her nose into my chest, while I held her helplessly. "He looked s-so hungry!"

I decided to let her sob. Neither I nor the Martian, no matter what our brain power, could drive this fixed notion out of her pretty little head.

"Now that you have seen them," said the Martian, "perhaps we can get to the business at hand?"

I seemed to be out of dilatory alibis.

"Okay," I said. "What do you want from me?"

"We want you to destroy Philip Baxter," said the Martian.

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"Destroy Baxter?" I echoed stupidly. "I was dragged all the way from Earth to do that?"

"Since we are here, and you were there," said the Martian, condescendingly, "what other choice did we have?"

"You could have sent a letter," I muttered.

"Hardly," the Martian said, unperturbed. "Since physical contact between our two dimensions is impossible."

"It is?" I said, surprised.

"Of course!" the Martian snapped. "If it were not, we'd have destroyed Baxter ourselves."

"Why didn't you use the sugarfeet?" I asked, bewildered. "Clatclit seems to have shown no ineptness in disintegrating other Earthmen."

"For the simple reason," said the Martian, with cold anger, "that on your wretchedly humid planet, a sugarfoot would be corroded to death before it could locate him. If, of course, it had already overcome the other obvious difficulties such as getting there, since Earth does not permit immigration of alien species."

Like a hot spark flaring where only ice had been before, a tiny light of hope began to burn in my heart. The Martians, for all their four-dimensional superiority, didn't know that Baxter was on Mars! Hell, why should they? I knew Baxter personally, and I didn't know he was on Mars until he was good and ready to let me know it.

"Jery—" said Snow, about to spill the beans.

"Ixnay, lover!" I growled. "Unless you want these guys tossing in the hand, and switching to Plan

C! Remember?"

I hoped she'd recall what had happened to those would-be rebels once the Ancients no longer had a use for them. I could tell, a second later, by her involuntary gasp, that she did.

"What was the import of that exchange?" the Martian asked, fairly smoldering with suspicion. "Your idioms were elusive."

"My woman was about to beg me not to do your will," I lied carefully. "I merely pointed out to her that if I refused, you would simply obliterate us and utilize some other scheme."

"Intelligent thinking, Jerry Delvin," said the Martian. For a horrible moment, I thought he meant he'd caught onto my misinterpretation of my words. Then I knew all was well, relatively, as he went on. "As to the method of destruction, we leave it to you to choose. However, haste is of paramount importance to us."

"Excuse me," I interrupted, "but would you answer me one probably idiotic question?"

"If it is within my range of information," said the Martian.

"Well, just why are you so set on getting rid of Baxter? Mind you, I have no overwhelming affection for him myself. But I can't figure your angle."

"The motivation is the usual, basic one. Even you humans follow it: Survival."

"Survival?" I repeated, blinking.

"Philip Baxter possesses the knowledge of the method of our destruction," said the Martian. "That in itself is a bad thing, but he has two more things besides this knowledge that make his removal imperative. He also possesses the means and the intention of using this means."

"What?" said Snow, losing the pedantic thread.

"He means, honey, that Baxter's not only got the knowhow to bump off this bunch, but the wherewithal and the urge."

"You Earthmen have a rather colorful succinctness of speech," the Martian observed.

Snow looked at me for help. "We what?"

I grinned at her despite our situation. "We talk purty," I interpreted. Then turning back to the Martian: "But if there cannot be physical contact between the races, why worry about Baxter? It seems to me that the worst he could do is snub you!"

"I'd better give you a bit more detail."

"Wait a minute." I held up a hand in protest. "If you tell me what Baxter knows then won't I be—"

"A threat to us? No. I do not intend to tell you the specific manner in which we can be destroyed, simply the nature of the destruction."

"All right. What?"

"You're aware, of course, of the geocentric theory of the universe?"

"Mmmm, I've heard of it. Isn't that the theory, once held by people on earth, that the Earth was the center of all creation, and the sun revolved around it, not vice-versa?"

"That is the one. Now, though your race believed it to be a false theory—"

"It is false!" I protested.

"For Earth, yes. But not, you see, for Mars. This place where you now stand, this brief liaison-point between our dimension and yours, is the center of your physical universe."

"You're crazy," I said. "Why, the sun alone is too massive to swing about this planet, let alone everything else! It'd be like a small boy trying to twirl a ten-ton boulder on the end of a rope; even if he managed, somehow, to get it started in motion, within ten seconds it'd be swinging him!"

"And if this small boy had another ten-ton boulder on the other side of him?"

"Well—uh ..."

"And another one above, and below, and in all directions from him? What then?"

I thought it over. "He'd be a mighty tired boy."

"That is not funny."

"It needs work," I admitted.

"Jerry Delvin," said the Martian with open irritation, "time is fleeting, and I cannot afford to dally while you play semantic pingpong with my words! Kindly allow me to complete my statement of this situation, or I shall decide by your flippancy that you no longer desire the companionship of your woman!"

That one, I detected by the sudden stiffening of Snow's hand in mine, I didn't need to translate. I shut up.

"This, then," the Martian went on more calmly, "is despite what your scientists say, the center of your universe. If they will but compute the masses, orbits and velocities of all other matter in the universe, they will see that. Or are they yet aware of the universe in its entirety?"

"Not—not quite," I said carefully, not wanting to chance losing Snow. "Our astronomical

instruments have a limited sensitivity to light. We see pretty damned far, but there's always something more beyond."

"Very well, then, you'll have to take my word for it. However, if you have properly understood the fact that our dimension exists at the place of Location itself, you will see at once that our only possible point of contact with your universe is at the central, non-moving point."

"I think I see," I said. "If you tried making contact anywhere else, it'd go speeding off from you, so to speak."

"Good. You understand perfectly. What Baxter proposes to do is to break our liaison, thus confining us to our own dimension forever."

"He proposes to do this by detonating a segment of our physical universe, one which coexists with yours. This will produce only the slightest of jolts in our world, but the balance between the two universes is so delicate that even this minor tremor will move us—by moving our contact-material—out of alignment. And we, since we exist in Location, cannot then move ourselves back."

"Would ... uh, would that be so terrible?" I asked nervously. "What do you gain by the contact anyhow?"

"The contact," said the Martian. "It is something we have always had. We don't need it, but we like less the idea of having it arbitrarily taken from us."

"Oh," I said. "I don't suppose you happen to know Baxter's angle in all this? I mean the reason for his urge to destroy you."

"Power," the Martian said simply. "You have heard of the Amnesty, of course?"

"Have I!" I muttered.

"Well, then. You know that the wearer cannot be countermanded by any but the combined veto of the World President and Philip Baxter himself."

"Yes," I said, puzzled.

"Then who, if Philip Baxter were to wear the Amnesty, could countermand him?"

I realized with a shock that no one on the three planets of Earth's domain could, the way the rules were set up.

"But people wouldn't stand for a dictator," I argued. "They'd vote out the power of the Amnesty."

"And if there was no more vote? Jerry Delvin, Interplanetary Security is currently the most powerful organization in your world. Its agents possess the most invincible of weapons, the collapser ray-gun. Philip Baxter wields the power, even now. But he desires that it should become known."

"Known?" said Snow uncertainly.

"He means, Snow, that it's no fun being the boss if nobody knows it. The more I think of it, the more I think Baxter can actually get away with it." I returned my attention to the Martian. "If he's held off taking over until you people were unhitched from our universe, then you must be a threat to him!"

"Only in his mind, Jerry Delvin. He learned that we exist. He also learned that we had non-Earthly abilities. He decided that we therefore were superior in knowledge of weapons of destruction. One cannot be a successful dictator when another being has more power, or if one thinks such is the case."

"Then you haven't such weapons?"

"We have. But, as I told you, physical contact between our races is impossible." It gave a shrug. "Any attempt on our part to use our weapons would result in that very jolt we are trying so desperately to avoid."

"I get it. You can shoot the charging rhino, but the recoil knocks you off the cliff."

"Overly metaphoric but substantially correct. So you must destroy Baxter for us."

"I'd like nothing better. I can get back to Earth, and alert the president, and maybe get the wheels rolling for an investigation of IS."

"Impossible!" the Martian snapped. "We dare not wait any longer. As yet, Baxter has confided his *modus operandi* to no one. Once he tells another man, then that man tells a third, and soon we become hopelessly vulnerable. No, the man himself must be destroyed, not just his power. When he dies, the power will die with him if you then tell your story."

"But I can't just walk up to him and kill him," I said.

"Since we are completely aware that you can, I must take it that you mean you will not."

"No, not that, exactly. But look, he's been a stinker, I know, but it's not in my power to destroy a fellow human being in cold blood."

"Then we shall heat your blood, Jerry Delvin," the Martian replied. "We will warm it with the racking anger you shall feel against us, knowing that these human children shall perish if you fail!" A cunning light came into the Martian's eyes. "And not only these children," it said. "But your woman as well!"

"No!" I cried, grabbing hold of Snow in both my arms. "I'll do it, but just leave her alone!"

"She stays here with us until you return successful."

"She does not!" I yelled, shaking. "I can't leave the woman I love with a creep that looks to her like a blob of black sparklers! I—"

With cold horror, I realized that my arms were embracing nothingness. Snow was standing, wide-eyed, ten feet away.

"Jery!" she cried, trying to come toward me. Instead, her steps slid over that shimmering metallic blur, and she remained in place.

"We who live in the heart of Location," said the Martian affably, "have a certain mastery over locale."

"You can't do this," I said unreasonably. Because it was quite obvious it was being done. Inexorably.

"Snow—" I said, and couldn't go on. The vision of Snow was moving back from me, or I was moving backward, or both. But the gap between us widened by the second. Then I was back in the rocky red tunnel, the parabolite sphincter narrowing swiftly before my face.

"Be—be careful, Snow!" I called, like an imbecile.

The wall was solid again.

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Simultaneous with that parabolite wall shutting in my face, three disturbing thoughts occurred to me: One, Baxter didn't have the Amnesty; Snow did! Probably in that catch-all handbag of hers. Two, if the Ancients could float me and Snow and the Space Scouts about like so much helium, why the hell didn't they just de-localize Baxter into a snake pit or something? And three, if physical contact was impossible between the races, how in heaven's name did they gimmick the Brain back on Earth? Which was also, come to think of it, moving awfully fast in relation to their liaison-point with the geocentric point of the universe!

A very baffled man, I began feeling my way down the tunnel toward that mighty roar of underground waters. The light paled and grew gray as I moved away from the parabolite wall. Then I was in darkness, feeling the bare stone with my fingers as I stepped carefully toward the increasing volume of ragged sound.

Then the wall curved away from my outstretched fingertips, and I knew I stood at the brink of that precarious arch of rock. There was nothing but blackness there, now.

"Clatclit!" I hollered over the boom of the river waters. "Clatclit, it's me, Jery!"

The rush of the boiling rapids was too great, however. It thundered by and swept the faint vibration of my voice along with it into that enormous well to my right.

Then I remembered Clatclit's manner of instruction to that hay-bale beast, what seemed like ages ago, out on the craggy Martian hillside. I put hooked thumb and forefinger into my mouth, and let off a piercing whistle.

Ahead of me in the darkness there was a glimmering of visibility, and then a feeble pink taillight waggled slowly up and down, far back beyond the other end of the bridge. Clatclit wasn't chancing moving as close to the death-dealing spray as before.

However, though a more powerful beam had been necessary to see by when I'd been moving into darkness, the pale glow was sufficient for the return trip. All I needed was a beacon, something to sight upon, so I wouldn't go astray in my slow crawl across that slippery curve of rock. Yes, crawl. This trip, I negotiated the arch on hands and knees.

And then I was across and hurrying down the corridor to the bend around which Clatclit shivered and waited. He stood up from his slouch against the wall, from which weary stance he'd been waving me onward with his taillight.

"Wow!" I said, catching dim sight of him in the weak glow of his water-pitted trylon. The sharp ruby glint was missing from his erstwhile pyramidic facets; now they looked dull crimson, and ropy, like taffy that has congealed after boiling over and dribbling down the side of the saucepan. "Does it hurt?" I asked, feeling partially responsible.

Side-to-side motion.

"It bothers you in some way, though, is that it?"

Nod.

"How?" I asked, unable to think of a yes-no question.

Clatclit pointed to my wrist, shook his head, pointed to my wrist again, and gestured upward, then nodded.

"Time. No ... other time. Uh ... Earth?"

Headshake. He rose on tiptoe and pointed up again.

"Beyond Earth. The sun!"

Nod.

"You mean that at this time, it doesn't bother you. But it will later, when you need the scales for absorbing sunlight?"

A very weary nod.

"Damn, that's rough. Will they grow back again?"

Pause. Nod. Tiptoe point. Three taps on wrist. Shrug.

"Yes. When the sun makes three times—In three days' time?"

Nod. Wrist-tap. Hands clasped to belly. Disgusted shrug.

"But in the meantime, you go hungry, sort of?"

Nod. Then, the social amenities taken care of, Clatclit pointed to me, to the ground, and looked questioningly.

"The Ancients have decided I'm to bump off Baxter," I said. "Then they'll release Snow and the boys. Not before."

Clatclit stared at me a moment, placed a hand on my shoulder, and shook his head, like a sympathetic friend. Then he took his claws and made a tugging, struggling motion with them, as though trying to tear something which wouldn't give. He followed it up with an incongruously comic coin-flipping motion to the back of his hand. It was his devious way of expressing the slang phrase, "Tough luck."

"You said it," I muttered. "Come on, though. The less time I leave Snow with the blob of black sparklers, the better. I've got to get to the spaceport."

Clatclit nodded and began his lumbering waddle off into the labyrinth. The Ancients probably expected me to book passage on the next Earth flight, to assassinate Baxter. They didn't know he was sitting right in their laps, in the Security sector of the field. It was just as well. I didn't relish the possibility of my elimination if they knew he was right where a sugarfoot could blast him as well as anybody.

As I trailed Clatclit up the wearisome slope that was taking us to the surface, I did some heavy thinking. The Ancients, before Earthmen first landed on Mars, probably had wandered about the planet freely, on the surface, living in their dwellings of parabolite, using their artifacts of the same impervious mineral. Then Earth, that paradoxically peace-loving and war-making planet, lands colonists. The Ancients, just from plain discretion, hide themselves and observe these unwelcome newcomers. Once it becomes clear to them that there is a potential menace from Baxter—who is no young chicken, having been in power before the first landing—they stay hidden, and start scheming to get rid of this guy who can jolt them out of their liaison.

I pondered over that bit. The Ancient had said that Baxter intended doing it by detonating a portion of their contact-material. Hell, they must mean parabolite! What other substance in the solar system was so alien to—

And with that thought, I suddenly knew the secret of that apparently impervious mineral's strength. No wonder it could not be destroyed! It was only in existence in our skimpy three dimensions in a fractional way. One-fourth of it was always present in the Ancients' world, since it couldn't *fit* into our universe in its entirety. And that meant not only one-fourth of its apparent mass, but one-fourth of even its atomic structure!

Even the collapsers, working on subatomic particles, were at a disadvantage. You can't nudge an electron out of orbit if it isn't actually fixed in that orbit. Three-quarters of those four-dimensional electrons were always cushioned by that elusive final segment that lay outside our universe. So trying to destroy parabolite by force was in the same class as trying to shatter a rubber ball with a hammer; a rubber ball which was hanging from an elastic cord, in fact! It just gave into the other dimension and rebounded frisky as ever.

"Boy," I thought, "this is going to put the skids under that scientific theory about parabolite's imperviousness. Parabolic molecules, ha! Well, it was a good theory while it lasted; it fit the known facts, at least. Hell, the stuff even has the wrong name! It ought to be called Elasto-plast, or some such euphonic label."

Clatclit paused in his climb up the tunnel slope, and turned a querying stare on me.

"Was I talking aloud?" I asked.

Curious nod.

"Sorry, it's nothing," I said, indicating that he should proceed with our journey. "Just the salesman in me coming to life. You can't have public interest without catchy trade-names. Once an ad man, always an ad man."

Clatclit looked positively bewildered.

"Sorry. Business talk," I explained.

He shrugged and continued his upward climb, with me tagging after the bobbing pink taillight.

As secure as the maximum-security Security prison was supposed to be, we got in with no trouble. The planet must be a regular yarn-ball of those rocky tubes. If you know the layout, you can apparently get anywhere from anywhere.

Our only excursion from the steady upward climb had been a brief stop-off in one of those fungus-lighted rooms. Clatclit picked up my collapser and returned it to me.

I felt infinitely more confident of success with its thick golden handle jutting out of my holster once more. Perhaps I could just find Baxter, sneak a bolt into his face, and scurry off into the labyrinth on Clatclit's heels.

I knew, even as I thought it, that I wouldn't be able to just blast him like that. I'd probably have to face up to him, pull an "All right, pardner—draw!" sort of sentence on him, and then pray that I was faster. It was unthinkable for me to act in any other manner. The give-a-guy-a-chance instinct was part of our national heritage, something called the code of the West, handed down to us by pioneer forefathers.

The method of ingress to the building was simplicity itself. The tunnel we'd been negotiating came to an abrupt end at a wall of granite slabs such as had buttressed my prison cell. I reached for the collapser, but Clatclit laid a restraining claw on my hand.

I watched, curious, as he put his left ear-orifice to the wall and listened intently. Then, seeming satisfied, he put his hands on the biggest slab of granite and pushed.

Nothing happened for a moment. Then the slab began to pivot about some central axis, and a one-foot gap was exposed on either side of its bulk. Beyond the open spaces, bright fluorescent tubing lighted a grim prison corridor.

"Isn't there an easier way to the spaceport?" I said.

A prison meant guards, and guards meant collapsers, and collapsers meant, possibly, good-by Jerry Delvin.

But Clatclit shrugged, pointed into the tunnel, and made zig-zag motions with both hands, all the while shaking his head in weary disgust.

"There is, but it'd take forever to get there, huh?" I interpreted. He nodded. Oh well.

Clatclit leading the way, we sidled through the right-hand gap, then he pressed the mammoth stone back into place.

"You're coming with me all the way?" I asked, surprised. Somehow, I'd thought his guideship ended at the same place the tunnel did.

Clatclit nodded vigorously.

"Is it that the Ancients don't trust me?"

Headshake.

"You have nothing better to do?"

Negative.

"Okay, I'll bite. Why?"

Clatclit stepped toward me, placed a hand on my shoulder, then placed his free hand over my heart, moved it over his own, held up two fingers and crossed them.

"Because we're friends," I said softly.

Clatclit nodded.

It took us an hour to locate Baxter. Clatclit showed no signs of surprise when I did not go to the ticket office and book a passage for Earth. Apparently, not being in on the finer points of the Ancients' scheme, he found no wild incongruity in my being brought all the way from Earth to obliterate a man who could just as easily have been dispatched by a sugarfoot. Or else, through some extrasensory awareness, something born of our friendship, he knew that imparting the location of Baxter to the Ancients might well mean my death.

Whatever his reasons, Clatclit simply followed me in my progress through the prison dungeon which, thanks to its completely escape-proof stone-corked cells, was left without guards. We went up into the more well-appointed section of the building, the warmly plastic-decorated halls that were open to the public who passed through the Security inspection when entering or leaving the planet. It was good business to hide the grimmer realities from colonists or casual tourists.

And those who learned about the dungeons were never in a position to pass the word around. Your first view of a Security dungeon was usually your last view of anything.

The public part of the building had too many people in it to suit me. Even if I could get by the flight officials and robo-scanners unchallenged, Clatclit couldn't. The building was rigidly off-limits to extraterrestrials.

So we went up the outside.

Built against, and a good ways into, the high hills that surrounded the town, the building was easy prey for anyone who cared to clamber up the rocky slopes from which it jutted and climb through a window. These slopes were lighted, but not patrolled. After all, under ordinary circumstances, no one in his right mind would try sneaking into an IS stronghold!

Baxter, as it turned out, was seated at a desk not unlike his own back on Earth, in the very office

where I'd been last interrogated by the team of Charlie and Foster. He was staring into space, and smoking a cigar, the solitary incandescent lamp on his desk making his ice-white mane of hair a sort of angelic aurora about that pleasantly rubicund face. It was like seeing Satan sporting a good-conduct medal.

Clatclit and I were crouched outside the window, on a narrow ledge we'd reached from the slope. To my intense interest, lying before Baxter, in the glaring circle of lamplight, was the black shirt I'd been wearing when I was rescued by Clatclit, the shirt which had been towed off by that haybale to obviate Baxter's being able to track the route of my flight.

I was about to whisper a question about the shirt to Clatclit, when Baxter turned partway about in his chair, and started to stub out the cigar in a black onyx ashtray. The question stuck in my throat, as I caught sight of Baxter's breast.

On a silver chain about his throat, he wore the Amnesty!

18

Something was very definitely wrong.

Until that moment when Baxter turned, I'd been certain that the Amnesty was in Snow's possession. And now here it was, gleaming in bright red and bronze against the front of his crisp black linen blouse.

The sight of it twanged a chord in my mind, and I crouched there on that narrow ledge, trying to grasp the fleeting thread of thought. The Amnesty was exactly the same color as that parabolite wall down in the tunnels, the barrier to the lair of the Ancients. Was it a coincidence that this token of power was designed to match in shade and intensity of color that unearthly mineral of another dimension?

A queer notion began to take root in my mind. Baxter had given me the Amnesty before I set off to find the missing boys. Or had he? Was that the Amnesty I'd carried, or a copy, a perfect duplicate constructed not of metal, but the impervious mineral.

My brain was spinning as little unimportant facts suddenly burgeoned and grew, and took on terrible significance. According to our science, parabolite was invulnerable to all tools, and could not be worked or shaped. Yet the Martian had said to me that Baxter possessed the means to disengage the fragile bond that linked the two dimensions by—The truth came home to me with an icy shock.

By detonating a portion of their contact-material! And the Amnesty, my Amnesty, was that material. I looked past Baxter to the black blouse, its lining sparkling beneath the incandescent lamplight with thousands of tiny metal filaments, and then I knew at last Baxter's monstrous plan.

Cold fury welled up inside me. I could easily, at that moment, have leveled my collapser at him and flashed him out of existence with no more feeling than that engendered by crushing a gnat between finger and thumb. My hand was sliding back toward that cold metal handle jutting from my holster, when there came an interruption.

The door before Baxter's desk opened, and Charlie and Foster came in. Clatclit and I ducked back from the pane, and listened, holding our breaths.

"About time!" Baxter growled. "Since you two are alone, I assume this was another wild goose chase!"

His fist slammed down atop the crumpled shirt, and I caught his meaning. Apparently, when they'd discovered my cell empty, they'd tracked my trail by whatever electronic device followed up the location of that rigged garment, and had been led miles astray in the Martian desert, finding only the empty blouse at the end of their quest.

"Yes and no, sir," Charlie said. "It's—it's the weirdest thing."

"Well? What?" Baxter snapped angrily.

Charlie, while replying, was unhitching a sort of tanklike apparatus from his back, from which a flexible tube ran into the end of the pistol at his belt. With the surprise of sudden memory, I recognized one of the weapons of the earlier settlers at Marsport: a sugarfoot-repelling water pistol, with three-gallon ammunition tanks.

"We got out the pack, sir, when we returned."

"Yes, yes," Baxter interrupted violently. "You took the dogs and trailed Delvin by scent from his cell. Fine. But did you find him!"

"We had trouble, sir. It was outside the crater, and the dogs needed air-booster muzzles, which cut down their sense of smell. And the trail was spread way out, too, as if Delvin had only touched the ground every thirty feet or so!"

I remembered Clatclit's bounding transportation from the cell, and had to smile. The dogs must have been starting and stopping every five minutes over that sporadic trail.

Baxter, at the end of his patience, flattened both hands on the desktop, and grated, spacing his

words for emphasis, "Did you find him?"

Charlie exchanged a look with Foster, then hung his head. "No, sir, we didn't."

"Lost the trail, I suppose," Baxter growled.

"No, we kept at it, all right," Charlie said. "It took us underground, into the lava tunnels and grottos. We even found a cot where he'd been sleeping."

I stared at Clatclit. They'd done better than I thought possible. Clatclit tilted his head to one side and shrugged. It meant the same thing in both our languages.

"Of course, you idiot!" Baxter said, with disgust. "It's obvious he had help from the sugarfeet. I'd have guessed that the moment I saw the intervals of his trail! What else but a man carried by a sugarfoot could travel in bounds like that?"

"Gravity here's only half that of Earth," Charlie protested weakly.

"Even so," Baxter muttered, "only an Olympic champ could make leaps like that! You've seen Delvin. Did you really think that gawky frame of his had such galvanic energy?"

I could resent his slurs later. Right now, I wanted to find out just how damned far those guys had tracked me.

"But we finally came to a bridge, over an underground river, sir. At the end of the tunnel beyond it, the trail came to a dead end, in front of a whole damned wall of parabolite. And something about that wall scared hell out of the dogs, too! They were whining, high up the scale, like they do when there's something wrong, and growling at that wall, sir."

Halfway through Charlie's discourse, I had jerked my head around to stare a baffled question at Clatclit. Where, I was about to ask him, were you when the posse scuttled by?

But he'd already anticipated the question, and I watched as he pointed to himself, then made a serpentine forward-stab with his hand, then an up-down-and-around motion with his palms over his torso.

"You scooted up the tunnel for a brisk toweling?" I said.

A firm nod.

I couldn't blame him. After all, Snow and I were gone for a spell. No reason for him to stand there and melt with the water already beading his candy-coated hide. So that meant that Charlie and Foster were outside the wall while Snow and I were in council with the Martian. I found I was glad Clatclit hadn't been there to spot them. Because if he had been, and they had those water guns, I'd have found nothing but a sticky puddle where I'd left a friend. If, indeed, I'd been able to get back that far.

Baxter's voice interrupted my thoughts. "And so," he said, mockingly bitter, "you return once again, empty-handed!"

"Not quite, sir," said Foster, stepping forward and setting a trim plastic rectangle on end atop the desk. "We found this just outside that wall."

It was Snow's handbag. Probably she'd dropped it in her initial fright when that wall had gaped open before us. I hadn't noticed it then, because I'd been pretty shaken, too. And when I made my ungracious exit from the Martian's now-you-see-it-now-you-don't den, the handbag was already gone, on its way up to Baxter via Foster.

Apparently Clatclit had known a shorter route to the IS building than the IS men did.

Baxter had the bag in his hands, now, staring at it with the first faint flush of elation coming into his face. "But this must be that girl's bag! The one who stole that other Amnesty!"

It hit me like a blow in the stomach. Of course! Baxter had had no idea that I was with Snow. Not until now. And he knew Snow had that Amnesty, the one he planned to use to blow the Martians out of our dimension. And now he knew where she was: deep in the rock of the planet, with a virtual bomb on a chain about her neck!

He didn't need his gimmicked blouse any longer, the one he was going to use to track me until I was in the chamber of the Ancients. That had been his plan, of course. The Amnesty was a remote-controlled bomb, which I, as his dupe, was to have worn during my search for the boys. Baxter, knowing that I'd find them, and the Ancients with them, had suggested that I wear that blouse so that he could trail me into their lair. Then the flick of a switch, and Jerry Delvin would be blasted to shreds, while the Martians found themselves stranded forever in immovable Location.

And yet I was still puzzled. How could he have known that I'd find them? I decided not to vaporize him just yet. I had a few points to clear up, or go out of my mind wondering about for the rest of my days.

I unholstered the collapser, slid the window open with one hand, and swung my legs over the sill.

"Good evening, gentlemen," I said.

They didn't seem very glad to see me.

Charlie and Foster stood stiffly before the desk, watching me warily as I completed my clamber into the room. Their eyes widened a fraction as Clatclit sprang lightly in after me, but that was all. Baxter, however, had lifted one eyebrow, and was appraising me carefully, as if trying to

gauge the intensity of my emotions. No one said a word for a minute, while Clatclit shut the window and came to stand a bit behind me, to my right, leaving the show to me.

Baxter found his voice first. When he spoke, it was in the casual friendly tone he'd used at our first meeting, his inflection giving no sign that I had him covered by the most deadly weapon in the solar system.

"Since I am still alive," he said dryly, "I can only assume that you want to see me about something before I die, else you would have blasted me through that window."

"That's very accurate," I said grimly. "If you'll tell your men to be seated, and to keep their hands where I can watch them, I'll lower this barrel a bit. I wouldn't want an accidental finger twitch to terminate our conversation."

Charlie and Foster, white-faced, looked at Baxter. He gave a curt nod, and they sat down. I stayed back from the desk, keeping my back against the wall beside Clatclit. I didn't want anyone else coming in and sneaking up behind me. Baxter swung slightly about in his chair to face me, then laced his fingers on his knees.

"Now that we're settled," he said, "what can I do for you, Mister Delvin?"

"Baxter," I said, "I just came from seeing one of the Ancients. He and I had a long talk."

Baxter never flickered an eyelash. He just nodded and waited politely for me to continue.

"It seems you are a menace to them. They stand in the way of your ambition, and must be destroyed. However, the Ancients, even with their extra dimension, don't seem to have any increase in brain power. Their evaluation of your intentions is without doubt the correct one, but as to their interpretation of your motives, they're full of hot air."

A slight smile of grudging approval appeared on his round face. "Very good, Mister Delvin. Well thought out. Tell me, just what do they think I'm after?"

"According to them, you want to be the visible kingpin of the tri-planet civilizations, instead of just running things from behind the scenes. For a while, I thought it made sense, too. But then it occurred to me that this puppet-control of our worlds is just the sort of position that would appeal to you, Baxter. You'd enjoy being the secret master of Venus, Earth and Mars. I could imagine you chuckling to yourself, delighting in being an apparent public servant, and saying to yourself, 'The fools; if they only knew—' Am I right?"

Baxter's smile grew broader. "In substance, yes. I do rather like being the kingpin incognito, as it were. But go on, you were about to make a point."

"Well, if that were the case, then the Ancients wouldn't have to be destroyed, sent back to their dimension forever. You'd be suited by the status quo. Alien beings on Mars would just be alien beings on a Mars which you still controlled. So there's got to be something more that you want. You have all the power I know of, right now. So there can be only one thing left for you to want: some power I don't know of."

"I must congratulate you on your perspicacity," he said. "Yes, there is something more, Mister Delvin. That much I will tell you. But as to what it is—" He spread his hands. "I don't see that it's your concern."

"You—" I said, then paused. His insouciance was not in keeping with his situation. Therefore, the situation was not the one which I thought it was. "You're pretty chipper," I said, "for a man held at collapser-point."

"Oh? Am I being chipper?" he said, all raised eyebrows and facetious wonder. "I hadn't noticed."

"You fool," I said softly.

Baxter's amiable smile vanished and a hard light came into his eyes. "What do you mean?" he said, through clenched teeth.

"I mean," I said gently, but with deadly earnest, "that the Brain back on Earth selected me because of my mental abilities. I mean, Baxter, that I can figure things out faster than you can dream them up."

"The Brain picked you," he said coldly, "because it was rigged by the Ancients. And for no other reason."

I nodded. "And the Ancients rigged it to pick the man most likely to succeed in your destruction."

Baxter was suddenly silent. He watched me intently.

I lounged against the wall, waving the muzzle of the collapser up and down slowly. "Let me clue you in to my reasoning, Baxter old man," I grinned. "This is a collapser. It is in working order. You do not fear it. Ergo, you have some protection from it. I would deduce that you are at present wearing a shield of some sort. A shield which you have kept secret from everyone but yourself and the inventor, who is probably long since dead, if I know your approach to things."

Charlie and Foster turned and looked at him, their eyes bugging out in surprise. Till that moment, they'd thought their weapon invincible against anything.

"You astound me," Baxter said, admiringly. "But there's something you don't know about the shield. It protects not by *deflection*, but by *reflection*."

"I could have gotten that part figured out, too, if I just allowed my mind to wander a bit through the paths yours seems to prefer. Nice work. Not only are you protected, but your assailant is

himself destroyed."

"And so, Mister Delvin," Baxter smiled, starting to get up from his chair to come and disarm me.

"And so," I said, "nothing!"

Baxter stopped on hearing the easy confidence of my voice. He hesitated, looked at me.

"You shouldn't have kept it a secret," I said, smiling. "Charlie and Foster, here, are therefore quite vulnerable to the ray." It was rewarding to see their increased pallor. "So, you guys," I addressed them, "unless you want to go out in a blaze of blue sparks, how about tying this silly old man to his chair?"

They faltered only the fraction of an instant, and then they had a furious, cursing Baxter neatly hooked at ankles and wrists to his chair with their security-manacles.

"All right," Baxter growled deep in his throat, when they had been gun-gestured back to their places. "You are clever, Delvin! So what happens now? Do you beat me to death with your fists, or what?"

"If necessary," I said. A brief flicker of fear went across his face. "But so far as I'm concerned, destroying you need not mean physical dissolution. I don't care so much about Baxter the man as I do about Baxter the kingpin. To keep my end of the bargain, I can simply report what I know to the World Congress, and have you stashed away where you can never carry out any of your totalitarian schemes."

The normal ruddiness of Baxter's face was superseded by a sickly gray. "You can't—" he said, then stopped. At the moment, it was quite apparent that I could.

"And as for your big secret power," I said, calmly and without boasting, "it took me about two seconds' brainwork to guess what it is."

Baxter just sat and smoldered, his mouth clamped shut.

"The Ancients," I said, "live in Location, with a capital *L*. I've already experienced a demonstration of their logistic powers. They had me bobbing around like a balloon down in their weird little cavern. And they were also able, not so long ago, to manipulate the workings of the International Cybernetics Brain across a void millions of miles wide. That, by me, shows one power which any would-be dictator would give a hell of a lot to get ahold of: teleportation."

Baxter stared at me in furious amazement.

"But," I went on, "there seemed to be a couple of details which didn't jibe, if that were the case. If they could manage control over cosmic distances so easily, why should they go to the trouble of getting a man, me, to bump you off? Why not simply teleport you into something fatal? That would be the easier method. But they didn't do it. Therefore, for some reason, they couldn't. Well then, Jerry, I thought to myself, what could the reason be? In their dimension, that of ultimate Place, or Location, distances have no meanings. Everything in creation is Here. So what held them up? What kept them from snatching you? Obviously, only one thing could, Baxter: the contact-material, parabolite."

He kept his features rigid, but sweat was beading his brow. It gleamed like diamonds in the lamplight.

"It seems that the Ancients can only control areas where their contact-material is present. Until the mineral was found by Earth scientists, that place was on Mars only. Then some of the material was taken back to Earth, for museums, for analysis, and even for paperweights and such. My guess is that one of the technicians who runs the Brain has a hunk of the stuff on his desk, right?"

Baxter narrowed his eyes, then relaxed and nodded. "Yes. As soon as I figured out the Brain had been gimmicked, I went there to check. I had it removed immediately. Then I re-fed the data into the Brain, and found the name of the man who should have been sent here to destroy the Ancients."

I nodded. "Your own. Philip Baxter. Which is why you sped up here so damned fast after I arrived. And also why you had to toss me into a cell. One thing eludes me, though. What gave you the hint that the Brain might have been rigged?"

Baxter smiled wearily. "Your loss of the Amnesty. When these idiots here called me, my first reaction was to chew them out and to have you released. It was only after talking to you that it dawned on me that you seemed ill-equipped for the task I had in mind. I got to wondering about the Brain, then. That's when I went over to see for myself, and found the parabolite."

I nodded again. "Yes. In their cavernful of the stuff, they could float me all over the place. When some of the stuff was near the Brain, they could control that. But nothing else. Nothing that was not in the presence of the mineral. That is, excepting one part of the mineral: the chunk that comprises the false Amnesty. Something had to happen to that hunk of it. Something that simultaneously rendered that piece out of their control, and told them that you were a menace to their existence in this dimension."

"If you think I'll tell you that—" he said angrily.

"No need to. I've figured out that one, too. When I first figured out just what parabolite was, I compared it to a rubber ball on an elastic cord. Trying to destroy it by force was impossible. It just bounced and swung into the cushion of its fourth dimension. But, sticking with the analogue, what happens if the rubber ball is attacked from all sides simultaneously? It has nowhere to go,

then. And, I asked myself, what could attack parabolite from even its extra dimension? What, except another piece of parabolite? Oh, not in the frictive way, like diamond cutting diamond. You still controlled only three of the dimensions using that method. And it had been tried already by scientists and found useless. So you had to attack it on the no-dimensional level. Since the three forms of matter—solid, liquid and gas—all must exist with height, breadth and depth, you had to use the only thing in our universe that we have besides matter: energy. Fire? No, heat had been tried already. Atomic dissolution? A bit better, perhaps; a battery of collapsers, working on the subatomic level, had managed to destroy a fraction of a gram of the stuff, simply from the laws of *chance* encounters with parabolite molecules in the fourth dimension. A ray as powerful as the collapser-ray undoubtedly accidentally gets generated in an extra dimension, but only in the most minor way, not nearly enough for your purpose."

"And what," Baxter asked between tautened lips, "is my purpose?"

"Since your rule-the-worlds dream necessitates the ability to teleport your agents wherever you please, you must have parabolite wherever you please. This in turn necessitates pulverizing the mineral down to its very molecules, and sowing it into the atmosphere of the three planets. Then you will be free to take complete command. The hitch, of course, is that the pulverization of parabolite would engender, as the Ancient put it, a jolt. A jolt which would unlatch Location from our dimension, sending the Ancients off forever. They didn't like the idea, and so they set out to destroy you."

Baxter's jaw, during the last part of my narrative, had gone slack, and he stared at me idiotically. I had to grin.

"Yes, I know what suffering you're going through at this moment, Baxter old boy. 'All for nothing,' you're telling yourself. If you had only known, huh?"

"You—you mean," he licked his dry lips and stared at me, horribly upset, "that all I had to do to be rid of the Ancients was to go ahead with my scheme? Simply pulverizing a hunk of that stuff would have sent them off?"

I nodded, ironically. "Yes. No need to rig a bomb, to send me seeking them, to try and set this bomb off in their midst. You could have set it off right back on Earth, and been just as rid of them."

"No need," he repeated dully. Then, suddenly alert; "Set it off? How did you know?"

"It was the only form of energy that hadn't been tried," I said, with a shrug. "Self-energy. Back on Earth, you ran that disc of parabolite through a hot atomic pile, and it became intensely radioactive, since the deadly emanations of the pile are even less than subatomic, and have no dimensions. Then a shielding coating of nullifying gamma plasm, the same stuff we use to keep our rocket chambers from dosing the passengers with deadly rays, and neat nickel plate over that. Emboss it with the seal of the World President, lacquer it in the colors of IS, and you have a neat, but incredibly potent, little fission bomb."

"And how could I set this off?" Baxter sneered. "Aren't you forgetting that the parabolite's at less than a critical mass?"

"Same way the old H-bomb worked," I said. "Under the gamma plasm, beside the radioactive parabolite, you have an atomic bullet, the kind the foot soldiers used in the Third World War. As for tracking it and detonating it, you must have a refinement of the tracking stuff you had in that blouse of mine. As the old H-bomb was triggered by an atomic bomb, so the parabolite, even at less than critical mass, could be triggered by the remotely-detonated atomic bullet. You planned to blow up the Ancients, and me with them, Baxter. Then you could go ahead and set off similar bombs, one each on Venus, Earth and Mars. The fallout would stay with the planets forever, even after losing its potency. And you could teleport your agents anywhere you chose."

"And the Ancients?" said Baxter.

"They reasoned out your intentions when you made that chunk of parabolite radioactive. Why do that unless you intended detonating it? But the very act of making it fissionable somehow took the teleportation-whammy out of it. They couldn't use it to snatch you, even when you were near it. Probably, since it seems the only likely reason, they couldn't use it because it was too atomically hot for them to work with." I was finished. I waited.

"Mister Delvin," said Baxter, after a long moment. "What do you intend to do, now?"

"Keep you in cuffs," I said. "Send an emergency call to the World Congress. See you corked into one of your own granite cells. With the air supply turned on, however. Though I wouldn't mind you having an hour or two of what I went through the other night."

"And," Baxter turned his head and nodded toward the handbag on the desk, "what about her?"

"She was being held conditional to my removing you as a menace," I said. "Consider yourself removed."

Baxter smiled. "And if the Ancients are not satisfied? What if they still desire my death, not simply my imprisonment?"

I thought it over. "In that case, I'd be forced to comply with their wishes."

To his credit, this unexpected statement on my part only stopped his tongue for a moment. He immediately tried a new approach. "And if the Ancients decide to destroy her anyhow?"

"Why should they?" I said, less sure of myself.

He cocked his head to one side, watching me. "No," he shook his head, "now I think of it, they wouldn't destroy her. They'd hold her captivity over your head, forcing you to return so that they might destroy you."

"Me?" I said, startled.

"Surely you can see why?" he went on smoothly. "After all, why were they out to destroy me, Mister Delvin?"

"Because you knew—" I said, then halted, stunned.

"—How to destroy them," Baxter finished for me. "The selfsame information which you now possess. What do you think your chances are for survival now?"

My guard wavered in that fleeting moment of realization. I caught the flicker of movement just a second too late.

Charlie, out of my thoughts for an instant, had whipped his collapsible out of his holster and brought it to bear on me.

But even before I could bring my own weapon up in a futile attempt at a duel which would have resulted in probably two fatalities, iron-hard claws gripped my shoulder and I was carried hurtling to the floor by Clatclit's full weight on my back. To the floor just behind Baxter's chair.

Charlie, spinning about to keep me in range, touched the trigger. There was a shriek. A shriek that died the split second in which it was born, and then my world disappeared in a blinding shower of blue-white sparks.

When Clatclit and I got up again, Charlie and Foster were missing, along with most of the corridor wall. Baxter was just standing up from the lopped-off remnants of his chair, the manacles at his wrists and ankles having been dissolved by the bolt which could not destroy him.

The bolt had rebounded from his shielding force to destroy its perpetrator, Charlie, and Foster, the hapless bystander.

Before I could toss aside my useless weapon and attack him barehanded, Baxter had yanked up another weapon from the floor. It was one of the old-fashioned water guns, its flexible hose running back to tanks filled with gallons of sugarfoot-destructive fluid.

"If you place any value on the existence of this creature who has just saved your life, Delvin, you will hand over that weapon to me at once."

Clatclit looked at me. I sighed, and tossed the collapsible to Baxter. What the hell, it wouldn't work on him, anyhow.

"And now," said Baxter, dropping the water weapon and covering us with the one which was deadly to both our hides, "I am going to need your help."

19

"Well, this is a switch!" I remarked. "The kingpin needs a hand!"

"It is a comedown," Baxter said wryly, "but you see, my late agent's fatal heroics have had a distressing side effect."

"Oh?" I said, looking about the shards of room that were still extant on the corridor side. "I don't see anything."

"That," Baxter remarked, "is precisely the point, Mister Delvin. A moment or two ago, not three yards to the left of where those fools were sitting—no, don't bother looking, there's only empty space there now—there was a small sending set. I brought it all the way from Earth with me. In fact, that is the reason I was sitting in this room tonight. Had my agents reported to my satisfaction that you were present among the Ancients, I should have used that set to detonate the atomic bullet in the false Amnesty. However—"

"Your trigger went bye-bye," I finished. "Need I say I am elated?"

"I take it the woman, the one wearing the false Amnesty, means something to you?" Baxter said. "The Ancients seemed to set some store in her captivity's coercive power over you."

"She does," I admitted. "Which is why I'm happy you no longer possess the means to set that damned thing off."

I had no particular love for the Ancients, but I didn't much like the thought of Snow being blasted into radioactive rubble.

"Well, then, if you desire to save her, you and your friend are going to guide me down to that cavern where they dwell, and—"

Footsteps pounded down the corridor, and then a squad of armed guards came into view. They saw Baxter and halted, and their leader stepped forward.

"Sir," he said, "Our detectors reported a collapsible being—" his gaze, forgetful of military deportment, took a second to wander bug-eyed over the more truncated sections of the room, "—being used in this vicinity."

"Congratulations," Baxter remarked sarcastically. "Your eyes might give you the selfsame information, corporal. One has been used. I have the situation in hand, however. You may take your men and go."

"Yes, sir," the young man said, obviously fighting an urge to break protocol and ask what the hell happened.

"Oh! And corporal," Baxter said, as the boy began to organize his squad.

"Sir?"

"You might scratch Myers and Gibson off the payroll list. Send their families the usual telegrams of condolence."

The corporal's eyes bugged even more so, and he swallowed noisily before mumbling "Yes, sir" again and departing.

"That was pretty callous, even from you," I said, as the sounds of their footsteps dwindled and disappeared.

"Not callous at all. Efficient."

"Callous."

Baxter shrugged. "In any case, come along you two. The sooner I rid myself of these Ancients, the better."

There was nothing else we could do. Dejectedly, Clatclit began moving off in his lumbering lope toward the staircase. I followed, no cheerier than he. Baxter brought up the rear. So far as I could see, in selecting me as the tool of Baxter's destruction, the Ancients had made the error of their four-dimensional lives!

Then, almost all the way down to the main floor, I heard the murmur of voices. We were nearing the terminal lobby, the point where passengers were checked on and off the planet. As we turned at the landing, I saw that the lobby was filled with a throng of people, some of them patiently answering questions of the flight-listing robots, others having baggage weighed, and still others engaging off-duty pilots and technicians in casual conversation. It was a normal enough scene, one to be found in any rocket terminal on Earth or off it.

But there was something wrong about it. I slowed my descent of the stairs and tried to place the uncertainty, the queasy foreboding I felt centering about my heart.

Then I had it. There were no women present. Not one woman could I see in that apparently casual group of passengers. And there was a quiver of tingling tension in the air, a very palpable sensation of mental concentration trembling on the brink of action.

Baxter sensed it too. I could feel his own progress slowing behind me on the stairs. "What—?" he said.

Then it happened. At the far end of the immense room, one of the security guards let out a cry. I shot my gaze toward the sound, and saw that a man beside him had yanked his collapser from his holster. Other guards came alert all over the place, and they started toward the man on a run. And they were all of them neatly tripped, shoved, and clubbed, while a brilliant crackle of free electrons sealed the fate of the first guard.

The Neo-Martian revolution was starting. Some of the guards managed to get shots off before they were overcome by weight of numbers. People vanished in blinding flares of energy, amid shouts of fierce rage from their companions.

"There's one!" someone shouted, and a clump of these desperate insurgents turned toward the stairs, where Clatclit and I stood. They were looking past us, at Baxter.

Then the Security Chief fired the collapser in his hand, the humming bolt of dissolving-power buzzing right past my ear. But he hadn't fired at the men below. He'd fired directly at the fluorescent fixture that glowed in the center of the ceiling. Suddenly, the flash that marked its passage was the only lighting in that room. Then the cascade of sparks died, and we were standing in blackness.

I grabbed Clatclit's arm, hoping we could make a break for freedom in the dark, but Baxter had out-thought me there, too.

Another throbbing beam of energy from behind us, and the floor was gone before our feet, leaving a dizzy drop into emptiness, then even the view of the abyss faded as the sparks of energy died. I stifled a cry of alarm in my throat as Baxter's free hand flattened itself on my back and shoved.

I staggered forward, and my foot came down on air. Then, my grip on Clatclit's arm throwing him off balance, we plunged into the empty space.

Somehow, writhing in midfall, Clatclit got his hard-scaled arms about me, and he took the brunt of the landing on powerful legs and tail. My left arm was numb from shoulder to elbow. I must have struck it on the floor of the room below the lobby when we landed.

Another thump told me that Baxter had arrived, too. He did better than we did. After all, he was expecting a fall when he took off from that sliced-off brink. In another moment, he'd prodded us out into the corridor of that first floor under ground level, where the lights were still working. Then, taking a step back, he blasted away the flooring of that room, too, to discourage anyone from following the way we'd come. Incongruously, as he came back out, he shut the door.

"Afraid they'll grab at the knob on the way down?" I said, rubbing my injured arm.

"Neatness," said Baxter, not to be outdone, "is a virtue."

"Come on, come on," Baxter said impatiently, waving the muzzle of the collapser at us. "Can we get to the labyrinth from here?"

"Why bother, now?" I said, jerking a thumb toward the lobby above us. "Way things look, you won't have any empire to come back to, even if you do knock off the Ancients."

"A minor skirmish like this cannot but fail in its purpose," said Baxter. "On my return, I fully expect to see the sky filled with Security ships from Earth, leisurely razing the entire city."

"Won't that be rather difficult to write off as 'Unserviceable,' even the way you keep inventory?" I needed.

"Move!" said Baxter, beyond patience.

Clatclit and I moved. We went back down the long ramp that led toward the dungeons. At gunpoint or not, I called back over my shoulder, "By the way, just what do you intend doing when we arrive at the ogre's castle? I should think that it was the last place you'd want to be found. Kind of like telling off a lion while your head's in his mouth."

Far off behind us, there was a growing shout of voices. Apparently, the rebels had managed to negotiate what was left of the stairway and were hot on our trail.

"Faster!" said Baxter, quite unnecessarily. I was in no mood to test whether or not the rebels checked one's ideology before blasting away. A disintegrated bystander is beyond apology. So we went faster.

We reached the dungeon level, and Clatclit proceeded to shove open that movable section of wall. Baxter raised his eyebrows in surprise, but then simply gun-motioned us through the gap. We went, and he followed a moment later. I watched with amusement as he tried vainly to shove that granite mass back into place. I don't know exactly what sugarfeet use for muscles, but it beats what we've got.

Angrily, Baxter stepped back against the curved wall of the tunnel, and said, "You! Move that back. We don't want them following us in here."

Clatclit moved over to obey, while I remarked, "Why not? Maybe they'll get lost. It'll save your city-razing ships a little collapser-power."

Baxter ignored my statement, and simply waited until Clatclit had moved back beside me, his taillight going on pyrotechnically as the moving granite cut us off from the light in the dungeon corridor.

Then we were once again moving down that frozen-lava slope toward the deeply hidden lair of the Ancients.

As we moved along, side by side, with Baxter coming relentlessly after us, Clatclit's hands started working furiously. He flicked an index finger toward me, then toward himself. Then he put the heels of his hands together and, after a brief waggling of the fingertips, clamped his hands into fists, and made that serpentine forward jab with one hand. He was asking, in his pantomimic way, if he and I, under cover of sudden blinkout of his taillight, might scoot off into the labyrinth and escape Baxter.

I held up a forefinger and waggled it left and right in a signal of "Better not, chum."

He put his palms up, fingers flipping open in a mute "Why not?"

I curled the fingers of my right hand into the palm, then pointed the index finger forward, and lifted my thumb up; an antique Earth gesture dating back to the times when hand guns had fanning hammers on them. I spun the muzzle of this simulated weapon up, down, and every which way, to indicate to Clatclit that Baxter might manage, through sheer blind blasting, to polish us off before we got very far.

Clatclit slammed his right fist into his left palm in a furious symbol of an exasperated "Damn!"

"What are you two plotting up there?" Baxter demanded suddenly.

"We were discussing the futility of a lights-out scurry for cover, since that weapon of yours would slice right through these tunnels," I said, deciding the truth was the best way to avoid suspicious repercussions. "If your bolt didn't get us, the falling ceiling might."

"I'm glad you're using your intelligence, Delvin," Baxter answered. Then: "Why are we stopping?"

"Because," I said, halting where Clatclit had suddenly paused in his forward motion, "that thunder you hear is the reason the Ancients never find themselves neck-deep in the sugarfeet. An impassable river is up ahead."

"Impassable?" Baxter scowled.

"Not for us, but for Clatclit, here," I said. "He can't even go around this corner without risking deadly corrosion. And, in case you didn't notice back in your office, he's had a pretty nasty exposure already."

"Nevertheless," said Baxter, "I must insist that he either accompany us, or be destroyed right here."

"What!" I said, appalled. "You can't ask him to do that! He wouldn't last any longer than you would in boiling oil!"

"I certainly do not intend to leave him here," Baxter snapped. "He might alert others of his kind, and—"

"And what?" I growled. "You could fend off a million of them with that weapon of yours."

"And risk the ceiling falling in on my head?" Baxter said. "No, Delvin, I'm not about to take that chance."

"And just how," I said savagely, "did that peanut brain of yours plan on your getting out of here without him?"

Baxter paused, his gun hand wavering.

"Because if he melts in the river, or is vaporized right here and now, you will be stuck without a light. Stuck in a rock-hard maze that you couldn't negotiate alone if you had a light."

Baxter just stared, thinking furiously.

"Of course," I went on, "you could simply aim that thing upward, and disintegrate your way out. But that, too, might make the ceiling fall in. And if it didn't, you'd have the small difficulty of climbing the glass-sided well you'd created. Climbing, by the way, into the Martian desert, where there is no air, no water, and very little heat. You'd be dessicated, suffocated, and a popsicle to boot!"

"I—I could very easily slant the bolt into Marsport," Baxter blustered. "I could climb the slope easily enough, and there'd be fresh air waiting for me, too."

"Yeah," I mocked, folding my arms. "Fresh air and a city full of insurgent Baxter-haters. Assuming, of course, that you didn't strike an underground stream in the process, and get washed away into the depths of the planet when your hold-off stance with the collapser tired you out, when you'd completely dissipated the charge."

"I—" Baxter said, desperately nervous.

"And also assuming," I continued, "that you know in which direction Marsport is, chum! Of course, you could swing that thing in a full circle of slant-blasts toward the surface, but then that would make the ceiling fall in, wouldn't it, once you'd cut away all supports."

Baxter trembled with impotent rage, but his gun's muzzle was finally slumped all the way toward the floor of the tunnel. He was beaten, and he knew it.

And that's when I jumped him.

My still-working right arm shot down and gripped his right wrist, a very awkward stance to take, but my left arm was still weak and useless from my fall. But Clatclit moved in, then, his rocky talons sinking like so many fangs into Baxter's right arm, all three of us a writhing tangle on the tunnel floor, each of us frantically aware that the gun had better not emit any bolts while an arm, leg or tail flailed in front of it.

Baxter shrieked with fear and rage as those steely fingers took hold. I think he was too upset otherwise to feel the pain.

And then a bolt buzzed blindingly into the tunnel, and as we all three flattened ourselves and waited for the ceiling to come crashing down, it splattered into nothingness against the wall.

We sat up, staring at the spot where the so-called invincible bolt had simply been dissipated, all of us looking pretty silly, flat on our bottoms, leaning back on our hands on that curved stone surface, momentarily losing sight of our belligerent behavior of a moment before.

"The wall!" I said, first to realize the significance. But I couldn't go on. Baxter finished for me.

"It's parabolite!" he cried.

Then my eyes were dazzled by the blaze of light that suddenly materialized all around us, and my stomach turned over sickeningly as I realized that the converse was probably true: We had just materialized inside the dazzling light!

We were, all three of us, within the metallic-shimmering chamber of the ancient Martians.

"Well done, Jery Delvin," said a familiar voice, and then the light before us trembled and warped, and I was looking into the disconcerting triple face of the Ancient again.

I was not, however, in the mood for compliments.

"Where is my woman?" I said peremptorily.

"On your departure, she expressed a desire to inquire further into the health of her sibling," said the Martian. "She is even now with him and his companions."

"In that cage?" I cried angrily.

"I assure you she is—"

"Kindly forego the lecture on metabolic stasis and raise the damned thing, will you?" I interrupted.

The Martian warped and sparkled in a dizzying movement that I could only interpret as a shrug, and then the huge parabolite cage came rising up from that not-quite-there flooring.

"Jery!"

"Snow, baby!"

We clung to each other awkwardly, and our lips met between the columnar bars. I pulled back and called, "Can't you open this thing up, now?"

"Your mission is not quite accomplished, Jery Delvin," said the Martian. "The man Philip Baxter is within our realm, but as yet undestroyed."

"You mean I've still got to—"

"As told you repeatedly: Physical contact between our races is impossible, Jery Delvin."

"Hey, what about that?" I said. "After I left here, I got to wondering how, if what you just said is true, you people were able to manipulate the Brain to select me."

"The Brain of which you speak works on a principle of force-fields, generated by induction coils. We simply placed the right counterforces in the right places. No actual contact was necessary."

"Well, damn it," I said, after a glance back at Baxter and Clatclit, who were staring bewilderedly toward the source of the voice, "can't you just keep him here? He's bound to perish from lack of food, or water, or—"

"Jery Delvin, the metabolic stasis which I have already mentioned to you is not something we used specially for these boys. It is a necessary contingent of our world. Where there is absolute Location, there is absolutely no change of the sort you mentioned."

I gave up. "All right, all right. I won't argue the point. If you could get at him, I guess you would. Not a chance of dropping him down a hole, or something, though?"

"By the very nature of our world, hazardous localizing is an impossibility. Our universe possesses a self-regulatory locale-control that obviates the contingency of perilous placement of an individual."

"Their universe has what?" Snow asked me, her blue-violet eyes wide.

"A built-in safety feature," I muttered. "It figures, now that I think of it. If Location is absolute, it is One. That means that it's either all-safe, or all-dangerous. It can't have a bit of one thing and a bit another. Which means that I'm still carrying the ball."

"Correction," said Baxter, behind me, "you have fumbled."

I looked back at him. He had the collapser in his hand yet, despite our space-warping materialization in the cavern. And the muzzle was pointed right at Snow's breast, at the Amnesty.

"Jery!" she cried, hanging onto my arm.

"Baxter!" I yelled, stepping in front of her and flattening myself against the bars. "Give us a chance! If that damned thing triggers the parabolite, you'll go with us!"

"How little you know, Delvin," Baxter smiled. "There are any number of features of this other dimension which even your fantastic intellect has not guessed. Did it never occur to you to wonder just where I'd learned the construction of a teleportation machine?"

"I—I'd assumed you learned it somehow from the Ancients," I said. "Before they realized you intended their destruction."

"I take my hat off to you," said Baxter, with a slight nod of grudging admiration. "I didn't realize you'd thought things out quite that far."

"Hell, it was the only way you could have learned," I said. "But what's it got to do with—"

"With the fission-bomb?" Baxter said, smiling. "Why, only everything. You see, Delvin, teleported matter, in order to bypass distance, must travel in the place where there is no distance: the fourth dimension. And so, the brunt of the blast will be absorbed by the Ancients, not by me."

I heard the Martian gasp. Apparently, they weren't aware of this fact. It was more than just displacement they faced, it was death.

"Your agents," I temporized, "they'd then be using a system that transported them via radioactive chaos!"

Baxter shook his head. "Since the transfer is an instantaneous one, I rather doubt that they'd absorb any roentgens to speak of."

That seemed to be that. He was set to fire, and I was all out of arguments. And my stance between Snow and that ray-pistol was only a fleeting protection. She'd go about one second after I did.

Then, behind me in the cage, I heard a movement, and Snow gave a little cry. I jerked my head about.

Ted, with more sense than his sister, had simply taken the Amnesty from about her throat and flung it away. All of us followed its flight with dazzled eyes.

Baxter swung up the barrel of the collapser and fired. And in the same instant, the spinning disc halted, and then dodged out of the trajectory of the bolt.

The Martian was protecting himself in the only way he could: Changing the parabolite-bomb's location.

I crouched involuntarily, clutching Snow's hand through the bars, as the life-and-death contest went on. The tiny disc of destruction flitted here, there and everywhere, in a dizzying erratic course, while Baxter kept the trigger of the collapser depressed tightly, and slashed wildly in the eye-dazzling light of that place with the pulsing beam.

I wasn't in favor of the Ancients, exactly, but I was bound and determined to halt Baxter's reckless blasting with that gun, one flick of whose ray would disintegrate me, Snow or Clatclit, not to mention the frightened huddle of small boys in that cage. And there was one way to halt him.

"At him!" I cried to the Martian. "He won't fire if it's anywhere near himself!"

He must have heard me. The disc skidded to a wobbly halt, and then it dove like an eagle toward Baxter in a swift, graceful line. A straight line.

"ZIG-ZAG, YOU IMBECILE!" I yelled, an instant too late.

Even the poorest shot can track an object moving toward or away from him. Baxter's collapser caught the descending disc a good twenty yards before it got to him.

My eyes clamped shut against the monstrous blaze of heat and light. Then, Snow's hand tightly gripped in mine, I was enveloped in inky blackness, with nothing but empty air beneath the soles of my boots. And falling.

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"Snow! Darling, are you all right?" I asked, getting groggily to my feet and pressing her hand between both of mine. The fall hadn't been as bad as the one I'd taken earlier through that hole in the floor, but it was enough to shake me up.

"Y-Yes, I think so, Jery," she said, pressing one slim hand to her forehead, then brushing a wisp of hair back out of her eyes. I took her tightly in my arms and held her.

Only then did I suddenly realize where we were.

The light came from the trylon tip of Clatclit's tail. It reflected in a red glow from the cavern floor, but vanished over our heads into an impenetrable darkness. Beyond Snow, I saw the Space Scouts getting to their feet. The kids were in much better shape than I was. With consistent bad luck, I'd taken the fall on my injured left arm, and now it was throbbing like crazy. Ted came rushing over to us.

Then I remembered Baxter and looked swiftly about. He was nowhere to be seen. "Clatclit!" I shouted.

My crystalline buddy came hurrying over to me, his little taillight bobbing as he ran. His glittering eyes looked a question at me.

"What happened to Baxter?" I said.

Clatclit pointed off into the darkness, and made that serpentine movement with his hand.

"Into the labyrinth?" I exclaimed. "But why?"

Clatclit pointed toward the floor. I followed his gesture with my eyes, and saw on the rocky ground the reason. The collapser lay there, its firing chamber cracked in half. It was useless as a coercion any more, unless Baxter had a good throwing arm.

"But why didn't you follow him?" I asked.

Disgusted stare. Clatclit pointed to me, Snow, and then the boys, and followed with an attention-getting tremor of his tail.

"Oh, yeah. We would have trouble getting out of here unguided, at that!" I said sheepishly. When Snow was around, I couldn't even see the obvious.

"Any chance Baxter can find his way out of here alone?" I said. "If he gets to the spaceport before we do, he may get back to Earth and get an army back here after us."

Clatclit thought it over. Then he placed an arm across my shoulders, and an arm across Snow's, and looked hopeful.

"Damn," I said, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, "it's mighty nice of you to offer, but we can't spend the rest of our lives down here with you, Clatclit!" I shook my head. "We've got to get out of here and get the word to the World Congress before Baxter sews the Earth up tight."

"Say," Ted's small voice interrupted, "what happened to the bars and stuff, hey?"

I blinked, startled, and looked about us. Then, on an impulse, I dropped to my knees and felt the ground. It was plain old lava. I rocked back on my heels, bewildered, and then I understood, and started laughing.

"Jery, what is it?"

"Snow, baby, it's the laugh of the century, that's all. Unstable is hardly the word for the Ancients' universe! Not only did they dislocate, but they took their contact-material with them! MY guess is that right now there is no longer a splinter of parabolite in the solar system."

"But why is that funny?" she asked, as I got to my feet again.

"Because, honey, it means that all Baxter's deep, dire and devious schemes have come to naught, and by his own hand, at that! He'll never build his teleportation machine, now!"

"His what?" she said.

"You see, baby, he—Oh, hell, it's a long story. I'll tell you when we have more time. Right now, we have to head Baxter off, or things won't be very funny at all."

Following Clatclit's light, Snow, the boys and I moved swiftly across the floor of that vast cavern, emptied of its space-stressed metal lining and occupants after heaven knows how many eons of existence there. The only hitch we encountered in our upward race was that spray-happy torrent which Clatclit couldn't cross without dribbling to death. However, a Space Scout is true, brave, and loyal, and he always carries a rubber poncho inside his travel-kit. It took three of them to swaddle our guide, but, with the assistance of two of the more sure-footed Scouts, I was able to tote him bodily across that perilous bridge, with nothing showing of him but his taillight, and that high in the air, away from most of the eroding spray. Once unwrapped, he took the lead again, tail high. Then, Snow's hand tightly in mine, we all took off like cross-country racers up those winding tunnels of Mars.

We emerged on the hillside overlooking the airstrip, from one of those "Forbidden to Enter" cave mouths, in the bright glow of the sand-converter, towering at the far end of the field. Despite political intrigue, insurrection, and the disappearance of the entire Martian race from the solar system, it stood there on its girder legs, monotonously separating the molecules of ferrous oxide into molten iron and atmosphere.

"Things seem to be quiet at the terminal building," I observed, looking across the field. "I wonder who won the battle?"

"What battle?" said Snow.

"Boy, honey," I kissed her lightly on the forehead, "you are going to take years to bring up to date."

To forestall any more questions, I turned and started off across the landing field, with my alien-plus-female-plus-adolescent group tagging cautiously after me. I was just busy wishing I still had my collapser, when, from a cavemouth to our right, a pallid glow appeared, and then a figure darted out onto the strip, in the glow of the terminal lights.

Baxter! If he got inside first, and IS men were in charge—

But he hadn't seen me yet. I couldn't just hope for a rebel win. I took off like an Olympic sprinter, racing toward that staggering silhouette before me, my hands outstretched in the hopes of throttling him a bit before I turned him over to the World Congress. Unless, of course, the rebels ruled Marsport.

And then one of the more excitable Space Scouts blurted an involuntary, "Get him!"

Baxter whirled, five feet away from my fingertips. His right hand came swinging up toward my face.

And then I was coughing, and sneezing, and waving frantic hands at a blazing something that engulfed my features.

By the time I realized it was only tunnel-fungus, and at the same moment realized how Baxter had lighted his way out, he was on his way into the terminal, his old legs whipping like pistons. Well, he'd be the first to see who'd survived the battle. Clatclit and the others had caught up to me, by then, and we moved in a desperate bunch toward those lighted glass doors, in a last hope of getting our man before our man's men got us.

Any second I expected a cordon of armed guards to come galloping out of there with collapsers ablaze in our direction. Any moment now, we'd all be separated into hot protons and flying clouds of electronic sparks.

I came to a stumbling halt, and ceased all conjecture.

For just inside those glass doors, Chief Philip Baxter was standing with his hands raised over his head, and there were men approaching him with drawn weapons. And not the rebels, either. His own security guards! IS had won.

"Hey!" said Ted, tugging at my arm. "They must have gotten my message! Lucky thing the rebels were the losers, hey?"

I spun about, giving him a dazed look. "What message?" was all I could choke out.

"In the *Phobos II*," he said happily. "I scratched it on the wall over my takeoff rack."

"I didn't see any message," I complained.

"It was in code," he explained, with the head-shaking condescension toward an idiot of which only small boys are capable. "Snow and me, we have a secret code."

"I know that!" I growled. "But how in the world—"

He gave a lazy what-does-it-matter shrug. "You probably didn't notice it because you didn't know the code. Otherwise, it looks like chicken-scratches. But I was pretty sure a good cryptograph man would figure it out. It's only a substitution code, after all."

"And what was the message?" I said, repressing a sudden urge to swear at him.

Ted yawned idly and scratched his stomach. "I just said: 'Help! We have been kidnapped by Chief Baxter of Interplanetary Security. Sincerely yours, Ted White, Space Scout First Class.' It wasn't the truth, of course, but I figured it'd get an investigation started. And then Baxter's goose would be cooked."

Before I could mutter a small curse, there came a sudden blast of energy from the terminal building, and the glass doors came flying open. I saw a figure come dashing out of there, and realized that Baxter was once more on the loose.

"The shield!" I groaned.

His hands-over-the-head had been only a reflex action. I only gave one quick glance toward the terminal lobby, where the remaining men were just getting their wits about them, then I took off after him again.

It was going to be a close thing, I realized. He had a good lead on me. At the end of the strip opposite to where we'd emerged from the labyrinth stood a ship. It was Baxter's personal ship, marked with the colors and seal of IS. If he once got aboard, he could get away forever. But even worse, he could train his ship's artillery-size collapser on the entire spaceport, and blast us all out of existence.

I could see I wasn't going to make it. He was a full hundred yards ahead of me. By the time I reached the ship, he'd be pressing the starter button, and all I'd get for my efforts would be the searing fires of the rockets in my face as the great ship lifted.

Then a bounding, red-glinting form was whizzing past me, covering thirty feet at a leap. Clatclit was on the trail of the man who had threatened his destruction back in the labyrinth.

Shrill, furious clackings came from within those sharp-fanged jaws as the sugarfoot rapidly closed the gap between himself and the man.

And still, something kept me racing across that field, some subconscious foreboding that things weren't finished yet. Then Baxter came to a halt, still twenty yards from the ship, and turned about, something in his hand from the ship-readying cart. The hose for the water tanks!

"Clatclit!" I yelled frantically.

As if not realizing his danger, the hurtling form of my alien friend zoomed down toward Baxter, powerful claws held wide for grasping his enemy.

Things happened terribly fast. From behind me, I heard a scream, and then a curse. I staggered, and turned. Snow was wrestling on the ground with a Security Agent, one of the still-shaken survivors of the backlash of Baxter's shield. Evidently, he'd been about to try another shot at the fleeing Security Chief, and Snow, with unladylike good sense, had given him the benefit of one of her brother-training flying tackles, before we all died in a new rebounding ray.

A wild trilling whistle came from the ship, and I jerked my head about. Baxter had let loose with the hose, and Clatclit was rolling on the ground, in a wild effort to shake the caustic droplets from his melting scales.

My head was spinning. Which was to turn? Snow was in a furious fight with a full-grown man behind me, and my best friend was being dissolved before me. I didn't know what to do. Should I run and stop her from being vaporized, or him from being turned into taffy?

Baxter took the decision out of my hands.

"Delvin!" his voice came.

I turned back toward him. Clatclit, still shuddering with the shock of that water-spray, was facing me, Baxter behind him with an arm across the sugarfoot's throat. And in Baxter's other hand he held the water hose, its pistol-control barrel aimed right at Clatclit's eyes.

"Tell the others to stand back," he shouted, "or I'll burn your friend's eyes out!"

By now, Snow had explained the situation somewhat to the guard, I guess, because she and he came abreast of me and stopped, listening to Baxter's threat.

The guard's gun came up swiftly.

"Don't, you fool!" I said, my hand clamping on his wrist. "He's got a shield!"

"I know that," said the guard, whom I suddenly recognized as the corporal who had led his men to investigate the blast in the upper corridor. "I'm only going to disable the ship!"

"No," Baxter called. "If the ship goes, then so do this creature's eyes!"

The corporal looked at me, wavering. "It's—it's only a sugarfoot," he said, uncertainly.

"Only a—!" I shrieked. How could I tell this idiot what I felt for Clatclit! "You'll shoot over my bloody corpse!"

"We can't let Baxter get aloft in that thing!" the corporal said beseechingly. "If he does, we're all dead!"

I was trembling with fear and frustrated rage. Baxter was backing toward the ship, taking the

weakened Clatclit backward with him. They were only a few feet from the entry port, now.

Then my hand went out, and I took the corporal's collapser from him. He stared at me confusedly, but let me take it.

"Everybody hit the dirt!" I said, lifting the weapon and taking careful aim. Guard, girl and Scouts took a dive.

I was neither aiming at Baxter, nor his ship. The blazing bolt of energy from the collapser, an instant before I joined Snow, the corporal and the Space Scouts on the ground, went where I'd intended it to.

Into the nearest supporting girder of the massive converter.

As in a slow-motion nightmare, the structure began to tilt with the uneven distribution of weight, toward the spot where a supporting leg should have been, and then the brightly burning rays of the ore-converting head came arcing down in a deadly sweep that passed over Baxter, Clatclit, and the ship, narrowly missing the spot where the rest of us lay. Then the power cables tore away, and the beam went out.

It was all over. The ship, of aluminum-magnesium alloys, was in perfectly fine shape. Clatclit, of pure sugar construction, was, if a bit water-sick, alive and healthy.

But Baxter—

The converter had been designed with one function: to turn ferrous oxide, plain old rusted iron, into its components. In the force of its ray, the oxide became free oxygen and molten iron. And the blood of a human being is made up of, amongst other things, tiny cells which have the presence of oxidized iron to thank for their bright red color.

When we got to Baxter, he was long past screaming. You can't make much noise when you're a solid blister, ten feet in diameter.

"Hey, Jery," said Ted, on the rocket back to Earth. "How come you and Snow fell in love so quick, hey?"

I looked from Snow, seated beside me on the lounge, my arm across her shoulders, to the viewport, through which I could see the dwindling red globe that was Mars.

"Well," I said, trying to think of an answer.

Across from us, squatting happily on a specially provided stool, was Clatclit. As ambassador-elect of the Sugarfoot Nation to Earth, and the first extraterrestrial permitted to land on our home planet, he was mighty proud of his upcoming honor. Clatclit the sugarfoot clacked something.

I looked at him.

He pointed to his wrist and shook his head.

I grinned. "There's your answer, Ted. There wasn't time to fall in love slowly."

Ted stared at the carpet and sulked. I had already, in a post-trauma state of nerves, shattered his composure not a little by angrily telling him that his "world-saving" code was really a cipher.

He'd been unwontedly morose ever since. I felt kind of bad about it, but couldn't find an opportunity as yet of getting his ego back on its feet.

Then Clatclit, resplendent in his new-grown ruby scales, made another noise. I looked at him again.

He made a back-over-the-shoulder gesture, then tapped his wrist.

"A while ago ..." I interpreted aloud for Snow's benefit. And Ted's, if he wasn't too sunken in gloom to listen.

He put one hand to his throat, and pointed an index finger at his eyes.

"... When Baxter was holding you as hostage?"

He pointed to me, then made a bang-bang gesture with the finger, followed by a point back over and above his shoulder, toward where that converter had been in relation to himself.

"Why did I blast the converter?"

Nod.

I stared. "What else was there to do? It was a little rough on Baxter, but I had to save you, didn't I?"

Side-to-side headshake.

"I didn't have to save you that way?" I remarked.

Ted was watching Clatclit with interest, I noticed, his eyes dancing with fascination at this better-than-code means of communication.

Clatclit shook his head.

"Okay, I'll bite," I said, puzzled. "What would *you* have done in my spot?"

Bang-bang gesture. Then serpentine motion with his hand.

"Shot the ... the lava tunnels?"

Disgusted stare.

"Threw a snake at him?" I hazarded, bewildered.

Abruptly, Ted laughed. I looked at him, chagrined. After all, he couldn't expect me to be at my brightest in the mind-dampening presence of his sister, though he was a little young to understand such things.

"I suppose you know what he means!" I said.

Ted continued to laugh, a high boy-soprano giggle which seemed in itself to afford him additional amusement.

"Okay, okay," I said to him. "Give. What did Clatclit say I could have done that would have spared Baxter and saved him from dissolving anyhow?"

Ted managed to squeak out, between gusts of delight, "Clatclit says that if he had been doing the shooting, he would just have disintegrated ..." He rolled onto his face on the lounge sofa, and couldn't go on.

"Disintegrated what?" I demanded, baffled.

Ted snorted, lifting his face to look for the reaction on mine. "The water hose!"

I stared stupidly, then broke into a grin.

I decided not to mention to him that a foot-thick metal girder is a hell of an easier target than a one-inch diameter of flexible tubing. What the hell. I had Snow; Clatclit had a whole skin; and—Well, growing boys need their ego.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET MARTIANS ***

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