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

Few colonists had seen a Martian, so why worry about them causing trouble? Yet Spencer had been killed—and Rex Tate trapped by the—

Secret Of The Martians

By Paul W. Fairman

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Gordon Malloy, Chief of Interplanetary Security, rocked back in his chair, and with seeming unconcern looked Rex Tate over searchingly. "How was Pluto?"

"Stinking. Why we want that frozen lump in the Federation is something I can't figure."

"Rich in minerals."

"You left me there for seven Terran months," Rex allowed criticism to sound in his voice.

This did not bother Malloy. "Good for you. Toughened you up. Safe too. Never much trouble on Pluto."

"That's why I joined up. So I'd be nice and safe."

"I've got something in mind for you."

"Where?"

"Mars. But it could be nasty so you'd better go back to Pluto."

"Try and get me on a ship. What's with Mars?"

Malloy looked for a place to put his feet and found only the top of his desk. Up there they looked like a pair of crossed banjo cases.

"I wish I knew."

"I'll go find out for you."

Malloy's eyes brooded. "The thing started as a result of privileges and stupidity, the way most things of this sort do. As you know, Mars is the only planet in the Federation without representation because the Martians refused to represent themselves. They wanted no part of the alliance." Malloy glanced up quickly. "How's your knowledge of the Martian background?"

"Sketchy. Ask me about Venus, Mercury, Neptune, Pluto. By all means ask me about Pluto."

"We're talking about Mars. When we went up there in 2091, we found as close to a dead planet as you could want. There were people, but damned funny ones. They wouldn't fight us or they wouldn't join us. They had a kind of pride we've never been able to analyze. They just kept backing away.

"We found rich minerals and fine farm land—land that had lain fallow for ages just waiting for the plow. And plenty of water. Every spring, the ice cliffs at the poles melted on schedule and sent down the moisture for bumper crops.

"But the Martians didn't farm—they didn't mine—they didn't do anything so far as we could discover except back away into their caves and rocky fastnesses up north and give us the cold eye."

Rex knew all this but he liked to hear The Chief talk—liked to be with him as did every other agent in the Gang, so he registered bright interest and listened.

"They rebuffed all our advances and so we let them alone."

"But that happened on other planets too," Rex said innocently, "and so we went right in and got acquainted—looked in their bedrooms and their dresser drawers."

Malloy frowned slightly. "But on Mars, we didn't."

"Nope. I wonder if it could have been because we had their land and their mines and didn't think they had anything of value around their north pole?"

"You're speaking disrespectfully of the System," Malloy said in mild disapproval. "You sound as though you think we moved in and took planets over. All we did was develop latent resources—"

"—Make for the better life—"

"—Invite them to join us for a greater System—"

"—The same way the British and the Dutch and the French and the Russians did in ancient times here on Terra."

Malloy regarded his big feet with hostility; as though they and not Rex Tate had been speaking. "Do you want this assignment, or don't you?"

"Sure I want it." Rex grinned. What other department chief would let a subordinate sound off? None except Malloy. That was one of the things that made up for the low pay.

"All right—then shut your trap and listen. As I said, the Martians backed off into those hills and caves and hung out a *Private* sign that we respected for three hundred years. Then, about six months ago, a Martologist named Spencer got tired of testing flora and fauna in the safe areas and wangled a permit to penetrate the taboo areas around the pole."

Rex Tate straightened—honestly amazed. "Alone?"

"No. In the company of his twenty-year-old daughter."

"Good God! Why we wouldn't even send a nuclear battalion in there! Who issued such an insane permit?"

"That's not our business. The criminally stupid ass is being hunted from other directions, but in this age of red tape and buck-passing I doubt if he'll ever be found. Our job lies elsewhere. We've got to find out what happened to Spencer's daughter."

"What about Spencer?"

"He came back."

"Without his daughter?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to talk to the slob for a few minutes."

Malloy dropped his feet to the floor. "Come on. I'll give you a chance."

Rex followed Malloy out of the office. They got on an elevator that dropped them to a sub-basement. Malloy manned a scooter and they rode for several minutes down a long, straight corridor.

Just when Rex wondered whether or not The Chief knew where he was going, Malloy stopped the scooter in front of a closed door. He opened the door and motioned Rex inside.

The room was small and bare, boasting as furniture, only a rectangular table in its center. On the table sat a rectangular box. Malloy pointed into the box and said, "All right—start talking."

A small chill danced down Rex's spine. In the box lay a serene-faced, middle-aged man with his hands folded over his chest. He had a rosy complexion and appeared to be napping. What an odd place for a man to sleep, Rex thought. He glanced up at Malloy. The latter said, "As near as we can tell, he's been dead for four months."

"But—"

"I know. Perfectly preserved—the skin soft—all normal fluid still present in the body. Nothing's wrong with him except that he's dead."

Rex touched the soft tissue. It was cool. "How can you figure the time?"

"He came in on a food freighter—in a cargo of potatoes that was sent from a farmer's market at a place called New Iowa in the heart of the Martian farm belt."

"Not far from the forbidden polar circle," Rex said.

"I thought you didn't know anything about Mars."

"When things were dull on Pluto, I studied timetables."

"That's interesting. I'll issue them to all agents."

"Of course you've got no proof that the body was put aboard at Iowa."

"Yes we have. The hold was locked and sealed there. The body was inside. The seal was unbroken."

The closed eyes of Professor Spencer made Rex almost as uncomfortable as the closed lips. "All right. I've got the picture. What do we do? Send in a battalion to question the Martian taste in gift packages?"

"We've got no proof the Martians did this."

"Who else?"

"Maybe some transplanted Terran farmer took up taxidermy on the side."

"The odds are way against it."

"So are the odds against a solar eclipse, but they happen."

"Then we make no hostile gestures?"

"Not until we know the score. That's what I want you to do, Rex—go out to Mars and find the score."

"Okay, Chief." Rex took a last look at the body. "And if I come back in that shape, check my pockets. There might be time to write a note."

"Don't be such a pessimist," Malloy growled.

(From the diary of Tommy Wilks)

The first thing you miss on Mars is the green. The things hardest to get used to are the reds and the yellows and the tired browns. Never is there any bright rich green filled with the promise of spring as I grew used to in Kentucky back on Terra. Because this is a dying planet and even when the Martian spring does come, there is a feeling of tiredness in the air.

And the warm rain on your face. You miss that too because there is no rain on Mars. You keep looking at the sky, hunting for the big black thunderheads that sent people running for cover back in Kentucky. You look and look until your eyes ache and even the sting of icy cold rain would be nice.

The water here is all underground and in the canals. It is good water, running down through the bogs and the rivers and the marshes in spring when the big northern ice cliffs melt.

It is very funny about the ice cliffs. Up there it snows in the winter I guess because they get higher and higher until they are like mountains. Then in spring, they melt in a few days. Nobody knows much about the ice mountains because they are in the middle of the forbidden polar zone. It is said there are Martian people up in the forbidden circle but I don't think so. Because why would anybody live in such a place when the level lands and the old sea bottoms and the canals are down here!

Anyhow, we never go there. The only Martians I ever saw are the ones that come by like tramps asking for food. We always give it to them because they are always hungry and we don't want any trouble. And then there is Barzoo. He was

here when we came. He lives in a little stone house out beyond the potato fields. All Martians have hard brown skins—almost like shells—and instead of white in their eyes, like Terrans, they have light green, and the pupils are always jet black. Looking at a Martian is a little hard to get used to at first but after a while it's all right.

Dad and Mom made me stay away from Barzoo at first, but he was harmless and now they let me visit him. We talk but I can only understand a little of what he says and he can't understand much Terran. He is a funny man, Barzoo. He never smiles and gives you the idea he has only contempt for Terrans. But he takes me and shows me where the big gadfish hide in holes in the canals and how to catch them with a white pebble on the end of a line.

Nobody minds Barzoo.

I am Thomas Wilks Junior, but everybody calls me Tommy. I am fifteen years old and I like to write and someday I will go to Terra to some big university and learn to do it well and then I will write stories all about Mars for the Terrans to read.

My father is Thomas Wilks Senior. My mother is Lucy Wilks. My sister is Jean Wilks. Father brought us to Mars when the Federation opened this land. It is very easy to grow good crops here—very big potatoes—because Dad says ages ago it was farmed by the Martians and the fields and the canals are all here. We put the potatoes on big space freighters that take them back to Terra. All the farmers send their potatoes in the big freighters and they all talk about going back themselves after they get rich out here but I have a feeling very few of them will go. There is something about this planet that grows on you. It's awfully cold a lot of the time and you have to learn to walk carefully or you go right up in the air. But you get used to it. And two moons instead of one.

I like keeping a diary because someday I will need what I'm writing now for my stories about Mars and will become very famous and live in a high tower in Kentucky. Or maybe I will build a tower right here on Mars.

(Wednesday)

We have a new man working for us. He came in on the last freighter. He is very tall and has yellow hair and he is different from most men that come here to

work. Most of them go to the saloon when the ship sets down, but this one went to the candy store and that was where I met him.

He bought me some ice cream and we talked about Mars. I guess I did most of the talking. I told him all about the farm and about Barzoo and the gadfish you catch with a pebble. He seemed very interested in Barzoo and said he'd like to meet him.

I told him if he worked for Dad I would introduce him to Barzoo and he said all right. Which Dad slapped me on the back for later because help is hard to get and he gave me credit for talking the yellow haired man into working for us.

His name is Rex Tate and we didn't ask him how he happened to come out here. We're just glad that he did because help is a problem.

After this I guess the farmers will check the candy store too when they come into Iowa along with the saloon. But who would expect to find a grown man like Rex Tate in a candy store? He's different than the other workers who come here. A lot more intelligent. I like to talk to him.

Rex Tate, clad in a Martian fox jacket against the sharp winter air, worked at a strand of broken fence on the far north line of the Wilks farm.

He straightened and looked off across the dull brown plains. The experts said this had all been ocean once; back in the days when Terra was a seething, untenanted ball of hot lava. Rex wondered how right they were.

One thing was sure. A no more dull, drab, peaceful landscape could possibly be imagined. He turned to look northward toward the high ice cliffs of the polar circle. The thin air made distances deceptive and the cliffs looked to be hanging almost over Rex's head. But he knew they were many miles away.

He frowned. This had seemed the logical place to start his investigation, yet what evil could lurk among these simple energetic Terrans? Such an act as had been perpetrated upon Professor Spencer was certainly beyond their ability to conceive, and Margo Spencer was certainly not hidden among them.

Only one thing kept him in this vicinity and it was indeed a frail thread. The Martian hermit young Wilks had told him about. He wanted to look the man over but had delayed, feeling that even though the lead seemed hardly to be

taken seriously, caution was still the better part of wisdom.

Rex turned now to watch big Tom Wilks stride across the frozen brown moss of the pasture. Terran cattle, Rex had learned, thrived on the prickly stuff.

Tom Wilks had a big, cordial face, roughened and seamed by the Martian cold. He slapped Rex on the shoulder and said, "Well, how do you like this outpost of civilization?"

"It's different—I'll say that."

"Hope you grow to like it. A man can get rich out here."

"I don't doubt it."

"You aren't like the others," Wilks said.

"Thank you."

"I mean most of the help we get out here are drifters looking for a stake. You could easy get yourself some land—make a go of it. We need good solid men out here. Now I've got a fine looking daughter—" Wilks paused. "Guess maybe I'm going too fast."

"Jean's a fine girl, but you don't know much about me, Mr. Wilks."

"The name's Tom and don't forget it. And don't think I'm going to nose into your business until you're ready to tell us. We're inclined to take people at face-value. We consider 'em first-rate until they prove otherwise. You might say we kind of follow our instincts."

Rex give him a quick smile. "One thing puzzles me."

"What's that?"

"How come there are no Martians working for you? The pay is good. I'd think they'd be swarming around."

"You don't know much about Mars, son. I've got a hunch there aren't many Martians."

When Rex started to reply, Tom Wilks waved a hand. "Oh, I know the Federation experts tell us different—say they live up there under the ice cap, but I don't believe it. A few of them would wander down."

"Young Tommy tells me you've got one around. A character named Barzoo."

"Uh-huh. God knows where he came from or what he wants here. Doesn't care to

work a lick."

This, Rex realized, was Tom Wilks' basis of judging a man. A worker rated high with him. A fairly presentable worker rated high enough to be considered for his daughter's hand. Not a bad way to look at it at that, Rex thought.

"I'd like to meet this Barzoo."

"Tommy'll take you out there any time you say."

"He goes alone?"

"The old coot's harmless. Looked him over myself. He takes the youngster fishing."

"Characters like that interest me."

"Well, finish this fence now and then get back to the house. Jean's fixed up something a little special for supper. Got her hair and face all shined up too. I wonder why?"

Wilks winked and strode off about his business, leaving Rex to wonder about Jean. He'd have to be a little careful there. She was a nice kid. There'd be no problem, though, because he wouldn't be around long enough. He hooked the last strand of wire into place and headed for the house....

Jean Wilks was a lithe, slim, dark-haired girl with laughing blue eyes and red, almost sensuous lips. When Rex got to the house she was there to open the door. She wore a close-fitting blouse, slacks, and a frilly postage-stamp apron. There was welcome in her smile and her eyes spoke quite frankly. They said, *I'm after you*.

"Come on in and shuck your coat," Jean said. "I'll bet you're frozen."

"Only my fingers."

Jean took his hand in hers and rubbed briskly. Her eyes teased. "I thought you were too hot-blooded to let a little cold snap chill you."

"I'm used to a hot sun."

She could change mood quickly. Her smile slipped away. "Where *did* you come from, Rex?"

As he hesitated she put a quick finger over his lips. "Don't tell me. Sorry I pried. We aren't that way here on Mars—really." She moved away from him. "How do you like my apron! It's supposed to show you how domestic I am."

"You did the cooking tonight?"

"Uh-huh. Mom and Dad and Tommy just left. They went to New Iowa for dinner with some friends. I'm in charge of the feed bag."

"Swell—let's open it up."

Supper over, Rex helped Jean with the dishes. He was struck by the domestic situation into which this case had brought him. He felt guilty—as though he were trespassing on the hospitality of these fine people. And fine people they were—of that he was assured. Now only remained to discover by what weird turn of circumstances the perfectly preserved body of Professor Spencer had been placed in a sealed potato hold in New Iowa.

"The ships that go out of here," Rex said. "Do they all set down in New Iowa—on the field there?"

They were having coffee in the living room. Jean had removed her apron and sat close to Rex on the lounge. Her hair was soft and gleaming in the light of the open flame from the old-fashioned fireplace.

"Usually," she said, "except during heavy harvest time. Then they put down wherever they can. We've had them parked in our lower pasture. You see we like to get the crops away as quick as we can and the freight company always sends enough ships to accommodate us because the run is so profitable."

"The lower pasture. Isn't that where this Barzoo fellow hangs out?"

Jean shuddered. "He's awful. I suppose I shouldn't feel this way about him because he's harmless and very good to Tommy. But that dull brown hide—his funny eyes."

"I'd like to see what he looks like. I'll have to ask Tommy to take me down there."

Jean regarded him thoughtfully. "I'll take you down."

"But why should you—?"

She shrugged. "I don't seem to be doing very well by firelight. We have two moons up here. They should be twice as hard to resist as one."

Rex was playing it straight all the way through—which meant playing it dumb. "But it's very cold out."

"Pretty cold in here, too. Let's get started."

Rex put on his jacket, wondering what he was going to do with this girl. She appeared from her bedroom wearing a white parka that made her look doubly attractive. "It's only a ten-minute walk. And the cold isn't as penetrating here as on Terra."

They hiked along, hand-in-hand, under the two racing Martian moons. The air was sharp, stinging, like heady wine. Rex felt as though he could have jumped clear up to where Terra hung close and beautiful in the night sky. This, he decided, was a wonderful planet, a wonderful country, a great place to settle down and build something—raise children. Bodies in shipping cases seemed far away and unreal.

Jean's hand, warm in his own, squeezed suddenly as though she sensed his thoughts. She glanced at him, her eyes rich with meaning. Then she broke away and ran on ahead toward an oddly shaped monolith of a hut further down the pasture.

As Rex hurried forward, he studied the stone hutch. It was obviously very old—something left over from a lost and forgotten civilization. It impressed him as having been built as both a shelter and a symbol. There appeared to be undecipherable meaning in the formation of it—blurred now by the wear of centuries.

Jean stopped beside the narrow entrance. "He's not here," she said. Rex pushed his head inside, bent forward to peer about the small interior. It was smooth, unadorned, cone-shaped.

He took a step forward, heard a quick laugh and tripped over Jean's extended foot. He grabbed as he went down—inside the shelter—and caught Jean's arm. He dragged her with him and they went down in a heap. He was looking into her fur-framed face, into her eyes. She had stopped laughing. Neither of them spoke during several quick breaths.

Then Jean said, "I guess you think I'm pretty forward, don't you?"

"I think you're pretty wonderful."

"I think maybe we're different up here—a lot different than we'd be on Terra."

Her breath was warm in Rex's face. "How do you figure that?"

"We're more elemental out here, I guess. We're more afraid of letting life get past us. I want you so bad it hurts. I want to marry you and have your children and I'm afraid of not letting you know it."

Her mouth was on his; her body through the soft fur of their clothing was warm and rounded against him. His blood was pounding and he was conscious of two things. First, this intoxicating girl in his arms. Second, the fact that the slab against which he was pressed had loosened and turned; that it had moved on a hinge of some kind and he had to hold tight to Jean to keep from falling through.

Then he became aware of a third presence. Just outside a figure loomed; a hideous looking man with a brown, scarred hide. A man with eyes that seemed to hold all the hate in the universe....

(From the Diary of Tommy Wilks) (Saturday)

They're gone—Jean and Rex Tate. Nobody around here knows what to think because there is no place to go. No ships have come in or gone out. Everybody is talking about it. Some people say Rex Tate had a ship and that he put Jean in it and took her away. But how can that be true? Where could anybody hide a ship around here? The country is flat as far as you can see. They say he must have had a ship hidden up in the ice country—in the forbidden circle and he took her up there.

But that is crazy too. They were having supper here last night when Mom and Dad and I went to the Parker's for supper. They weren't here when we got back and none of the cars or horses are gone so how could they have got away?

They say he took Jean away, but I wonder if it wasn't the other way around? Jean was in love with him—she wanted to marry him—and I wonder if maybe she didn't take HIM away? But that's foolish, too. There was no place for her to take him or him to take her. It certainly is a mystery. We haven't had so much excitement since we came to Mars. People coming and going—men riding off in bunches hunting under every piece of moss as though they'd turned to midgets

and were hiding there. It's all very silly. But Mom is sick about it. She's in bed and Mrs. Parker is taking care of her. The men swear they'll catch Rex and kill him wherever they find him. They say he dragged Jean away to have her for himself. I don't think so—not for that reason, anyhow. I know how Jean felt about him and girls in love are funny. He wouldn't have had to drag her anywhere. That was how Jean felt about him.

It's all very strange. And very lonesome here with Dad gone off with the hunting party and Mom under sedatives. I'm going to ask Barzoo what he thinks about it.

(Sunday)

I've learned something important and I don't know what to do about it. I went to Barzoo's hutch to find him but he was not there. I waited around a while and then, while I was looking inside, I thought I saw something funny about the wall. One section of it looked different than the others. It wasn't dirty along the bottom. It looked as though there was a crack there. I examined it and found it moved on a hinge. I pushed it back and everything was dark behind it. I listened for a while and then thought I heard a sound inside as though somebody had taken a step.

I got scared and dropped the stone back into place and began to run. I ran all the way home to tell Dad about it because that must be where Rex and Jean went. There can't be any other place.

But Dad isn't here and I can't tell Mom. She's too sick and I'd only disturb her....

It's been an hour now. Dad still isn't home. I've done some thinking. Why did I run away from the hutch? There isn't anything there to be afraid of. When you think it over, it's logical that Barzoo would have a place underneath the hutch to keep warm on cold winter nights. Even if his hide is thick, he still needs shelter. And why should he have told me about it? It's his private business and I never asked him. I'll bet he would have told me if I'd asked him.

I'm going to wait another half hour for Dad. Then, if he isn't back, I'll go to the hutch with a flashlight and see what's under it. Maybe everybody is right about Rex. Maybe he's got Jean down there.

But if he has I'll bet she isn't trying very hard to get away....

The half hour's up. Here I go....

"So that's the story," Rex said. "Now you know who I am and how I happened to come to New Iowa."

Jean twisted her arms against the thongs that bound her wrists and said, "I think you were stupid not to tell us and let us try to help you."

"But I was moving in the dark entirely unsure of myself. I had to look around and find out—"

"Oh, I see. You suspected us. You thought we were capable of murdering a man and putting his body in a box and shipping it back to Terra with our potatoes!"

"I thought no such thing!"

They spoke openly, convinced that the five Martians who were their captors could not understand Terran. They had been at the hutch when Rex and Jean got there—four of them—crouched behind the wall. When Barzoo arrived, just as Rex tilted the section of wall, they had seized the two Terrans and tied their hands. There had been nothing Rex could do, hampered as he was by Jean lying in his arms.

Rex's thoughts had been the bitterest of gall as he forecast his report to The Chief—that was, if he lived long enough to submit a report:

I was necking with a local farmer's daughter in the stone hutch of a Martian character. I had every reason to be suspicious of this Martian and should have been on my toes when he arrived. Instead, I was on my back, kissing this aforementioned local daughter and this Martian and four of his friends took us both. No credit to them, though. In the shape we were in, a crippled blind man could have taken us. Any further orders, Chief?

The Martians had ignored his pleas that they leave Jean behind, or perhaps the Martians did not even understand him.

They had been led off down a long, dark tunnel. So far as Rex and Jean were concerned, their next step could have almost dropped them off into oblivion but the Martians were sure-footed and seemed to be entirely familiar with the pitch-black tunnel.

They walked for what seemed hours before a light showed in the distance.

Another hour brought them to the spot where a dusty overhead bulb glowed dimly. It appeared to have been there untouched for centuries because the ceiling was damp and calcium-bearing droplets had almost covered it. Yet it glowed bravely.

Here, the two Terrans were allowed to rest. One of the Martians dug into a small opening in one wall and brought forth a quantity of grayish substance which he offered them—holding it toward their mouths with his filthy hand. They turned their faces away and he made no further effort to feed them.

They were ignored—left sitting on a ledge while the Martians gorged down the food. Afterward, the one Jean designated as Barzoo, looked up suddenly as though a thought had come. He talked to one who had finished eating and was wiping his hands on his dull brown hide.

Rex tried to fathom Barzoo's words. Familiar with languages and dialects the System over, he got some of Barzoo's meaning. The Martian leader was worried about the condition in which the hutch floor had been left. Perhaps the wall-section had been left tilted. After a while, the other Martian got to his feet and trotted back through the darkness along the tunnel through which they had come.

After the Martian left, Barzoo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and motioned Rex and Jean to get up and move into a passage to their right.

"How much further can he take us?" Jean asked. "After the first drop back at the hutch, it seems to me the tunnel has been level."

"A floor can be deceptive. We could have been moving down a gradual slope for miles."

Jean said nothing. The going was easier now, this tunnel being lighted at intervals by the strange overhead bulbs. Rex asked, "Are you sore at me for what happened back at the farm? For not telling you the truth?"

"No. We're in too much trouble to waste time being angry. What's done is done. Only the future is important now."

Rex could have made his self-recrimination vocal but he felt that too would be a waste of time. He said, "Didn't anybody—any of you Terrans know about the opening in that hutch?"

"I'm sure no one did—except perhaps Tommy." She thought that over and added, "No—that's absurd. If Tommy had known it he wouldn't have been able to keep it to himself."

"Maybe they'll hunt around and find it."

"Maybe—but I hope they don't."

"Why not?"

"If they find the opening they'll come looking for us. These Martians are hostile. Some of our men might be killed and they have wives and families."

Jean made Rex feel ashamed of himself. "Don't worry. I'll get you out of here."

She glanced up at him. Her chin trembled slightly as she sought to stiffen it.

At that moment they walked into a larger tunnel. There were more overhead bulbs here and a ribbon of narrow-gauge track stretching off into the distance.

"A railroad!" Rex exclaimed.

"I wonder where it goes?"

"I've got a hunch we're going to find out."

One of the Martians had gone around a shoulder of the tunnel. There was a whining sound. He returned in the driver's seat of a small rail car. Barzoo motioned the Terrans into one of the seats. The other Martians got in behind them. The driver pulled a throttle. The whining sound increased and the car moved off down the tracks.

Rex listened for a time, inspected the portion of the car within range of his eyes, then said, "I wonder what kind of power this thing uses?"

Jean did not answer. Her head had dropped to his shoulder. She was asleep. He settled himself, forming a pocket with his body so she could rest against him with the seat supporting her. Behind him the eyes of the three Martians, including Barzoo, had also closed. Rex wondered if the driver was asleep also.

The car rolled on in a monotonously straight line, mile after mile. Rex realized he had discovered a civilization under Mars, the existence of which was unknown on Terra. He knew that none of the authorities or experts suspected anything so civilized as a railroad in the forbidden polar lands. At best they thought the territory inhabited by hardy bands of hostile, backward ice dwellers.

This was indeed a great discovery, he told himself bitterly. Of course neither he

nor Jean would live to reveal it, but they could die happy, knowing they were great explorers.

He grew tired of excoriating himself. The passing overhead lights had a hypnotic effect. He closed his eyes and slept....

Fanton, son of Fandor of the Bantarks—last great ruling dynasty of Mars—lay sick and dying in a foul cell under the Amphitheater of the Gods. He was old and tired and ready to die, yet he longed for survival because his work was not yet done.

For two centuries, Fanton had ruled as Lord of the North Hemisphere. He had seen the great prosperity of the planet even under conditions whereby the scientists of his father had foreseen the planet's death. He had been there at the birth of their scientific magic.

Fandor, his father, had been a wise and gentle ruler. When the Terrans came in their great ships, Fandor had prevailed upon the Council and a policy of cautious retreat had been instituted. Fandor advocated this because he knew the Martian science was no match for that of the Terrans. Not that the wizardry of the Martian scientists was any less great, but they had bent their efforts in peaceful directions while the Terrans came with huge warships and no end of armament.

So the Martians, under Fandor, had retreated quietly to the north allowing the Terrans to move onto the planet. This policy was much despised by the young and the hot-headed who would have preferred to meet the invader face to face and die in battle if need be. But the majority of the Council was old and weary as was Fandor, and they prevailed.

Then Fandor felt he had lived long enough and refused to enter the place of Eternal Strength—greatest miracle of Martian science. He died peacefully and Fanton put on his royal robes.

Now those robes had been torn from his body and he had been refused access to the place of Eternal Strength. Pandek, the fiery young Councilman had overthrown him and assumed power and the younger Martians were preparing to sweep down over the planet and slay the unsuspecting Terrans.

They would be slaughtered of course. This, Fanton knew, because the Martian weapons were puny, but there would be death and fiery agony before the Terrans

finally won.

Many times, in his heart, Fanton had wondered if the policy of the old ones had been wise. Fanton was a scholar. The books of the Terrans had been smuggled into the north country. He had learned the language and read the books and there was one Terran writer of whom he never tired; a genius named William Shakespeare. In his great play called *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare had said: *There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at its flood leads on to fortune.*

Lying in his filthy cell, Fanton's mind was cloudy. He was not sure if those were the exact words but the point was clear. Perhaps there had been a time in the affairs of the Martians when the tide of fortune was at its flood—when they could have won out over the Terrans. But that time had certainly long-passed and if their present plight was the result of the old mistakes, then so be it. There was still no justification for mass suicide.

So Fanton did not want to die. His work remained undone. Above his cell, in the Amphitheater of the Gods, Padtek was fomenting a kettle of hell's brew. Already, they had used the Place of Eternal Strength in a fiendish manner—desecrated it—and now they deprived their Emperor of its healing magic.

Fanton realized the die was cast. He himself had been removed from the stage. Mad new actors bent upon destruction were reading their lines.

He, Fanton, was finished....

Tommy Wilks walked a long way down the dark passage, his light picking a path through the gloom. He knew he had already gone further than he should but always there was the temptation to see what lay just ahead.

And nothing was ever there. Only the sinister black passage leading onward. He explored another length, then stopped. This was far enough. What if he had unknowingly turned into a by-passage? Suppose he would miss the intersection on the way back?

Thoughts such as these flared into his mind to bring a sudden sense of entrapment. The walls seemed to be closing in on him. He turned to retrace his steps.

Then he froze. Sound. A far-away, echoing sound. The soft tap of footsteps. But

coming closer. Tommy threw his light on down the tunnel. He strained his eyes ahead looking for whatever or whoever made the sound.

It was louder now and he realized, too late, that his flash was on—guiding the menace—serving as a beacon. He clawed at the switch but his fingers were clumsy thumbs. When he finally got the light out, the footsteps had increased to a running tempo. He turned and fled blindly back along the tunnel. He had not taken ten steps when he tripped and fell. He struggled to his feet in panic. Too late. Hard, rough hands were upon him.

He fought but his struggles were useless....

Twice, Rex had tried to maneuver the Martians into removing the thongs from his wrists. At the end of the rail line there was a pool of water fed by a spring. He motioned toward his wrists and signified thirst. One of the Martians callously threw water in his face until he was gasping for breath. His second attempt failed also and now he and Jean were being led through a shining marble corridor the like of which he had never seen even in the finer buildings on Terra. What manner of world, he wondered, was hidden here under the northern Martian ice cap?

But the wonder in store made the corridor look like a tunnel clawed through bare earth. It was a huge amphitheater into which he and Jean were rudely shoved. They stood frozen, their perilous position momentarily forgotten.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" Jean gasped.

"It must be an illusion of some kind. I can't believe it really exists."

The floor upon which they stood was of pure, glittering gold. It stretched away in shining glory to a wall of crystal—a window so high and vast Rex could not conceive it as standing alone. Surely it had to fall by its own weight.

It dwarfed a high, curved dais along which sat a line of richly robed Martians. In the center of the dais was an elevated throne upon which sat a scowling young Martian.

But the thing that caught and held the two Terrans were the towering cliffs of ice framed in the great window as by a master painter. Rex and Jean were pushed forward. As they came near the high throne, the young Martian smiled coldly as

he noted the direction of their eyes.

He broke the silence. "You seem to admire our view."

"You speak Terran," Rex said, surprise in his words.

"A source of amazement to you, no doubt. You who consider us a mob of imbeciles cringing up here in the ice floes."

"Whoever you are, I'm afraid you're in trouble. We aren't used to being hauled around like criminals."

"Then it's time you got used to it."

"Who are you?"

"I am Pandek, ruler of all Martians. Down on your knees!"

Rex and Jean were hurled roughly to the floor. Rex lowered his head and whispered to Jean, "Take it easy. We've got to feel our way and wait this out." To Pandek, he said, "Is this the way you're in the habit of receiving ambassadors from friendly nations?"

"Friendly? That from you who have kicked and despised us for hundreds of years?" Pandek's rage was heightening with each word. "You and your arrogant army of invaders? You who treated us with the patronizing kindness you reserve for amiable dogs?"

"We came in friendship—"

"—with armed space ships at your back—uninvited—unwelcome—smiling like the hypocrites you are!"

"Those entrusted with government on Terra would be happy to hear that you are willing to come forth and negotiate," Rex said.

Pandek arose from his throne, his brown face mottled with rage. "Negotiate for what is already ours? Put our stamp of approval on your conquest of our planet?"

Rex saw that further words were useless. He stood silent until the ruler's anger subsided. Then he asked, "What do you plan to do with us?"

"Kill you—as we will kill every Terran on our world."

He eyed Rex for signs of fear. When they did not appear he seemed mildly disappointed. When he spoke again it was in a quieter tone. "But first I would have you see a little of what Martian science is like. I would have you know how far ahead of the Terran bunglers our scientists were even a thousand years ago. I would have you know by what power Mars will again come into its own."

"I would like to see the work of your scientists." Conceit was obviously one of this ruler's weaknesses, Rex decided. He hoped others would reveal themselves.

"Very well, Terran. You shall see a part of the miracle concerning which you Terrans have wondered for years; the miracle by which your stolen lands below the polar circle have been watered and kept lush."

"The ice cliffs?"

"Yes. I cannot show you the process whereby the rains and the snows are created and drawn to the pole each season—how these great cliffs of ice are built over the winter months. But I can reveal to you the most spectacular part of the process—the melting of the ice cliffs."

In spite of their predicament, Rex was vitally interested. Jean, also. He glanced at her and saw the intent look on her face.

Pandek picked up a device at his elbow—obviously some sort of a telephone and spoke into it. His words were low and indistinguishable. But the results were almost instantaneous.

A far-away hum was heard, greatening in volume as from the release of sudden power. A faint blue light appeared, glowing the ice at the base of the cliffs. The color shot up through the ice mass—clear blue—as new colors were added to that at the base. Red, yellow, purple, crimson—so bright they seemed to sear Rex's eyes. Then they too started climbing up through the solid ice.

A deep rumbling was heard. Pandek said, "Your Terran scientists have not even begun to realize the power of nuclear fission. Two thousand years ago our scientists were ages ahead of them."

Pandek said more, but his words were drowned in thunder from the crashing of ice cliffs beyond the great window. Huge cataracts were even now pouring down the walls of melting ice. Both Rex and Jean stood awed at the sight of such vast and instantaneous destruction.

Pandek smiled his cold smile. The thunder subsided somewhat and Pandek said, "I see you are impressed. I would welcome your comments." He was enjoying

himself.

The display had astounded Rex but the expression on his face remained cold. "I imagine you were responsible for sending the body of Professor Spencer back to Terra."

Pandek paused at Rex's quick change of subject. "Yes, a fitting reminder to the Terrans that we aren't animals to be gaped at."

"On the contrary—an indication that you *are* animals."

Pandek half-rose from the throne.

"You'll die a little more horribly than I'd planned for that remark."

"Perhaps I will but the fact remains that you're mad to think you can stand against Terra. Your scientific know-how is admittedly great, but it is not geared for war."

"You think not?"

"I'm certain of it. I'm also sure of another thing."

"What else are you sure of?"

"That you have no scientists."

"Then how—?"

"You had them—ages ago—and they built well—so well that their work has survived to this day. What you have here was built by geniuses for fools to operate. I'm certain all you do is press switches and reap the benefits of work done by long-dead brains in another age."

The darkening of Pandek's face told Rex his words had cut deep. In a way, he felt sorry for the Martian. A hate-filled, envy-charged man seeking to vent his rage in mad ways.

If carried to their ultimate, his acts could only lead to the destruction of his people at the hands of the Terrans. But this made the situation no less perilous for Rex and Jean and other Terrans on Mars.

"You hold a Terran citizen," he said. "The daughter of Professor Spencer. Is she still alive?"

Pandek was again enjoying himself. "Oh, very much so." His smile held some hidden meaning as he said, "A trifle embarrassed perhaps—at the moment—but alive and healthy."

"I demand you return her to her own people."

"You demand? I admire your courage—"

"What do you plan to do with her?"

Pandek's Martian eyes grew speculative. "She fits into my plans as does the young woman at your side. A new day will dawn upon Mars soon, a reversion to the old days when Mars was a virile, fighting planet. Then, there was less science and more emotion. The masses were whipped to a fighting frenzy by supplications to the old gods." Pandek grinned wickedly. "Human sacrifices were a part of those supplications. Nothing stirs the people like the public sacrifice of a beautiful female with all its pomp and splendor. It stirs them deeply."

"The thought of it stirs *you* deeply, you mean. You're mad. You're a dangerous maniac. I can only hope your own people put you down in time."

With a howl of rage, Pandek leaped from his throne. He drew a short ornamental sword from his belt and swung it viciously against the side of Rex's head. Rex went down like an ox felled for slaughter.

Jean screamed....

The rough-skinned Martian who subdued Tommy Wilks, pressed him against the wall of the tunnel and used Tommy's own flashlight for purposes of inspection. He growled a few unintelligible words and seemed to be debating a problem.

Tommy watched him silently, warily, without fear. He had ceased struggling because it was useless but his mind was alert.

He had no way of knowing the Martian was in a quandary. He had been sent to check the tunnel entrance in the stone hutch on the Wilks farm. But he had come upon Tommy halfway to his objective. Should he take Tommy to his superiors, or finish his original mission? It was indeed a problem.

The Martian was not too bright. Also, he was lazy. The capturing of this Terran changed things, he told himself. He would take the boy to the terminal. Then

perhaps something would happen so he would not have to take the long walk back through the tunnel. Perhaps he would be honored for his capture and another would be sent to the hutch.

This hope brightened him as he took Tommy roughly by the arm and hauled him toward the railhead. Tommy was not a difficult prisoner. They moved swiftly. But the boy was breathing heavily when he was pushed into one of the cars and the Martian took the controls.

Tommy rested, awaiting his chance. He had by no means given up hope. It was just a matter of the Martian easing up on his arm. At least that would be the first step. Tommy was glad the Martian had been contemptuous and not tied him up.

The car rolled smoothly along its tracks; faster than the one used to transport Rex and Jean because the Martian transporting Tommy had always liked speed. He liked it so well he opened the car to its greatest capacity and at one point had to release Tommy's arm in order to put both hands on the throttle.

Tommy struck instantly without thought as to the outcome—only with hope. And his hopes were fulfilled. He hurled himself against the Martian with both fists extended. They hit hard brown hide just below the Martian's right shoulder and sent him off balance. The Martian snatched at Tommy while trying to regain his equilibrium and learned the folly of attempting two things at once.

But too late. He teetered, howled dismally, and pitched in front of the racing car. It hit him with a dull thud, killing him instantly. But his dead bulk also wreaked a kind of vengeance on the car, lifting it from its tracks and sending it skidding along on its side.

Tommy had been thrown clear and as he hit the wall of the tunnel he knew he was done for. Every bone in his body snapped. Every ounce of his flesh crackled with pain. He fell to the tracks and lay dying.

But the process was slower than he anticipated. A full minute passed and he had not yet expired. This puzzled him. How could you live with all this pain? With every bone broken? It just didn't make sense. Tommy waited.

But death proved remarkably stubborn. It refused to drop its black mantle over his tortured body. Finally Tommy moved an arm—a foot—a leg. Odd. They all worked. He got to his feet. He conceded that maybe the agony was not as great as it had first seemed. Now that he could breathe again, things were better. There was only one bad place, really; a vicious bloody abrasion along his right forearm.

The lights of a platform loomed ahead. Tommy crawled over the car and stepped gingerly around the body of the dead Martian. Then he hurried forward and climbed on the deserted platform.

Here the light was better and he examined his arm. It was an angry, bloody mass but the blood was oozing out rather than flowing. No deep wound had been suffered but it hurt like fury. He could not bear to have anything touch it so he put his arm out at an awkward angle and left it there while he looked around, wondering what this place was and also how hard you had to get hit and how much it had to hurt before you got killed.

His ponderings were interrupted by the sound of footsteps. In the face of this, there was nothing to do, he decided, but pick a direction and run. Back up the tracks? No. While the lights from the overhead bulbs were dim, they would still reveal him at quite a distance. The platform had two exits. The running footsteps were approaching along one of these. That left the other. Tommy plunged into it and ran.

He ran a long way and his surroundings changed swiftly. The rail platform had been crude and uninspiring but now he was fleeing along a beautiful marble corridor.

He stopped for breath, backed into a partially secluded niche and admired his surroundings. Was this the kind of place the Martians lived in? It certainly didn't fit into his preconceived notions of a place where backward ice people would dwell.

As his breathing lessened, a tantalizing sound asserted itself upon his ears. An odd, singing sound, both pleasant and mysterious. He wondered where it came from.

He peeked out into the corridor and found it deserted.

The singing sound. As he walked back along the corridor, it diminished. He turned and retraced his steps. The sound greatened until he came to an archway in one wall of the corridor. The sound obviously emanated from that direction. The archway was supported by gleaming marble pillars and as Tommy passed between them, the singing sound rose to a crescendo that vibrated deliciously against his nerve centers.

Then he saw it. A beautiful, domed room that gave a first impression of being a public bath of some sort. But there was no water, only brilliant, breathtaking color; all the gorgeous colors of the rainbow dancing down from the ceiling in beams of crystal clarity. There was sound and color—and something else; a subtle something that made Tommy very happy; excitedly happy in a way he had never before experienced.

He moved forward, completely engrossed in his new surroundings. He moved in under the shower of color and a feeling of ecstatic exhilaration went through him. It was wonderful.

Then he froze. Not twenty feet away stood two Martians clad in rich metal harness and holding long golden spears. Guards. Sudden fear swept Tommy. The Martians were staring straight at him.

Desperately, he signalled to his frozen muscles; *Let's get out of here*. But they failed to respond. The guards stared at him. He stared back.

Nothing happened.

Why, they're asleep, Tommy thought in amazement. They're standing there sound asleep with their eyes wide open holding their spears. That's crazy. Why don't they fall down?

Tommy wanted to run. But he couldn't. The curiosity of the very young not only barred retreat, but pushed him slowly forward until he was standing beside one of the guards.

The Martian had not moved a muscle. His chest neither rose nor fell. Completely fascinated, Tommy extended his hand. He touched the face of the guard. It was rough and cool. The guard did not move, Tommy laid a hand against the golden harness. Nothing happened. He had not intended to push, but he did. He pushed so hard the guard tilted over on one stiff leg. Appalled, Tommy leaped back.

The guard kept on tilting until he fell on his side with a great crash of ringing metal.

Tommy darted back through the color rays and out of the strange room so fast that he was far down the marble hall before his mind told him he was running.

He kept on running. Then he stopped as suddenly as he had started. He looked

down at his wounded arm. He glanced quickly up and down the corridor, then ducked again in a wall niche where he gave his whole attention to his arm.

Had he dreamed all this? The horrible Martian in the tunnel? The car crash? The color room? He must have dreamed it. The proof was there before him. A smooth, unblemished forearm where there had been a huge bloody bruise but a few moments before! He rubbed the arm—tested it. There was not the faintest sign of a wound.

He looked around in bewilderment, peeked both ways and moved out again into the corridor.

His luck had held for a long time but now it failed him as sudden footsteps sounded in a traversing passage just ahead. They were coming swiftly. Tommy looked around in desperation.

This appeared to be the end but it was not. Fate seemed indeed to be toying with him—moving him around like a mobile chessman. At the last moment it showed him a doorway he had overlooked. The door was unlocked and he went through it as fast as he could while still closing it softly behind him.

Inside, the light was very dim. Tommy listened at the door as the sound of footsteps diminished. He smiled—quite proud of his ability to take care of himself under these circumstances. He would certainly have a lot to put in his diary when he got home.

If he got home.

Tommy drove this last thought from his mind. He would make it. He was doing all right. Whereupon fate slapped him and sharply for his conceit by turning him and dropping him down a flight of stairs he'd been too busy watching the door to notice.

The fall hurt but Tommy was no longer frightened. He knew that so long as he had survived the car crash no violence of this type could even dent him.

He got to his feet and danced around for a while, holding a barked shin, then straightened as a new sound smote his ears. Someone was sobbing.

A woman. A woman crying.

It did not take Tommy long to trace the sound. He was in a narrower, lower corridor now; one not as fine as the big one upstairs. As Tommy moved forward, the sobbing told him he was going in the right direction. He opened a door.

Inside the small room was a narrow, high-legged bed—more of a table, Tommy thought, but he gave it no attention. He was held spellbound by what lay upon the table.

A girl with wrists and ankles bound down. She had long chestnut hair that hung down over the edge of the table. She was helpless. And she was completely nude....

Rex got up from the floor to which he had been viciously hurled by three Martian guards. He and Jean were in a cell. As the barred door clanged shut, he turned to help Jean as best he could. "Are you hurt?"

"I—I guess not." She tried to smile. "Only my dignity."

"I got us into a pretty bad mess."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I don't know who's else it was."

Jean strained at her bonds. "They could have at least taken these things off our wrists."

"We can do it ourselves."

"That guard out there—he's leering in. Maybe we'd better wait until he leaves."

"Maybe he won't leave. Anyhow—I don't think they care whether we take them off or not."

They stood back to back while Rex worked on the thongs binding Jean. The knots were stubborn but they finally gave, the guard outside watching the process with amusement.

Jean got Rex's wrist free quickly and they sat down on the edge of the single bunk and rubbed their wrists. "Well," Jean said, "where do we go from here?"

"To wherever they execute their prisoners, I imagine."

"But we're still alive. Aren't we supposed to keep the chin up like they do in books?"

He took her suddenly in his arms.

"You're a brave girl."

She pressed close to him. "I'd rather hear you say I'm an attractive girl."

He kissed her hard. "Does that convince you?"

She sighed and snuggled closer, oblivious of the leering guard. "Thanks, mister. That's better. A gal doesn't mind dying, but she hates to go out feeling she hasn't hooked her man."

Rex felt a catch in his throat at the brave front she was maintaining. And it had to be an effort. Jean was no fool. She was a realist. No need to tell her they were finished—that he was no superman who could kick down a wall and carry her to safety.

"Let's not think about anything but us," she whispered. "We have at least a few minutes to live—really live!"

"With that guard standing there?" Rex said bitterly.

"Well, then we can almost live." She kissed him.

A few minutes later, he said, "Did you notice anything funny out there in that council room?"

"What do you mean by funny? I was so busy looking at those tumbling ice cliffs —"

"I mean the councilmen sitting on either side of Pandek. Not one of them moved or spoke."

"That's right. They sat there like dummies."

"A row of dummies afraid to move even their eyes."

"There's something else that puzzles me," Jean said. "Those ice cliffs are life and death to we Terrans down below. Then why do the Martians build them up each winter and melt them for us in the spring? I'd think they'd leave the plains arid and thus drive us out."

"I wondered about that too. There can be only one explanation. They've repeated the process for so long they're afraid to stop—afraid of what it might do to the overall welfare of the planet."

"Perhaps if they didn't the ice would pile up of its own accord and crush them and their cities."

"I wonder how many cities there are."

"I don't care—really. Hold me closer. I'm cold...."

"But I don't understand why they would do such a thing as this," Tommy said. He had released the girl and found her clothing in a corner of the room.

"It is a part of some pagan rite they plan to revive. The victim must lie in—in the manner you found me for a certain length of time. Some weird looking priests visited me at intervals and recited incantations. It was horrible!"

"What's your name?"

"I'm Helen Spencer. I came here with my father—"

"Never mind that now. I think we can get out of here. There was nobody in the hallway when I came in."

"I'd like to find my father."

"We can try."

"They separated us a long time ago. For a while they treated me like a queen, even though they kept me a prisoner. I wondered why. Now I know. It was all a part of this terrible pagan sacrifice. I think the time is very near."

"Then let's go."

But they had waited too long. The door opened and four Martian guards entered. They almost filled the room. Tommy hurled himself at the closest one but was knocked viciously back against the wall. It seemed that fate had deserted him at last.

The Martian in charge, one who stood a head taller than the other three, grasped Helen roughly by the arm. He seemed infuriated at finding her dressed. He threw her roughly after Tommy and she too fell to the floor.

The Martian stood there, undecided, some problem evidently occupying his mind. The three subordinates waited in silence. After a few moments, the leader turned and barked several sharp commands.

The orders puzzled the three Martians. They stood where they were until the leader barked another sharper order. Then they turned and filed out.

The leader stood motionless until their footsteps died in the corridor. Then he

bent swiftly and lifted Helen Spencer to her feet.

As she cringed away, he said, "I am Maxis, a dictator in the Emperor's guard. I think perhaps you can help me. If so, I may be able to help you."

"You—you're speaking Terran," Helen said.

"Of course. Many of us know your language." He pointed to Tommy. "Who is this one?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure he has hurt none of you. Please let him go free."

Maxis shook his head impatiently. "It is of no importance. Tell me—while you lay here bound, did they bring a man to see you? A very old man—very feeble?"

Helen did not trust the Martian. After what had happened to her she was in no mood to trust any of these people. There had been an old man. The priests and a tall young Martian had practically carried him in. They had stayed in the room for quite a while, the young Martian talking harshly. The older one had pleaded with him. Had the old man escaped? Helen wondered. Was this one hunting him down?

"You don't trust me," Maxis said, "but you must. If the old one came he would have been brought by a young one. The old one would have been horrified at seeing you."

"That's how it was," Helen said.

Maxis' eyes flared. He laid a quick hand on Helen's shoulder, then drew it back. "How long ago was this? Tell me! How long ago?"

"Several hours at least."

"Then he still lives! They lied to us. Pandek lied to us!"

"If you would explain—"

"The man you saw—the old one—was Fanton, Lord of the North Hemisphere—Ruler of Mars. Pandek told us of his death when he assumed the throne. Only for this reason did the legions swear loyalty to Pandek. But Fanton still lives!"

Tommy had got to his feet and was brushing his clothes. "Maybe not. They might have killed him in the meantime."

"I have a feeling he is not dead," Maxis insisted. "I must find him. I must not fail to find him!"

He was turning toward the door. Tommy said, "What about us?"

Maxis turned back and Tommy knew he was ready to leave them to fend for themselves. Tommy said, "You promised to help us if she told you what you wanted to know."

"You are right. But you will be in my way."

"A promise is a promise," Tommy said stoutly.

"Very well. We will go down to the prison block. You two will march ahead. I will act as though I am delivering you. But if there is any trouble I will have to desert you. I cannot stand and fight. I cannot risk being slain until I find my Emperor."

They marched out into the corridor. The three guards had gone their way and no one was in sight. But from the grim look on the Martian's face, Tommy knew peril lay ahead.



The door to the cell in which Rex and Jean were imprisoned was unlocked. Five Martian guards entered. The leader was in high rage. "This girl will have to do," he snapped. "The crowds in the square will not know the difference and the priests will just have to keep their mouths shut. Take her!"

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As three of the guards advanced on Jean, Rex went into action. He drove his knee into the groin of the leader, bending the Martian forward into a straight right that almost tore his head off. The Martian went down. His jaw structure was so thick, Rex's fist turned numb from the contact and the Martian was only dazed.

Rex knew his one hope lay in getting control of the small pistol the leader carried. He lunged. The gun lay in the fallen leader's out-stretched hand. Rex's fingers touched it. But the leader's fist closed.

The delay was fatal. It gave one of the guards time to take one long step and kick Rex solidly behind the right ear. Rex went down hard, smacking the floor with his face. He did not move. Jean screamed. A hard hand went brutally over her mouth, dragging her down also.

The leader of the squad said, "Take her to the ceremonial room. Prepare her for the knife. Tell the priests I will be there soon."

"Aye, great Lord Pandek," the guard said.

Jean bit the hand that lay across her mouth. It was jerked away. She tore loose and threw herself down on Rex's unconscious body. She was pulled roughly to her feet and other hard hands dragged her away.

Perhaps it was Tommy's luck that carried the party through. On the trip to the cell blocks they met only two other Martians—not soldiers—who exhibited only mild curiosity.

Once in the lower tier, Maxis seemed more at home. "This is the likeliest cell block," he said.

"But we can't search all those cells," Tommy said. "It would take hours. We'd surely be stopped." He was looking down a long corridor lined with bars. Other corridors intersected until the place was a maze.

"You are right," Maxis said. "I have a plan that may save us time. Come. You two walk behind me now."

They moved down the corridor. Only one guard lay in their path but he was down on his haunches, asleep. They glided past him, Maxis' gun held ready. They moved on until they were approaching a more brightly lighted intersection.

A small table was located against the bars of a corner cell and a Martian sat at the table occupied with some papers.

The trio approached from behind the man quietly. He heard them when they were a few steps away. He turned. Maxis took a last bold step and was towering over the seated one.

Maxis spoke casually, but with authority. "I've been sent to deliver Fanton to the council hall."

Maxis did not expect cooperation from the guard. But he hoped for something else. His eyes were on the guard's face, watching for the man's first reaction.

It was entirely satisfactory from Maxis' point of view. The guard's startled eyes widened, then narrowed in suspicion. "Who sent you for him?"

Maxis smiled without humor. "Then he is here! He does live! What cell, you mother's mistake? Quick!"

The guard looked into the barrel of the deadly gun Maxis held close to his face. A black hole from whence could come needle flames that would burn his head into an instantaneous crisp. "The—third aisle—cell eight—"

The gun in Maxis's hand spit a small blue flame. For a moment, the guard's head was enveloped in fire. Then the head was gone.

Helen Spencer recoiled in horror. Maxis said, "He was a traitor." To the Martian, that justified everything. He bent over and picked up the headless body and carried it into the nearest cell.

He returned and said to Tommy, "This is the dangerous moment. You must help me—do exactly as I say. You must go to the cell and bring Fanton back to this table. I must wait here."

Tommy was perplexed. "I don't get it. You should be better able to get him out of his cell. If we meet a guard, he'll stop us."

"No he won't. He will bring you here. All authority in the block stems from this key-center. If you meet a guard tell him you are under orders from the key-keeper. He will be suspicious and completely confounded, but he will bring you here. In the meantime I can better stave off trouble with the authority this post gives me." Maxis looked at Helen and pointed. "You—into that cell—out of sight. Stay there until we have either succeeded or failed." His face was grim. "If we fail, you must shift for yourself with nothing but my good wishes to help you on your way."

His tone indicated his good wishes would be of scant aid. He laid a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Walk to the next intersection down that corridor. Turn to your right and count off seven cells. Fanton will be in the eighth. Good luck."

Tommy took the key Maxis handed him and started off as directed. The key seemed very heavy. The corridor seemed very long. The task set for him seemed next to impossible.

He reached the cell without trouble. He unlocked the door. Inside, a very old Martian lay in filth and rags on the floor. Tommy knelt beside him, his heart pounding. "You are to come with me," he said.

The old Martian opened his eyes. "Who are you?"

"I am Tommy Wilks, a Terran, but that doesn't matter. Maxis, one of your friends, is waiting at the table down the hall. Can you walk, sir?"

A tired smile brightened the old Martian's face. "Strange indeed are our times—when a Terran juvenile comes to aid the Lord of the North Hemisphere. The times have gone mad and we can only go where destiny directs—or seems to."

Fanton, with Tommy's aid, had got to his feet and Tommy helped him from the cell. But now there was a barrier—three scowling Martian guards. One of them barked a challenge in his own language. "Don't say anything," Tommy warned Fanton. "Maxis said it might work out like this."

To the Martian, he said, "I've been sent to bring the prisoner," but he knew the Martian did not understand him.

The three spoke among themselves, their confusion quite obvious.

Then it worked exactly as Maxis had hoped. At a command from one, the other two guards took Tommy and Fanton each by an arm and hauled them along the corridor toward the key-center. As they approached it, Tommy saw that Maxis had gotten to his feet and was waiting for them. The grim Martian stood with both hands behind his back.

As they came to a halt, the leader of the trio spoke questioningly to Maxis in their own language. Before Maxis could answer, the other's eyes opened wide and Tommy knew what was going on in his mind. He was recognizing Maxis as a false key-keeper.

The leader got short satisfaction from his discovery. He died with his questions still unanswered as Maxis brought his right arm around and blasted the man's head into a cinder.

The other two guards fell away quickly, their reflexes in perfect condition. Both snatched for their own guns, one going down as Maxis' ray cut him in two.

The other guard was bringing his gun up. Maxis had no time to match shots with him or perhaps chose not to from a certainty that both of them would die as a result.

Instead, he hurled himself on the guard and caught the latter's wrist bending the gun away from himself and the others. The guard was far heavier than Maxis, his bulk possessed of greater strength. He dropped the gun but heaved Maxis to one side and came down heavily upon him. He had trapped Maxis' arms successfully and it was a matter of moments before he would again have the gun in his fist.

Tommy acted from desperation—without plan. A heavy ring of keys lay on the desk. Tommy snatched them up and swung them, from high over his head, down hard on the skull of the guard. The guard's head was indeed hard. The keys rang dully against it but the guard's hand only faltered in reaching for the gun.

Tommy swung the keys again, and again. Unable to grip the gun, the guard reached with both hands, thus losing his hold on Maxis for a moment.

The moment was enough. Suddenly the guard stiffened and came awkwardly erect. There was an empty look in his eyes and then Tommy saw the reason. The handle of a dagger protruded from his chest, driven in by Maxis who was even now rolling the corpse over and coming free.

Maxis sheathed his dagger, still dripping blood. He snapped, "We've got to move fast. Now all we have to go on is hope."

Helen came from the cell as Tommy asked, "Where are we going?"

"We've got to get Fanton to the Place of Eternal Strength. Come!"

He took the old Martian in his arms and the cavalcade moved off down the corridor following Maxis' lead. Guards could be heard, running in from different directions.

To Maxis, it was but a matter of time. He did not expect to reach the Place of Eternal Strength. He could only try; and die finally, battling for his Emperor. But this did not sadden him. There was no better way for a Martian to die....

Rex floated in a sea of pain. Sadistically beaten by the guards who had overpowered him, he lay on the floor of the cell; aware of the blood-pool around him and of the pain, but unable to force his body into action. He knew the door to the cell stood open. He forced his mind to focus on this point. It could mean only one thing.

The guards had left him for dead.

The thought cheered him. He was not dead. Therefore he was living on borrowed time—a break men in his profession seldom got.

Another thought intruded. Maybe he wasn't lucky. Maybe he was crippled. He had as yet not inventoried the damage. Was it worse than the pain indicated?

He searched for numbness and found none. He moved and the pain increased. That was good. Nothing paralyzed. But was an arm or leg broken? Was there a spine injury?

Resolutely, he forced his muscles to respond. Arms, legs, bones okay. He got to his feet and swayed dizzily. Pain shot through his head. He almost blacked out, clawed at the wall, kept himself from falling.

He got hold of a bar and held himself erect while the floor spun and the walls tilted. Then they steadied away. His stomach settled back into place, the nausea giving ground sullenly.

After a while, he decided he was all right. As all right as he would be for a long time. He looked around for a weapon. All the bars were in solid rock. The legs of the bunk were riveted down.

He hunted and stood finally looking at his two fists. They were all he had. They would have to do.

He stepped out of his cell and saw two guards approaching along the corridor. He debated flight. He stopped. There were the two fists. Might as well find out right now how effective they would be. He crouched and stood waiting....

Jean moved in a daze. She had been taken by the Martian guard through long corridors, into a splendid part of whatever building this was. At one point during

the trip, she lashed out suddenly, bit the hand across her mouth and raked her nails across a hard face.

The Martians had been in no mood to tame a tigress the gentle way. The big Martian, after snarling from the bite, swung his other fist viciously. The blow rang against Jean's head. She fell. The Martians growled at each other, picked her up roughly and carried her, half-conscious, on down the corridor.

She was taken to a high room, far up in the building. The room seemed to be some sort of a storage place for fine garments. They were everywhere; gold surplices hanging in rows; gold and silver sandals hanging from pegs along the wall. A rich room with windows and daylight coming in; the first Jean had seen in a long time.

She remembered the stone hutch—so wondrous—so far away—so unattainable. Rex. Tears welled in Jean's eyes and she tasted the dregs of bitterness as she saw Rex—in memory—lying bloody and broken on the floor of the cell; recalled the ferocity with which the Martians had attacked him.

Suddenly Jean realized what was going on—what the Martians were doing there in the high room—stripping off her clothing. With a choked cry she found new strength and fought again.

She took them by surprise; broke from them and ran, half naked, toward the door. Escape seemed imminent but she threw herself straight into the arms of a tall, scowling Martian who held her like a child and carried her back into the terrible room. As he walked toward them, those who had brought her there fell on their knees. One of them intoned, "Pandek—great Pandek—Lord of the North Hemisphere."

"Not quite," Pandek said, speaking in Terran. "And never if I continue to be surrounded by bungling fools such as you, who cannot hold a slip of a girl. Had I not come through that door she would even now be making her escape."

"She surprised us, great Pandek. It will not happen again."

Callously, Pandek held Jean forth with one great hand and hit her sharply on the point of her chin with a doubled fist. "I'll make certain of that. Here—take her. Maybe you will be safer with an unconscious sacrifice. Comb out her hair—wash her body. Put on the golden harness—get her ready for the knife."

They took Jean from him and laid her on a marble slab and continued their ministrations. Pandek, scowling deeply, walked to the window and looked out. Beyond and below was a great open square filled with people. They milled about

a high, central platform upon which sat a throne and a sacrificial block. The block was caked with the blood of a thousand sacrifices made before the Reformation, centuries before. It had been removed from the square, but had been carefully preserved by a core of fanatics who had never given up hope of the Old Regime coming again into power; the old, bloody regime that worshiped the robust pagan gods and gave the people great spectacles.

Now the block had been returned; the minds of the people had been inflamed and they awaited the first sacrifice of the New Age—the age in which proud pagan Mars would again demand its rightful place in the sun. Pandek's hand thrilled for the feel of the knife. He thrilled at the thought of driving it home and thus ushering in the New Age.

His mind went, quite naturally, to Fanton, the weak old fool he had dragged down. It had been a clever coup. Of course, Fanton still had followers, but they had been misled, lied to, cleverly hoodwinked. A little fearful of a slip in his plans, Pandek had not had Fanton slain. He had merely thrown the old fool into a cell to die—had deprived him of rejuvenation.

Perhaps Fanton was already dead. Pandek wondered. But perhaps not, and with plans having gone forward so smoothly, it was safe to kill the deposed Lord of the Northern Hemisphere.

Pandek turned swiftly and went to see about it....

Maxis, leading his cavalcade down the prison corridor and carrying the even frailer body of his Emperor, traveled half the breadth of the prison before danger confronted him; three guards loyal to Pandek the usurper and dedicated to his treacherous cause.

Maxis laid the body of Fanton gently upon the floor. Then he stepped over it and made his stand between his Emperor and those who had deserted him. He paid no attention to the two Terrans. He wished them neither harm nor good fortune, they would be of no value in this fight so he forgot them.

The guards, sure of their advantage, moved slowly forward. They knew Maxis and gave him a tribute by taking it for granted he would not retreat. They drew their short, wicked swords, thus forcing Maxis, a man of ethics, to foreswear use of any other weapon even though death faced him.

The Martians moved in from three angles, skillful swordsmen all, and Maxis parried three quick thrusts with a tricky maneuver that left a scratch on the arm of one guard.

It was a gallant parry, worthy of a better reward than certain death. The guards retreated a step, set themselves, and moved in again. Maxis would certainly not be able to repeat the maneuver.

Then there was new, sudden, and devastating action. From the rear of the guards, came a crazed, unarmed juggernaut of destruction; a mad Terran; bloody, savage-eyed, lethal, he threw himself against the flank of the advancing trio, locked an arm around his throat, and with leverage obtained by wrapping his legs around the Martian's body, snapped the ugly head at the base of the spine.

The Martian fell with the Terran under him. As Tommy cried, "Rex—Rex! Where did you come from?" the Terran had disentangled himself from the corpse and was engaging a second guard. Stunned by the suddenness of the attacks, the guard was easy prey for the Terran's death grip. A second spine snapped and as the Terran rose, he saw that the third guard had fallen before Maxis' sword.

Maxis said, "Your aid was indeed timely."

Rex wiped blood from his face and advanced like a great cat. "What are you doing with these people?"

Tommy rushed forward. "It's all right, Rex. This is our friend. The old man is the Lord of the North Hemisphere. Maxis is trying to save his life. This is Helen Spencer. They were going to kill her."

Maxis had again taken Fanton in his arms. "We have no time to discuss these things. Find a gun on one of those bodies and follow."

He moved swiftly down the corridor. Tommy and Helen Spencer followed, but Rex strode forward until he was abreast of the Martian. "Where are we going?" There was suspicion and hostility in his voice—as though he suspected a trick.

"I can't go into detail," Maxis said, "but believe me, our chances of survival lie in reaching a ray fountain we call the Place of Eternal Strength. The Emperor's life is at stake and ours also."

As though on cue, two guards appeared from a cross-corridor. Grinning mirthlessly, Rex turned the gun on them. It spat forth a crackling ray that cut them in the middle and brought the upper halves of their bodies toppling to the

floor.



"Now lead the way," Rex said.

He killed four more guards before they arrived at the Place of Eternal Strength, shooting them in the back without compunction as he stalked ahead of Rex, clearing the way.

Upon arrival at their destination, Tommy cried, "Why this is the place where my arm was healed. I had a wound and then it was gone!"

Maxis laid the body of Fanton on a marble couch under the singing colored rays. "Even greater miracles are achieved here," he said. "It heals all ills—even old age. If a spark of life remains in a body, the fountain greatens and strengthens it."

Rex stared in wonder. "Will it revive the dead?"

"No. It will preserve a dead body—cause it to remain perfect for centuries but once life is gone it can never be returned."

"Then this is what happened to Professor Spencer. He was killed and placed under this ray."

Maxis nodded sadly. "Brutally murdered. It was Pandek's signal for his great coup. We were caught completely unawares. He acted very cleverly and told us Fanton had died, refusing rejuvenation, when in truth he had deprived Fanton of the fountain's healing power. Only today did I discover that Fanton still lived."

Rex was staring at the body of the ancient ruler. "How long does the process take?"

"A matter of minutes. Let's only hope that those minutes are afforded us."

"There are still some shots in my gun," Rex said.

They waited, while the body of Fanton seemed to visibly recharge itself. Two guards appeared. Rex killed them.

"How was this rebellion allowed to get started?" he asked.

There was a grim look upon Maxis' face. "Through laxness. Through carelessness. From stopping our ears against the sound of treacherous undercurrents. From feeling that young hotheads were basically sound and would not arrange their own destruction and ours too."

"This Pandek you speak of—he planned to move against the Terrans to the south?"

"He still plans it. He has vowed to wipe every alien from the planet and establish a new age of Martian resurgence."

"The Martians would be annihilated."

"Pandek is willing to gamble on that."

"He must be insane," Rex said.

"It began when Fanton advocated a change in Martian policy. For centuries, ever

since the Terrans came, our course has been one of proud isolation. The policy was instituted centuries ago by ill-advised leaders and Fanton carried it on against his better judgment. When he began talking of a reversal, the underground mutiny gained in strength."

"Will saving Fanton's life stop the rebellion?"

"This thing we do is only a feeble step in the right direction. Even with Fanton strong and healthy, we may not be able to win."

"What is this sacrifice business?"

"It is supposed to take place in the public square. An old and barbaric rite in which a maiden is slain and the people file by and bathe their hands in her blood. It will be the signal for the final act of over-throw—when the rebels come into the open and slay all who remain faithful to Fanton."

A new voice spoke. The two men turned. Fanton was sitting on the edge of the marble couch. Helen and Tommy were staring at him.

Fanton's words were for Maxis. "You have done well. If I'd known before where loyalty lay, things might have been different."

Maxis dropped to one knee. He bowed his head. "My lord."

"No time for this. I must get to the Council."

"It will be very dangerous."

"But the uprising must be beaten down. The Council is still loyal. They must see that I am alive."

Rex said, "I think you'll find—"

Fanton waved him to silence. "We must hurry."

As the group left the Place of Eternal Strength, Maxis said, "Perhaps they will have to be assembled. If they are not in session—"

"They *must* be in session!"

On the trip to the Amphitheater of the Gods, two rebels were killed and one loyal Martian added to the cavalcade. As they moved into the great hall, Fanton said, "They are here!"

This appeared to be true. The seats flanking the central throne were still occupied. The throne itself was vacant. Immediately upon entering the great hall, Rex ran forward and climbed to the tier of benches. The council members sat silent, unmoving. Rex pushed the body of the nearest one. It tumbled off the bench like a sack of grain and fell to the floor.

Fanton paled. "What does this mean?"

"They're all dead," Rex replied. "When we were here before I noticed that none of them moved nor spoke. This is the work of a mad-man—Pandek. This is his joke. He rules all alone."

Maxis said, "You will have to try and escape, my Lord. You must get to the Terrans and tell your story."

Fanton considered. "If I run like a coward, thousands of loyal Martians will die. Their blood will be on my hands."

"That's not true," Rex said, sharply.

Further talk was interrupted by the sound of men approaching at a run. Fanton turned and pointed. "Behind that pillar! There is a small door that leads to an observatory platform above the square. Only my father knew of the stairway behind the wall."

Fanton pressed a carved leaf in a decoration on the pillar and a small section of the seemingly unbroken wall moved inward. Fanton entered and the rest followed with Rex and Maxis and the new recruit bringing up the rear.

Maxis said, "I will stay here and fight. I'm tired of running away."

Rex dragged him into the opening. "Don't be a fool. There's a time to fight and a time to run. This is a time to run."

As the wall-section slid back into place, Fanton indicated a stairway a short distance down the narrow corridor. Rex said to Maxis. "You go ahead to guard Fanton. This new man and I will stay here in case Fanton and his father weren't the only ones who knew about that opening. I think whoever was coming heard us leave."

Maxis was prepared to object. He hesitated, watching Fanton, Tommy and Helen move up the circular stairway. "Go ahead," Rex snapped. "You don't know who may be up there."

Scowling, Maxis turned suddenly and took the stairs three at a time.

Rex and the loyal Martian had a short wait. The sound of the others had scarcely died out above, when the panel opened again. "I was right," Rex whispered. "Stand on the other side."

The two defenders had the advantage of a comparatively dim interior; that, and the remaining charges in Rex's gun. Three guards crowded into the narrow passageway.

As they saw Rex standing by the stairway, he dropped to the floor and fired at an upward angle. His lethal charges cut the two forward guards to pieces.

The third one, though confused, was more alert. He also had a gun and looked desperately around for a target. The loyal Martian thrust viciously with his sword. He missed. The guard danced away. Rex brought his gun around, but hesitated with the loyal Martian in his range of fire. When he maneuvered a clear shot, he pressed the switch. Nothing happened. The gun was empty.

In the meantime, the guard brought his gun around to bear on the Martian. The later made a second desperate thrust. It went home but only as the Martian fell dead from the guard's last shot. Rex got to his feet, wiping sweat from his face.

And at that moment, Pandek stepped into the passageway.

Instantly, Rex leaped for the fallen guard's gun. Pandek smiled contemptuously and kicked it far down the passageway. Pandek apprised the situation swiftly. He said, "Pick up the sword, Terran scum."

Without reply, Rex bent down and did as directed.

"Are you skilled in its use?" Pandek asked.

"I never had one in my hand before."

Pandek raised his own sword, identical to the one Rex held. "Then I'm afraid the contest will be rather unequal," he said and moved toward Rex. "On guard! It will be a great pleasure to kill you."

Rex took a backward step. He was no match for Pandek with these weapons. Pandek would be a master at close swordsmanship. This had to be true. Otherwise Pandek would not be so eager to engage him.

Rex thought of the headquarters on Earth; of Professor Spencer, so still, so peaceful in that box. So dead. Would he go back to Terra the same way?

With Fanton's hiding place known to Pandek, the rebellion seemed assured of success—as certain as his own death at Pandek's hands.

He took another backward step....

Jean was ready for the sacrifice. She had been dressed in a rich golden harness and wore golden manacles on her wrists. She had waited in the room with the sound of the crowds in the great court below rising in volume as their impatience increased.

Finally a door opened. A tall resplendent figure entered. He wore a jeweled cloak that swept the floor. A hideous golden mask covered his face.

There were two attending priests with Jean. They dropped to their knees and lowered their eyes. One of them intoned, "Great Pandek. Lord of the Northern Hemisphere. The sacrifice is ready for your knife."

The room grew hazy before Jean's eyes. It spun in a sickening swirl as she slipped to the floor in a dead faint....

When she regained consciousness, Jean found herself under an archway in the court below. The great square was jammed with howling Martians. A long red carpet stretched from the archway to the platform in the center of the square. The sting of a sharp odor in her nostrils told Jean how she had been revived.

A priest on either side now supported her. They moved forward from the building toward the platform. Evidently, she could either walk or be dragged. She preferred to walk. She raised her head high and matched the priests step for step.

The crowd pressed close to the red carpet on either side. Unbroken lines of guards held the Martians back. To Jean, they seemed things out of a nightmare.

They reached the steps leading up to the platform. Five steps. She counted them as she ascended.

The marble block.

The priests laid her along its length. The golden manacles were removed. Each priest took an arm and held her to the slab with the tall masked figure raising his knife and looking down at her. The knife arched.

Then, halfway in its descent toward her bared breast, it stopped. The masked figure looked upward toward the high wall of the building. He shrank backward—pointed with the knife as he cringed away.

A dramatic gesture that turned every eye in the square toward a small balcony high on the wall. A cry went up. A single word.

"Fanton!"

The true Lord of the Northern Hemisphere stood with his arms out-stretched imperiously over the crowd below. He held this position until the roaring died away and a whisper could have been heard in the great square. Then he spoke.

"Hear your Emperor now! You have been lied to by those who would destroy you. You have been told I was dead and that a new order would prevail among you; an old, outdated order that brought only blood and suffering in its time. I tell you now that those who spoke thus were traitors who sought to exploit your suffering to their cruel ends. The leader of these was Pandek, a prince I trusted. I now declare his life forfeit and say to you that he will be executed in public at this hour one day hence. Return now to your homes and have done with this madness. I, your Emperor command each of you personally. You who are vested with authority, return to your duties."

The sonorous voice ceased and Jean felt herself being raised from the marble slab. She opened her eyes. The golden mask had been lifted from the face of the executioner. He had dropped the knife and now he held a sword in his hand.

It was Maxis.

He whispered, "Under the platform, quick! There is an underground passage back into the palace. You will be safe."

Jean was bewildered. As she descended she saw that the crowd had surged backward, leaving an open space between the platform and the palace. Maxis turned and ran toward the open space.

A small group of Martians was running forward from the building. They were led by Pandek with a sword in his hand. From another doorway, Rex ran to join Maxis. He was unarmed.

One of Pandek's group turned and swerved out to intercept him. Like a great cat, Rex crouched, waiting. The Martian moved in. Rex went under the vicious swipe of the Martian's sword and caught the Martian's arm and spun him around. Before the Martian could recover his balance, there was an arm around his throat—pressure on his spine. He screamed as his spine snapped. Rex raced on and joined Maxis.

The guards in the square had now chosen sides. A few rallied behind Pandek. By far the majority took their stand behind Maxis. Their number doomed the smaller group.

But Maxis held up his hands. "Stand back! All of you! Come forward, Pandek. You think so highly of your swordsman's skill. Let me see the proof. Just we two."

Pandek was not slow in accepting the challenge. He came forward and the two Martians circled cautiously in the open space between the two opposing forces.

Pandek seemed the better of the two. Maxis fought mainly on the defensive, his play unspectacular, which made Pandek's thrusts seem all the more brilliant.

Pandek evidently felt any retreat was a mark against him. Not so with Maxis. He retreated whenever it was made necessary by Pandek's able thrusts. Pandek sneered. Maxis fought stolidly, doggedly.

Until Pandek made the mistake of losing regard for his foe's ability. He thrust smartly and did not maintain the balance necessary for retreat in case of quick counter attack.

The counterattack came. Suddenly Maxis' blade was everywhere. Pandek retreated in order to regain his balance and reassume domination of the match.

Maxis never gave him a chance to do this. Always, Pandek was a scant second too late in parrying a thrust to balance himself for the next. He fell.

Maxis moved in swiftly. For a moment he stayed his thrust hoping. And what he hoped for, came to pass. Pandek's courage broke. With terror in his eyes, the fallen Martian shouted. "Stop! I am of royal blood. You don't dare kill me!"

Maxis smiled and drove his blade home.

As he drew it forth, he glanced at Pandek's waiting group. Brave men all, who had espoused the losing cause openly. To a man they were throwing down their swords, their eyes on the dead Pandek, contempt on their faces. The contempt of men who suddenly realized they had been led by a coward. Men who were ashamed.

Maxis sheathed his blade and looked up to where Fanton, Lord of the Northern Hemisphere raised his hand in salute.

Maxis bowed. Then he turned to Rex. He said, "It is over, my friend. The fuse has been snuffed in time. We will be eternally in your gratitude."

"It's the other way around. We're getting out of this little affair with whole skins. That's something to be really thankful for."

(From the diary of Tommy Wilks)

What a story I'll have to tell! I guess I'm about the luckiest kid on Mars right now because when we get back, they're going to let me tell what happened! I've got it all written down so I won't forget anything. I've got it up to the time we left Rex and the Martian in the passageway behind the wall. Rex didn't tell me all that happened but when Maxis got back there, after hearing the noise, he found Pandek on the floor unconscious. Rex said Pandek came at him with a sword and he was pretty sure Pandek would kill him but Pandek missed a thrust and Rex got in a lucky grab and pushed a nerve on Pandek's neck. He made it sound very easy but I'll bet Rex is about the best nerve fighter in the world. That's what they call men who can kill with nothing but their bare hands.

Anyhow, they brought Pandek upstairs and Maxis wanted to kill him. But Fanton said no—that Pandek should be kept alive until the rebellion was over—if it ever was.

They talked about what they'd do, but Fanton made the final decision because he was the Emperor. He said he wanted to reveal himself to the people at a dramatic moment because that was what had an affect on crowds. He decided the most dramatic moment would be while the knife was raised over Jean.

So they took Pandek to a room and tied him up and Maxis took his place. Maxis' job was to call the crowd's attention to Fanton at the right instant to heighten the dramatic effect. He was also supposed to look scared to death so the crowd wouldn't swing Pandek's side against the Emperor.

It all worked swell except for one thing. Some traitor guards came and let Pandek out. If Pandek had gone after Fanton, it all might have ended differently. That's what Rex said. But Pandek got rattled and went after Maxis instead. Maxis killed him even though Pandek was a much better swordsman.

Now to me, that doesn't make any sense. I asked Rex about that but he just smiled and said Pandek was better than Maxis except for one thing. Guts. That's a funny term that means courage. I wonder where Rex heard it. Probably on Earth.

Anyhow, everything is fine, now. The people are behind Fanton and he's coming back to New Iowa with us and wants to go on to Terra for a good-will visit. He wants to open the northern country to Terrans and trade scientific secrets.

Right now I'm in a room they gave me to sleep in while we're here. I saw Jean and Rex walking in the garden down below. He was kissing her.

Or maybe it was the other way around.

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