

Encounter

Below

Tharsis

Where there's life there's adaptation—and danger.

BOB BUCKLEY

The wind was out of the west. It carried before it a ruddy haze of dust that whispered gently against the deserted recreation dome. All about lay the canyon, an abyss of ragged, multicolored stone. It seemed to cup the Noctis Lacus Mining and Exploration Settlement with friendly, severe shelter.

Tom McCormick rested his broad forehead against the cool plastic of the port a moment longer, enjoying the view while he attempted to ignore the persistent twinges of conscience that threatened to tear him away. The evening, descent of the sand spiders had begun. The tiny wisps of life, not spiders at all but small insectoids with limbs as attenuated as a king crab, whirled down the cheer crags like Duffs of ebony snow, their unbelievable numbers concealing the brilliant exfoliations of lichen that stippled the cliffs like heatless flames of orange, scarlet, and chrome yellow. For the spiders the dunes that mounded the

flats spelled insulated safety from the rigors of the freezing Martian night.

The second man in the dome lounge was not interested in the view. He was young, with plain, strong features, and his large hands almost swallowed up his knees as he sat hunched on the edge of the couch staring at the free-patterned floor of fused plastic.

"I've never asked you for anything before, Tom, but . . ."

The little biologist turned away from the port with a long sigh. "Then don't ask now, Paul. You know my position, and I think you understand why I came to it. If it weren't that you were being . . . well, we can let that drop for now. What matters is that I'm rejecting an applicant I suspect to be unable to adjust to colony life. If Jeanne won't fit into a crew successfully there's no way she can fit into the colony. She might not even survive."

McCormick's light cotton tunic, an import from the pressurized farms of Hellas City, revealed a well muscled, but compact frame, for he was just barely over five feet tall. But it was his face that caught and held the attention: the skin was patterned by a tangled web- work of tiny wrinkles that puckered into tiny sunbursts about his deep-set eyes.

"You probably think I'm being paternalistic, Paul," he went on. "Perhaps I am. I'm remembering a —dome blow-out a long, long time ago when the Noctis settlement was a single dome and three prospectors. One of them was a girl. Her name was Jeanne, too, fresh out from Earth she was." McCormick glared at the other. "I couldn't save her. But at my age a man's already made a lot of mistakes. He avoids making them again because he just doesn't have the energy. If you were older you'd understand."

"I understand just fine," Culkin snapped. "What all this boils down to is prejudice." But if the boy was expecting an angry retort he was disappointed, for McCormick only smiled sadly. Behind him the port was glowing with a soft, rosy-colored twilight. The flats were in deep shadow, now, and in another few minutes the entire canyon would be dark.

"She's been pretty friendly, hasn't she?"

Culkin flushed a deep crimson that was not entirely due to the sunset flaming along the bluff-tops. "That's not why I'm defending her."

"Isn't it?" McCormick's eyes were as expressionless as polished glass.

"No! Jeanne's an excellent geologist. And Sheldon's given her top scores in sandcar handling."

"And that's not all she handles well." The overhead lighting of the lounge came on with a shimmer, making it seem even more spartan. The Noctis Lacus Settlement was still little more than an outpost. The main colonies at Claritas and Hellas were different, both of them growing up around subsurface aquifers and rich loess soils with the farming supplemented by ore extraction contracts leased to Lunar Industries and Homeworld corporations. Noctis would grow, also; but in time, not immediately. The caverns had to be mapped, the ore veins identified, before the heavy work could begin. But there was a future in the great canyons. McCormick knew it, and so did the slim brunette standing framed by the airseal of the portal. It had been Norah who had convinced McCormick to bring the crew west and hire their two cave buggies out to the Noctis division of the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Lands, the only government on Mars. Waist-length braids swung like glossy snakes about the girl as she moved into the lounge.

Culkin seemed to sense the arrival of an ally. "Tom's rejected Jeanne Alexander as a replacement for Sally. Can you believe that, Norah?"

The girl laughed as she threw herself down on a couch. "Yep." Then she looked at McCormick "Why?"

For an answer the biologist fished in one of his tunic pockets and tossed a tiny object to the girl. She caught it on the fly automatically and easily. "Know what it is?" he asked.

Norah turned the thing about in her fingers. "Drug capsule with a red gel coating. So what?"

"I found it in my office after Alexander had been there for an interview. She doesn't know she dropped it."

"Must be pretty terrible from the way you're looking at it, Tom."

"It's an engram transplant, a memory capsule. No way of knowing precisely what it is without ingesting it. Might be a technical journal article, or a joyride across the ice fields of Titan."

"Oh!" Norah put the capsule into an empty dish and wiped her fingers delicately on her pants-leg. "I wonder how she got it past the customs inspection on Phobos?"

"It's no crime to possess engram caps," Paul Culkin protested loudly. "Any of us could place an order with Earth. The things are expensive, but certainly not the instruments of destruction that Tom accuses them of being. The caps are even catching on at Luna, and I think that's all the more reason for *not* rejecting Jeanne just because she conforms to Homeworld technology and mores."

The landscape outside the port was growing darker. The sky was almost black, holding a thin tracery of ice clouds that were slowly drifting southward, toward the icebound pole. The highlands atop the bluffs would have another thirty minutes of light, but for the canyon abysses night had fallen already.

Norah shifted on the couch.

"Well, we need a replacement for Sally, Tom. There's no getting around that. If you delay any longer we're going to lose credits. It's no good just letting a buggy go unused. And the Bureau won't like your rejecting an applicant without so much as a trial run. I also agree with Paul that you can't reject her solely because she lives up to Earth mores."

"You'd have me sign on a New Guinea cannibal just so long as he could drive a cave buggy," McCormick said with a sigh.

"That's an idea." Norah grinned. "Let me propose a compromise. Give Jeanne a chance to prove herself in the field. We can rearrange buggy crews."

"You want me to double up with Paul?" McCormick glanced at Culkin thoughtfully. "That would work. He's a geologist, and that maintains technical balance. But still ..."

"I like it," Culkin declared loudly, standing up to begin pacing the floor, his hands clasped behind his back. "It gets you off the hook, Tom."

"It gets nobody off any hook. Mars can still kill, especially in the caverns, and your Jeanne doesn't understand us, nor does she understand how a crew functions. On Earth the individual works for himself, and equality is legislated. Put someone like that into the Bureau system and you've got all the makings of bad trouble."

"I'm willing to risk it," Culkin shot back angrily.

"Damned decent of you, considering it's going to be Norah who's taking the chances."

"Relax, Tom." The girl was smiling. "If I don't mind a risk, don't you mind it for me. I'm a big girl, and besides, it's a lot harder for a woman to fool a woman."

The golden bar of sunlight that had emblazoned itself across the east rim of the canyon narrowed to a sliver and vanished. Black shadow swallowed up the port. Off in the distance, where the sole roadway climbed out of the canyon on a series of switchbacks, the headlamps of an ore truck threw banners of white glare across the walls of rock, painting them for an instant in stark relief.

"One patrol?" McCormick asked finally.

"It only takes one to smoke out a loser," Norah said quietly. "Tomorrow you can check her out on the buggies while Paul and I finish up that workdome contract. That night we go down in the caverns, and when we get back the lady might very well ask for a transfer on her own. The caves can do that to a newcomer who goes deep for nothing more uplifting than a few credits."

2.

The creature was without awareness, without identity. It could not comprehend the endless dark, nor the slow ebb of heat energy into its jelly-like body through the thermopods bedded deeply through adamantine rock toward the magma pockets that underlay the deep caverns. In its structure, part protoplasmic, part mineral, the creature was a curious combination of life and unlife. It had existed in an unchanging state for millions of years. It had sensed when the floods had come, it had sensed when the torrents had drained away. Its main body lay unmoving within the ancient grotto with the evidence of its hunger all about: empty crevices where once there had been rich veins of ore. The feeder tentacles had etched the stone with powerful acids and left it pocked and crumbling. Now the ores were played out. They had lasted long, but all things come to an end. The creature was quietly, inevitably starving to death. It did not "know" this, but its great bulk was permeated with foreboding. The five simple ganglia, copies made from the brains of insectoids that had blundered into its feeding tentacles at long intervals, were alert. But there was no prey to be found, or absorbed. Dissolution was coming rapidly. Nothing was left to it but division, the entire bulk disintegrating into a thousand-plus mobile, diminutive reproductions, one or two of which might chance upon another rich grotto and grow to maturity, sending thermopods down to suck the heat of the planet. Already the process of division was beginning as chromosomal structures within the central cell mass began aligning into a precise and complex pattern.

3.

"Coffins with wheels!" The girl's tone implied that she was not impressed by the two cave buggies drawn up in the equipment dome. She put her gloved hands on the hips of her suit and shook her head from side to side within the transparent helmet.

McCormick grinned. He knew the buggies weren't pretty and he didn't much care. They had been designed for strength, and they gave off the massive presence of two granite boulders. Neither was longer than twelve feet, nor wider than six, even taking into account the six large wire wheels arrayed along the lengths of the tubular hulls, three to a side. Each of the vehicles was double-ended, since rarely did a buggyman find himself with the luxury of the room to turn around. A pressure-tight bulkhead

separated the forward control-room from the rearmost, and the hull itself was 200mm machined Martian steel, the finest this side of Luna, with a bright orange envelope of Teflon bonded over the metal. Two hatches, one at the bow, the other at the stern, opened inward, and above their rims were the inset, glassine-shielded driving lamps, three to, an end, and above these the tiny driving ports arrayed in a curve before the padded couch on which the driver had to lie, belly down, the entire trip. Caving was profitable and interesting, but no one as yet had been foolish enough to acclaim it as fun.

McCormick reached through one of the open hatches and moved a switch on a control panel. A section of hull rose with a hum, exposing a slim pod mounted on an extensible pivot arm.

"This is the sensor pod," he explained. "It contains a spectrographic laser, a TV camera, and a searchlight. Both crewmen share it, but it is usually operated by whoever isn't driving the buggy at the time. Now, climb inside. You've got until 1400 to memorize the controls. I want you to be able to work them in complete darkness, because even in a power outage the motors run. They're fail-safe, and the wire wheels serve as sensing antennae even if you can't see the cave walls. If you want to live to be an old caver you'll need every trick we can teach you."

The girl dropped into a crouch and peered through the open hatch into the interior of the buggy. "Not much room in there, is there?" When McCormick didn't answer she frowned. "Look, I spent most of last night going over the construction plans and control schematics with Paul. It's all up here now." She tapped a gloved finger against her helmet.

"Schematics in the brain don't mean reflexes in the muscles. Inside." When the girl didn't move McCormick sighed and gazed resolutely up at the straining plastic of the dome. "It's that or the next ore train back to Claritas," he said firmly.

This time Jeanne moved, though not without complaint.

Paul Culkin put down the battered melt-gun and studied the fresh seam of joined plastic critically. It seemed secure. Satisfied, he put the tool down and sat back on his haunches. The thin, dry wind of Mars kicked up a flurry of orange dust and sent it whirling across the flats. Culkin's suit was already coated, its brilliant scarlet subdued to muted orange. As for Norah's, it was now an ugly brown, the blue color completely obscured.

The girl glanced over. "What's wrong?" She had been working all morning to assemble the Central Equipment Base for the dome foundation.

Culkin looked away from the ore train that was just starting to *move* out from the loading docks of the big—still experimental—ore crusher. Behind it the Noctis Lacus settlement showed as a cluster of twelve dark purple hemispheres, like a bunch of Concord grapes half buried in orange dust. The sun was directly overhead, a tiny, glaring point of light that always seemed too small, and far too bright. It made the lead sandcar of the train glow like fire as the sunlight illuminated the orange hull with the yellow pennant streaming back from the tip of the whip antennae. In a day the train would be at the big colony at Claritas. There the ore would be smelted, then shuttled up to Phobos for loading into the big freighters . . . "lummoxes," as the ponderous, ion-powered vessels were known among the colonists.

The geologist's cheek twitched. "Nothing's wrong."

"Then you're daydreaming on my air allotment. Get back to work."

"I bought the air today," Culkin snapped irritably.

"Oh. That's different." The girl studied the nearly completed framework, the basepad of fused plastic that was puddled across the low rise of dolomite. "Dream all you want."

"I wasn't daydreaming, I was worrying."

"Might as well stop that. It never accomplishes anything except to promote ulcers." Norah grinned. "Is it Jeanne?"

"Yeah." Culkin began joining brace frames again.

"You're afraid she's going to shoot her mouth off at Tom and get sent back to Hellas, forthwith."

"That's about it," Culkin said flatly. "Jeanne's pretty, but I think her mouth is bigger than her brain sometimes. And it amazes me that a girl so intelligent is so lacking in common sense." He put the melt gun down again. "Know what she told me last night?"

Norah waited expectantly.

"She wants to map out an ore strike on her own, register it, and sell it to some corporation on the homeworld. That's why she came out to Mars . . . to get rich!"

Norah laughed softly. "Quite a feat if she can pull it off."

"I know." Culkin went back to work. He finished the last joining and swung the entire assembly upright, carrying it over to the Central Equipment Base. Norah helped him seat it and bolt it down to the basepad. The steel footings for the meteor shield were already in place and all that remained to be done was for a halftrack to deliver the dome envelope and pump equipment. That part of the erection had been contracted out to another crew—there were seven at the settlement, all engaged in mapping the caverns spatially and geologically, and in the still experimental ore extraction plant. Piecework, like the dome construction, allowed the crews a chance to earn work bonuses, and when the month's allowances for air, food, and other life supports were totaled up McCormick's crew would be at least a hundred and fifty credits to the good.

Norah slid the last lock-nut into place and fused its head with her gun. Culkin began a last recheck of their work.

Norah holstered her melt gun and stood up. She studied the colossal cliffs that seemed to lean over the flats, always about to topple and crush them beneath a terrible weight. "You know Tom was right last night, don't you?"

"I don't know any such thing," Culkin snapped back.

"Jeanne's from Homeworld. Anyone growing up with that population, under such fierce competition, is going to think of herself first and the crew second."

Culkin looked across the flats to the settlement. The huge halftracks that made up the ore train were nearly to the base of the cliffs, and the roadway that snaked precariously up the stepped bluffs. "I can bring her around," he said firmly. "When she sees that her survival depends on the well-being of the crew she'll come around."

Martian caverns were curious to see. They had not been formed by slow seepage of groundwater, but rather a combination of seepage and scouring action. Thus there were no stalactites dangling from the curved and deeply grooved ceiling; no stalagmites thrusting up from the sloping, concave floor. The caverns almost seemed artificial in their tubular appearance, as if they were colossal, pre-planned drains of a forgotten race of burrowing aliens.

Like the layered walls of the abyssal canyon complexes, a hundred million years of geologic history lay exposed in the subterranean ramblings. The caves had been dug gradually over the ages by sediment bearing torrents released periodically as the planet swung nearer the sun. The polar caps had melted then, forming an unstable atmosphere of water vapor and carbon dioxide that nightly condensed into blizzards of planetary proportions, draping highland and valley alike with thin drifts of snow. With dawn and the return of the sun, the new-formed snowfields melted into a steamy runoff; a mere trickle at first, but a trickle that rapidly built into flashflood proportions as the muddy liquid was gradually funneled into the equatorial canyons. There the waters collected, seeping downward. Cracks became caves, and the galleries lengthened and widened steadily. Through millennia the process continued, and the caverns were never completely filled, for the water percolated downward, and as it neared the mantle, flashed into steam. Ascending crustal faults, it came out upon the surface again in hot springs and geysers.

It was the caverns that allowed life to exist at all on Mars, for without them the water vapor released at intervals by the melting of the ice caps would have been lost to space. Because of them, however, through a mechanism somewhat like the oceans of Earth, the planetary waters were systematically recycled and doled out to the surface lands in usable form, again and again.

But mankind enjoyed the caverns for an entirely different reason. Already the two buggies were halfway through the completion of their mapping patrol. Now they were descending a main gallery, the run holding steady to a twenty-degree slope. McCormick's buggy was in the lead, the biologist steering while Culkin kept up the charts. Prone on the narrow couch in the forward compartment, the biologist watched his reflection nod in the thick crystal of the ports. Beyond the crystal he could see the beam of the mobile pod sweeping across the cave walls, pausing momentarily as the geologist took readings with the laser.

"Iron ore," Culkin reported at last. "If it's the same layer that runs back under the settlement we're down to the 350-million-year level. I'll know for sure if we hit oil shale at 390. Damn, I wish we had one of those mythical time-machines. I'd give anything to be able to see Mars when it still had its lakes."

"When Tycho Base gets around to inventing one I'll have it installed forthwith," McCormick promised. "But you'd be disappointed. Lieberanz says the oil-forming lakes were nothing more than stagnant mudflats with a meter or two of scummy, alkaline water over them. He wrote a paper on it last year. Says effects of the wind probably kicked up big bubbles of alkali froth and sent them tumbling across to the shore where they piled up in big, sudsy ridges."

"Sounds nauseating. Look, there's a fungus colony." The spot illuminated a knobby mass of pale tissue wedged into a moisture-oozing crack in the ore. "Pretty small. Looks unhealthy," Culkin decided.

"We're deep." McCormick reminded him. "Too deep for most cave life, and that means too far away from the sun."

Fungus colonies lived off decaying particles of organic matter percolating down through the stone, like the

oceanic abyssal life on Earth. By the time a piece of foodstuff drifted down to the bottom everything it passed for a distance of six kilometers or so had had a bite of it. There was never much left, which was why such life-forms were so small.

McCormick guided the buggy on. Twenty meters behind came the second buggy. Jeanne Alexander was steering. Five times, now, McCormick had had to order the girl to drop back to a safe distance. She seemed determined to ride his tail, almost as if she were afraid he might find something and not pass it on.

The slope steepened to thirty degrees. The gallery narrowed.

"Just hit oil shale," Culkin reported with an air of triumph. "Looks like it's going to be a sizable bed. So much for your scummy lakes."

Abruptly the gallery divided. A shaft exited through the floor of the gallery leaving two narrow ledges barely wide enough for the passage of a buggy on each side. McCormick took over control of the spot and flashed it down into the pit. A ramp of silt became apparent leading down into the darkness of a lower level. Apparently there had been a collapse of the gallery floor in the distant past and the floods had been diverted downward. He sent the buggy toward the left ledge and switched the transceiver circuit into the outside antennae.

"Jeanne?"

"Here, Tom." The girl's voice struck McCormick as being surprisingly calm.

"I want you to take your buggy down. There's a ramp of silt, so the descent won't be difficult. Just mind that you keep your speed low, and don't over-drive your lamps. Drop signal boosters at twenty-meter intervals so we don't lose contact. Can do?"

"You're the crew chief." The rear buggy accelerated, slewed about the other and whirred down the cavernous drain. In a moment it was gone, even the brilliant glow of its lamps swallowed up by the gloom. Tom McCormick watched uncomfortably. He was being possessed by a terrible sense of wrongness. If this was a mistake . . . he shook his head angrily. Why, when he had had the chance, hadn't he held firm? Why hadn't he sent the girl back to Hellas?

6.

The creature stirred, ganglia alert. The air pressure within the grotto had subtly changed. Something very large was approaching. A sensory tendril reported the event and cellular dissolution slowed and stopped. The multi-cellular gel that formed the central mass began to re-form, spreading itself thinly across the grotto floor until it became a vast, semi-liquid puddle of mindless hunger.

7.

The buggy careened wildly down the broad ramp of crumbling silt, the grooved walls of the immense cavern painted a livid, glaring yellow by the driving lamps.

"What a stroke of luck," Jeanne said gloatingly. "I wonder if Paul suggested to Tom that we take this lower gallery by ourselves. If so, I love him."

"Womankind loves the malleable," Norah replied dryly. "But slow down. This isn't supposed to be a race to our graves." When the scene outside the rear cabin continued to bounce wildly she tried again. "If you don't, ol' girl, I'll override your controls and back this thing down myself."

The buggy slowed slightly in its crazy descent. The walls ceased to be a blur and began to show strata of mudstone and shale. There were also intrusions of pyroclastic stone, quartz included. But there were curious cracks, or crevices winding through the stone, as if veins of ore had been mined away. In some areas the stone showed porous and badly eroded, as if by acid.

"Are you adventurous, Norah?"

"What does that mean? The question, that is." Inwardly she already knew, she had been expecting the invitation for hours.

"I was wondering if you like to ... well, gamble. An individual could become fantastically wealthy by making just one strike down here. Both Luna and Earth need raw ores badly and they're willing to pay for them handsomely."

Norah smiled. The cavern opening was dwindling rapidly into a narrow archway of shadow. A thin cloud of disturbed silt hung above the ramp. "What about Tom and Paul?"

"Paul I can handle. As for Tom. I've seen those looks the two of you pass back and forth when you think nobody's looking. You know a man's weakness. Grab him hard and make him walk the line . . . your line. It's easy."

The buggy was speeding up again, swaying from side to side on the uneven sediments of the ramp.

"You're asking a lot. And I'm curious, once you make this big find, who are you going to sell to? Lunar Industries and the Home-world corporations deal through the Bureau."

"There are other groups," Jeanne answered mysteriously. "Some aren't quite-so open in their dealings as the big corporations, but they wield as much clout. Also, they don't care so much for laws."

Norah drummed her gloved fingers thoughtfully on the rim of the port. "There are other details, you know. Removal of the ore, processing, transportation and distribution. The Bureau handles that for the crews. I don't see how a free-lance prospector could manage."

"That's my contact's problem, all I'm in this for is the credits. They say they can handle everything else, and I believe them."

"The original rugged individualist, huh? Unfortunately you're working with obsolete philosophies. Mars isn't the frontier that Earth was in the Nineteenth Century. Teamwork is what counts, now."

"That's OK by me, Norah. Teamwork is just fine, so long as I'm the captain of the team. That's the only safe position. It's a lot easier to step on a cat on the ground, than knock him out of a tree. And that's where I want to be, up in that tree . . . the power tree!"

The buggy dashed off the ramp with a bounding leap that caused the tubular body to bounce on the wire wheels as if they were springs. It sped across a wide fan of sediment into a huge grotto whose floor was a smooth, white blanket of salt. The individual crystals sparkled in the lamp glare like a graveyard of fallen stars.

"Jeanne, slow down!" Norah shouted anxiously.

But it was already too late. The buggy entered what seemed to be a wide pool of shiny tar. It lurched to a stop, its stern hanging free over the salt, just as the tar began to contract, balling up into a towering mass. Norah screamed.

8.

Paul Culkin fired off the laser again. A pinpoint-sized spot on the cavern wall glowed white, then crumbled into ash. "More oil shale," he reported, making a notation on the rough chart. "Air's full of ammonia. Trace of water vapor, too. Probably getting close to the mantle. Is Sheldon still trying to convince the circuit agent from the Bureau to have a pilot heat exchange engine installed in one of the deep galleries?"

McCormick cursed as his helmet rang against the low ceiling. "Yes. The settlement's already got the water, buried deep. All we need now to expand is a dependable power source."

"Maybe Jeanne will want to stay, then."

"Don't count on it. She'll hang around until she builds up enough credits to leave, then skip off like a wind demon. Her driving purpose in life is physical comfort. She's not a builder, just an exploiter."

"Maybe not," Culkin insisted stubbornly. "Last night I explained how the Bureau serves as a planetwide clearing house for construction and settlement planning. How it finances exploration and mining ventures."

"I know, she told me about it."

McCormick laughed for the first time since the patrol began. "She sounded disillusioned. Told me that the

only people on Earth who swallow the official government line are in subsidized homes eating soymush with rubber spoons. Said the joint assets accounts were just a communistic scheme developed by the Bureau to keep the masses poor and laboring."

The buggy began to climb over a low mound of rubble that had fallen from the ceiling.

"Speed up, Tom!" Culkin shouted suddenly. ,

The buggy sputtered ahead as McCormick twisted the throttle.

"Good. Now let me take over steering."

The biologist complied without question. The buggy began to creep backward.

"What's the matter?"

"Something grabbed at us as we went by ... There it is. I've got the spot on it. Looks like a blob of black jelly. The tentacle is still contracting. Must have a slow metabolism like the sand spiders.

"It looks like a length of black string, but it's potent! Ate a long streak through the Teflon hull coating, all the way down to the steel."

McCormick twisted on the couch, straining to see the dark shape bathed by the harsh glare of the spot. It seemed to have no definite form. Tentacles were budding out at random all over its exterior, their tips inching caterpillar-fashion over the stone. One such tentacle was crawling toward the buggy. It paused atop a ledge, swelled up like a child's balloon, then darted toward the hull like a tiny, ineffective jet-propelled projectile. The lump of flabby flesh impacted on the cave floor a meter away from one of the coiled-wire tires.

"That thing shouldn't be alive this deep," McCormick said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we dare analyze it. I'd hate to sacrifice it, then discover that it was the only specimen of its kind."

Culkin sent the spot leaping across the stony arch of the ceiling and down the opposite wall. He laughed suddenly. "We're in luck. There's a second one ... up on that ledge. See it?"

"Yeah. Hit the big one with the laser and let the computer chew on the data for a while."

The needle of coherent light stabbed into the first blob and the creature flashed at once into greasy black smoke. A cracking mass of glowing carbon was left behind. Culkin hummed atonally as he waited for the read-out.

"Here it comes," he started to say, but he was not to finish.

McCormick jumped as the emergency call light began to pulse scarlet.

"What?" he demanded sharply.

"Tom, Norah. We're in trouble . . . two kilometers along the lower gallery. Something has the buggy . . . can't see what . . . being up-ended . ." The noise of something falling came through the pick-up. "Jeanne, get out of here. MOVE!"

The transmission broke off abruptly, as if a sending antennae had been disabled. The last thing McCormick heard was Norah cussing like a spacejack.

The creature had no awareness, but it had been stimulated, and that stimulation had triggered off reflex loops from its ganglia. The unwieldy mass of protoplasm began to contract vigorously. Fibrous cords stretched painfully. Thermo-pods snapped as they were forced to expand beyond their tensile strength. Wisps of steam shot from the exposed tubes. The severed length of one thermopod jumped from its tube in a long streamer of dark jelly and splattered against the lofty ceiling of the grotto. Its exodus was followed by a small tendril of molten rock that raced across the salt a short distance, then froze into a gray rope of stone.

But the sacrifice of a few thermopods was minor when weighed against the mineral wealth of the object mired in the creature's soft mass. Ingestion began at once. Floods of smoking acid vomited forth, bathing the buggy. The wire wheels vanished at once, as if formed from spun sugar instead of high-grade steel.

10.
Brilliant lamps illuminated the interior of the gallery with flickering white fire as the buggy descended the silt ramp in a rush. It leveled out. The metal tires hummed as McCormick braked violently. The buggy shuddered and slid sideways, coming to a stop against a buttress of stone.

The figure continued its stumbling advance over the salt, its suit and helmet bright in the lamp glare. McCormick saw that the suit color was blue, not yellow, and knew joy. And guilt an instant later. He tore an emergency-pack down from its clips and opened the hatch, calling for Culkin to follow.

They met Norah ten meters on. The girl held a hand torch, and one shoulder of her suit bore a long, ragged burn. As McCormick daubed on sealer he tried to ignore the broken thermal webbing.

"Where's Jeanne?" Culkin demanded anxiously.

Norah didn't answer at first. Instead, she swung the torch beam around so that it pointed back the way she had come. It showed a vast, dark shape mounded on the salt. It sparkled like translucent jelly, and a bubble seemed to be forming on its dorsal surface, bringing to McCormick's mind the image of gas rising through thick crude oil.

The girl made a sound like a sob. "There," She said. "In there with the buggy."

11.

The creature accepted the feast of nutrients with mindless satisfaction. Then, as its immediate metabolic hungers were quenched, its feeding became more selective, for certain sensors were reporting the presence of a uniquely complex protoplasmic structure, no simple insectoid this time, but a rich template of new structures, and new behaviors.

The acids did their work swiftly, stripping away cell walls, disassembling alien protoplasm into basic genetic components and protein molecules. The chemical investigation was painstaking in its thoroughness. Nothing was destroyed, instead it was copied. The creature began to modify its own structure, drawing massive amounts of energy from the rock through its thermopods. A new form began to grow, cell by cell, organ by organ. Abruptly awareness burst upon it like a dawning sun. And with the awareness came the memories, alien thoughts. The creature had conquered, and yet in conquering, it had lost itself to its prey. For the first time the creature "looked" upon its grotto and knew where and what it was.

12.

Norah screamed and took a panicky step backwards. She bumped into McCormick and he seized her automatically in his arms without thinking. What loomed above them banished thought.

"God!" Norah hissed. "What is that horror?"

McCormick did not answer. The hideous excrescence budding from the central mass of the blob glistened with an evil sheen in the torch-light. Iridescent colors swam crazily as the figure pulsed from within. This added to its dread aspect, for from the waist up it was a perfect reproduction of Jeanne Alexander, like a nude statue carved from flawless, jet-black obsidian. The hips and legs were still forming, their detail crude, but sharpening with each passing moment. The upper parts of the figure were stunningly accurate, though, exact even to individual eyelashes and stray strands of hair. Were it not for the monochrome tint, and the huge size—the figure was nearly twenty meters tall already—it might have been easily mistaken for the girl herself. At the moment the shapely mouth was even working in slow pulsations that were a horrible parody of speech.

Norah screamed hysterically. The figure had seen Paul, and it appeared to recognize him, for it bent toward the cowering geologist, the huge arms reaching out.

"P-P-A-U-L-L-L!" The deafening shout was hardly recognizable, being more like a drawn-out, modulated groan, than a true voice. Then the ebony shape swayed unsteadily and tried to take a step forward. But its misshapen feet and legs would not leave the salt.

"Jeanne!" Paul Culkin shouted suddenly, his eyes wild. He tried to run toward the groping arms, but McCormick seized his arm and pulled him back, with Norah's help. The geologist struggled all the while, but they retreated, shambling backward toward the buggy, whose lights glowed steadily in the darkness of the grotto like the last gleamings of sanity in a world gone mad.

Norah was babbling by the time they reached the open hatch and shoved Culkin inside.

"Go around to the rear and open the center hatchway," McCormick ordered sharply. When Norah didn't reply he shook her violently and repeated the command. This time she nodded weakly and hurried off.

Soon he was passing Culkin back through the center bulkhead, making room so that he could get to the buggy controls. "Take care of him," he told the girl, at last, and squirmed around until he faced the port. Carefully he closed the hatch, then started up the buggy and turned it, spinning the wheel so sharply that the vehicle rose up on its port tires and almost rolled over on the salt. Then he shot for the distant ramp at half acceleration.

Behind, in the mirrors, he could see the giant figure leaning after them, striving to lift its huge feet and failing; its voice thundering off the grotto walls until the entire chamber rang like a vast bell with a voice of pure anguish.

It was too much. With a tiny cry of fear McCormick leaned on the throttle control and the buggy began to whine under full acceleration, heading for the surface . . . and sanity.

They were gone! Jeanne Alexander watched the last pale gleam of light go dim and vanish. Darkness swallowed up the grotto, a darkness tinged with red, for the salt and lower walls were alive with infrared radiation. Once again the girl tried to move. Her right foot lifted slightly this time. Cords tore and she felt a brief twinge of pain, but with the pain came relief. She wasn't trapped in the salt! That had been her greatest fear.

She swayed with the struggle to free her left foot. It lifted sluggishly. The binding cords snapped abruptly,

and a plume of steaming lava squirted up through one of the deep channels bored through the salt. The scant alien memories in her brain identified the cords as thermopods, and the paired image of a dielectric heat engine swelled in her mind. They were necessary to life. Without them she would lapse into unconsciousness and die, for her mass was far too great, her brain far too demanding of energy for her to be able to subsist in the old ways. The feast of the buggy had presented her with a rich store of energy, that which had been trapped in its powercells, but now she would have to find an alternative to the thermopods . . . and quickly if she wished to live.

Did she? Of course! It was a foolish question.

Carefully, haltingly, as if a newborn, she began to totter massively toward the ramp. Beyond it lay the surface, the sun, but most importantly, her own kind.

Paul had tried to come to her, she had seen that. But McCormick, damn him, had stopped the boy. Well, she'd fix him, and that catty little Norah as well. At the moment she felt chipper enough to take on the entire Noctis Lacus settlement, and as she began to stride up the steep incline of the ramp her lips tightened purposefully. There was a whole planet over her head; a rich red ball hanging temptingly in space like an apple. Maybe it was time she took a bite out of it!