

Nomad

By WESLEY LONG

Nomad

I.

Guy Maynard left the Bureau of Exploration Building at Sahara Base and walked right into trouble. It came more or less of a surprise; not the trouble as a condition but the manner and place of its coming was the shocking quality. Guy Maynard was used to trouble but like all men who hold commissions in the Terran Space Patrol, he was used to trouble in the proper places and in the proper doses.



But to find trouble in the middle of Sahara Base was definitely stunning. Sahara Base was as restricted an area as had ever been guarded and yet trouble had come for Guy.

The trouble was a MacMillan held in the clawlike hand of a Martian. The bad business end was dead-center for the pit of Guy's stomach and the steadiness of the weapon's aim indicated that the Martian who held the opposite end of the ugly weapon knew his MacMillans.

Maynard's stomach crawled, not because of the aim on said midriff, but at the idea of a MacMillan being aimed at any portion of the anatomy. His mind raced through several possibilities as he recalled previous mental theories on what he would do if and when such a thing happened.

In his mind's eye, Guy Maynard had met MacMillan-holding Martians before and in that mental playlet, Guy had gone into swift action using his physical prowess to best the weapon-holding enemy. In all of his thoughts, Guy had succeeded in erasing the menace though at one time it ended in death to the enemy and at other times Guy had used the enemy's own weapon to march him swiftly to the Intelligence Bureau for questioning. The latter always resulted in the uncovering of some malignant plot for which Maynard received plaudits, decorations, and an increase in rank.

Now Guy Maynard was no youngster. He was twenty-four, and well educated. He had seen action before this and had come through the Martio-Terran incident unscathed. Openly he admitted that he had been lucky during those weeks of trouble but in his own mind, Maynard secretly believed that it was his ability and his brain that brought him through without a scratch.

His dreaming of action above and beyond the call of duty was normal for any young man of intelligence and imagination.

But as his mind raced on and on, it also came to the conclusion that the law of survival was higher than the desire to die for a theory.

Therefore it was with inward sickness that Guy Maynard stopped short on the sidewalk before the Bureau of Exploration Building and did nothing. He did not look around because the fact that this Martian was able to stand before him in Sahara Base with a MacMillan pointed at his stomach was evidence enough that they were alone on the street. Had anyone seen them, the Martian would have been literally torn to bits by the semi-permanent MacMillan mounts that lined the roof tops.

The Martian had everything his own way, and so Maynard waited. It was the Martian's move.

"Guy Maynard?"

Maynard did not feel that such an unnecessary question required an answer. The Martian would not have been menacing him if he hadn't known whom he wanted.



"Guy Maynard, I advise that you do nothing," said the Martian. His voice was flat and metallic like all Martian voices, and the sharply-chiseled features were expressionless as are all Martian faces. "You are to come with me," finished the Martian needlessly. He had not concluded the last bit of information when invisible tractor beams lashed down and caught the pair in their field of focus and lifted them straight up.

The velocity was terrific, and the only thing that saved them suffocation in the extreme upper stratosphere was the entrapped air that went along with the field of focus.

The sky went dark and the stars winked in the same sky as the flaming sun.

And then they entered the space lock of an almost invisible spaceship. The door slammed behind them and air rushed into the confines of the lock just as the tractors were snuffed.

Maynard arose from the floor to face once more that rigidly held MacMillan. Before he could move, the door behind him flashed open and three Martians swarmed in upon him and trussed him with straps. They carried him to a small room and strapped him to a surgeon's table.

The one with the MacMillan holstered the weapon as the ship started off at 3-G.

"Now, Guy Maynard, we may talk."

Maynard glared.

"It is regrettable that this should be necessary," apologized the Martian. "I am Kregon. Your being restrained is but a physical necessity; I happen to know that you are the match for any two of us. Therefore we have strapped you down until we have had a chance to speak our mind. After which you may be freed—depending upon your reception of the proposition we have to offer."

Maynard merely waited. It was very unsatisfactory, this glaring, for the Martian went on as though Maynard were beaming in glee and anxiously awaiting for the "Proposition." He recalled training which indicated that the first thing to do when confronted by captors is to remain silent at all cost. To merely admit that your name was correctly expressed by the captor was to break the ice. Once the verbal ice was broken, the more leading information was easier to extract; a dead and stony silence was hard to break.

"Guy Maynard, we would like to know where the *Orionad* is," said Kregon. "We have here fifty thousand reasons why you should tell. Fifty thousand, silver-backed reasons, legal for trade in any part of the inhabited Solar System and possibly some not-inhabited places."

No answer.

"You know where the *Orionad* is," went on Kregon. "You are the aide to Space Marshal Greggor of the Bureau of Exploration who sent the *Orionad* off on her present mission. The orders were secret, that we know. We want to know those orders."

No answer.

"We of Mars feel that the *Orionad* may be operating against the best interests of Mars. Your continued silence is enhancing that belief. Could it be that we have captured the first prisoner in a new Terra-Martian fracas? Or if the *Orionad* is not operating against Mars, I can see no reason for continued silence on your part."

No answer, though Maynard knew that the *Orionad* was not menacing anything Martian. He realized the trap they were laying for him and since he could not avoid it, he walked into it.

Kregon paused. Then he started off on a new track. "You are probably immunized against iso-dinilamine. Most officials are, and their aides are also, especially the aide to such an important official as Space Marshal Greggor. That is too bad, Guy Maynard. Terra is still behind the times. Haven't they heard that the immunization given by anti-lamine is good except when anti-lamine is decomposed by a low voltage, low frequency electric current? They must know that," said Kregon with as close to a smile as any

Martian could get. It was also cynically inclined. "After all, it was Dr. Frederick of the Terran Medical Corps who discovered it."

Maynard knew what was coming and he wanted desperately to squirm and wriggle enough to scratch his spine. The little beads of sweat that had come along his backbone at Kregon's cool explanation were beginning to itch. But he controlled the impulse.

"We are not given to torture," explained the Martian. "Otherwise we could devise something definitely tongue-loosening. For instance, we could have you observe some surgical experiments on—say—Laura Greggor."

The beads of sweat broke out over Maynard's face. It was a harsh thought and very close to home. And yet there was a separate section of his mind that told him that Laura would undergo that treatment without talking and that he would have to suffer mentally while he watched, because she would hold nothing but contempt for a man who would talk to save her from what she would go through herself. He wondered whether they had Laura Greggor already and were going to do as they said. That was a hard thing to reason out. He feared that he would speak freely to save Laura disfigurement and torture; knowing as he spoke that Laura would forever afterward hate him for being a weakling. Did they have her—?

"Unfortunately for us, we have not had the opportunity of getting the daughter of the Space Marshal. But there are other things. They are far superior, too. I was against the torture method just described because I know that Mars would never have peace again if we destroyed the daughter of Space Marshal Greggor. Your disappearance will be explained by evidence. A wrecked spaceship

or flier, will take care of the question of Guy Maynard, whereas Laura Greggor is forbidden to travel in military vehicles."

Kregon turned and called through the open door. His confederates came with a portable cart upon which was an equipment case, complete with plug-in cords, electrodes, and controls.

"You will find that low frequency, low voltage electricity is very excruciating. It will not kill nor maim nor impair. But it will offer you an insight on the torture of the damned. Ultimately, we will have decomposed the anti-lamine in your system and then you will speak freely under the influence of iso-dinilamine. Oh yes, Guy Maynard, we will give you respite. The current will be turned off periodically. Five minutes on and five minutes off. This is in order for you to rest."

"—*to rest!*" said Maynard's mind. Irony. For the mind would count the seconds during the five free minutes, awaiting with horror the next period of current. And during the five minutes of electrical horror, the mind would be counting the seconds that remain before the period of quiet, knowing that the peaceful period only preceded more torture.

Kregon's helpers tied electrodes to feet, hands, and the back of his head. Then Kregon approached with a syringe and with an apologetic gesture slid the needle into Maynard's arm and discharged the hypodermic.



"Now," he asked, "before we start this painful process, would you care to do this the easy way? After all, Maynard, we are going to have the answer anyway. For your own sake, why not give it without pain. That offer of fifty thousand solars will be withdrawn upon the instant that the switch is closed."

Maynard glared and broke his silence. "And have to go through it anyway? Just so that you will be certain that I'm not lying? No!"

Kregon shook his head. "That possibility hadn't really occurred to us. You aren't that kind of man, Maynard. I think that the best kind of individual is the man who knows when to tell a lie and when not to tell. Too bad that you will never have the opportunity of trying that philosophy, but I think it best for the individual, though often not best for society in general. Accept the apology of a warrior, Guy Maynard, that this is necessary, and try to understand that if the cases were reversed, you would be in my place and I in yours. I salute you and say good-bye with regrets."

Maynard strained against the straps in futility. He felt that sense of failure overwhelm him again, and he fought against his fate in spite of the fact that there was nothing he could do about it. Another man would have resigned himself, realizing futility when it presented itself, and possibly would have made some sort of prayer. But Guy Maynard fought—

And the surge of low frequency, low voltage electricity raced into his body, removing everything but the torture of jerking muscle and the pain of twitching nerves. It was terrible torture. He felt that he could count each reversal of the low frequency, and yet he could do nothing of his own free will. The clock upon the wall danced before his jerking eyeballs so that he could not see the hands no matter how hard he tried. Ironically, it was a Martian clock and not calibrated into Terran time; it would have had no bearing on the five-minute periods of sheer hell.

Ben Williamson raced across the sand of Sahara Base, raising a curling cloud of dust behind him. The little command car rocketed and careened as Williamson approached his destroyer, and then the long, curling cloud of dust took on the appearance of a huge exclamation point as the brakes locked and the command car slid to a stop beside the space lock. Williamson leaped from the command car and inside with three long strides.

He caught the auxiliary switch on his way past, and the space lock whirled shut. "Executive to pilot," he yelled. "Take her up at six."

The floor surged, throwing Williamson to his knees. Defiantly, Ben crawled to the executive's chair and rolled into the padded, body-supporting seat. He lay there for some seconds, breathing heavily. Then from the communicator there came the query:

"Pilot to executive: Received. What's doing?"

"Executive to crew: Martian of the *Mardinex* class snatched Guy Maynard on a tractor. We're to pursue and destroy."

"Golly!" breathed the pilot. "Maynard!"

"That's right," said Williamson. "They grabbed him right in front of the BuEx and that's that."

"But to destroy them—?"

"We're running under TSI orders, you know," reminded Williamson.

"Yeah, I know. But killing off one of our own people doesn't sound good to me. Makes me feel like a murderer."

"I know," said Ben. "But remember, Maynard was grabbed by a Martian. Being an aide to Greggor, he was filled to the eyebrows with anti-lamine. That means the electro-treatment for him, plus a good shot of iso-dinilamine. All we're doing is giving peace to a man who is suffering the tortures of hell. After all, would any of you care to go on living after that combination was finished?"

"No, I guess not. Must be worse than death not to have a mind."

"What's worse is what happens. You haven't a mind—and yet you have enough mind to realize that fact. Strange psychological tangle, but there it is. Tough as it is, we've got to go through with it."

"They're after some information on the *Orionad*?"

"Probably. That's why we're taking out after them. It's the only reason why Guy Maynard was covered under the TSI order."

"Too bad," said the pilot.

"It is," agreed Williamson. "But—prepare for action. Check all ordnance."

It was almost an hour later that the communicator buzzed again. "Observer to executive: Martian of *Mardinex* class spotted."

"Certain identification?"

"Only from the cardex file. Can't see her yet, but the spotters have picked up a ship having the characteristics of the *Mardinex* class. It's the *Mardinex* herself, Ben, because she's the only one left in that class. Old tub, not much good for anything except a fool's errand like this."

"Turretman to executive: Have we got a chance, tackling a first-line ship like the *Mardinex* in a destroyer?"

"Only one chance. They probably didn't staff it too well. On an abortive attempt like this, they'd put only those men they could afford to lose aboard. Probably a skeleton crew. Also the knowledge that detection meant extermination, therefore go fast and light and as frugal as possible on crewmen. That's our one chance."

"One more chance," interrupted the technician. "We have the drive pattern of the *Mardinex* in the cardex. We can bollix their drive. That's one more item in our favor."

"Right," said Ben. "What's our velocity with respect to theirs?"

"Forty miles per second."

"Tim, launch two torpedoes immediately. Pete, continue course above *Mardinex* and cross their apex at two hundred miles. Tim, as we cross their apex, drop a case of interferers. Once that is done, Pete, drop back and give Tim a chance to say hello with the AutoMacs."

"Giving them the whole thing at once?"

"Yes. And one thing more, Jimmy?"

"Technician to executive," answered Jimmy. "I'm here."

"Can you rig your drive-pattern interferer?"

"In about a minute. I've been setting up the constants from the cardex file."

"And hoping they've not been changed?" asked Ben with a smile.

"Right."

The little destroyer lurched imperceptibly as the torpedoes were launched, and then continued on its course a hundred miles to the south of the Martian ship, passing quickly above the *Mardinex* and across the apex of the Martian's nose. The turretmán was busy for several seconds dropping his case of interferers from the discharge lock. The little metal boxes spread out in space and began to emit signals.

Then the destroyer dropped back, and from the turret there came the angry buzz of the AutoMacs. On the driving fin of the *Mardinex* appeared an incandescent spot that grew quickly and trailed a fine line of luminous gas behind it. Then the turrets of the *Mardinex* whipped around and Tim shouted: "Look out!"

His shout was not soon enough. On the turret of the Martian ship there appeared two spots of light that were just above the threshold of vision against the black sky. The destroyer bucked dangerously, and the acceleration fell sharply.

"Hulled us."

On the pilot's panel there appeared a number of winking pilot lights. "We'll get along," said he, studying the lights and interpreting their warning.

"Got him!" said the turretman. The top turret of the *Mardinex* erupted in a flare of white flame blown outward by the air inside of the ship.

"Can we catch him for another shot?" asked Ben pleadingly.

"Not a chance," answered Pete. "We're out of this fight."

"No, we're not," said Ben. "Look!"

Before the *Mardinex* there began to erupt a myriad of tiny, winking spots. The meteor spotting equipment and projectile intercepting equipment were flashing the interferers one after the other with huge bolts from the secondary battery of the *Mardinex*.

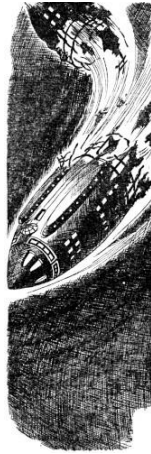
Ben counted the flashes and then asked the technician: "How many spotters has the *Mardinex*?"

"Thirty."

"Good. The torps have a chance then." The nonradiating torpedoes would be ignored by the spotting equipment since the emission of the interferers made them appear gigantic and dangerously close to the nonthinking equipment. The torpedoes, on the other hand,

would be approaching the *Mardinex* from below and slowly enough to be considered not dangerous to the integrating equipment. If they arrived before the spotting circuits destroyed the entire case of interferers—

The lower dome of the *Mardinex* suddenly sported a jagged hole. And almost immediately there was a flash of explosive inside of the lower portion of the Martian ship. The lower observation dome split like a cracked egg, and the glass shattered and flew out. Portholes blew out in long streamers of fire around the lower third of the *Mardinex* and a series of shattering cracks started up the flank of the ship.



"There goes number two—a clean miss," swore Ben.

"Number one did a fine job."

"I know but—"

"This'll polish 'em off," came Jimmy's voice. "Here goes the drive scrambler."

"Hey! No—!" started Ben, but the whining of the generators and the dimming of the lights told him he was too late.

The *Mardinex* staggered and then leaped forward until six full gravities. Bits of broken hull and fractured insides trailed out behind the *Mardinex* as the derelict's added acceleration tore them loose. Within seconds, the stricken Martian warship was out of the sight of the Terrans.

"No reprimand, Jimmy," said Ben Williamson soberly. "I did hope to recover Guy's body."

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