

THE GREAT DOME ON MERCURY
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Words: 1015

In the meantime Thomas' helpless journey had come to an end. After an interminable descent in what to him had been pitch darkness, the giant who was carrying him halted. Darl had heard the whistling inrush of air into some lock, then the clanging of a door. He felt himself hurled to the ground. Fumbling hands tugged at him, drew off his space suit.

The dim light of the cavern, as the helmet was dragged from his head, hurt Darl's eyes. Salt sweat stung them. It was hot, hotter than the Dome, hot as it was in the surta mine, where only the nerveless Venusians could work for any length of time.

Darl struggled to focus his eyes on a blurred blue form that towered above him. He felt sharp claws scratch at him and realized that cords were being passed around his limp body. They cut tightly into his legs and his arms. Then he was staring at a tube in the hand of his captor. Its end glowed with a brilliant purple light, and he felt a flood of reawakened energy warm him. His head jerked up, he strained against the taut, strong fibers binding him. The paralysis was gone, but he was still helpless.

A husky, rumbling voice broke the silence. "I wouldn't struggle, Earthman, if I were you. Even should you get free I still have my ray-tube. And my little friends would ask nothing better than your body to play with."

Darl writhed to a sitting posture. Now he could see his mysterious abductor clearly. This eight-foot, blue-feathered individual, with curved beak and beady eyes glittering from his naked, repulsively wrinkled head, was a Martian! Despite the human shape of his body, despite his jointed limbs and thumbed hands, this denizen of the red planet resembled a vulture far more than he did any other Earth creature.

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The Earthman's pride of race came to his rescue. "What's the game?" he growled. "Looking for trouble?" There was nothing in Darl's voice to show the fear that chilled him. Behind the Martian he could see vaguely a group of little yellow Mercurians.

"I'll ask all the questions here. And you'll answer them, too, if you're wise. Even your dull mind should comprehend that you are in my power."

Darl decided to proceed more cautiously. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

"I want," the Martian answered, "the recognition signal of Earth's space-ships."

"What!" The ejaculation burst from Darl's throat. This alien wanted the secret code, the watch-word that distinguished Earth's space ships, that gained for them free admittance to ITA's armed posts on the outer planets! This could mean only one thing, that the long rivalry, the ancient dispute

between Earth and Mars was about to flare into open war. Any friendly visit from a foreign flier would be heralded by word from M-I-T-A. Thomas' face became a stony mask, covering the tumult of his mind.

"You understood. I want the Earth recognition signal at once—and after that, the surrender of the Dome." The very calmness of the husky tones was a threat.

"Never!"

"I warn you, Darl Thomas. It would be the better part of wisdom for you to yield willingly what I ask. You will give in eventually, and the means of persuasion I shall use will not be exactly--pleasant."

"You'll get nothing from me!"

The outlander's lidless eyes were filmed with a gray membrane. His head thrust forward, the feathered ruff beneath it bristled. Darl braced himself to withstand the swooping pounce that seemed imminent, the slash of the sharp beak. A burring rattle broke the momentary hush. The Martian relaxed, turned to the Mercurian from whom the sound had come and replied with staccato vibrance.

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As the cave filled with a whirring tumult Darl had a chance to examine the Mercurian natives crowding around his prostrate body. They were little

yellow midgets, ranging from eighteen inches to two feet in height. Half of their small stature was taken up by snouted heads, with saucer-like, crimson eyes, and long white tusks jutting from foam-flecked mouths. The trunks were globular. The spindling legs and thin arms ended in sharp claws. There was an impression of animal ferocity about these tiny beings that stamped them as utter savages.

His captor was speaking to the Earthman again, his horny beak parted in what might have been a grim smile. "My friends remind me that I promised you to them. They have not forgotten how you and your fellows drove them from their burrows."

Darl was suddenly cold, though the sweat still streamed from his bound body. An uncontrollable shudder took him as he saw what the diminutive claws of the midgets held. While the Dome was still an unfinished framework one of the Terrestrial artisans had somehow been isolated from his fellows. Thomas had been of the party that found what was left of him, and the memory was still a throbbing nightmare.

"Once more! Will you give me the recognition signal?"

Darl shook his head, and prayed for sudden death. The Martian spoke to the dwarfs. They started forward, saliva drooling from their tusks. Darl gritted his teeth. He would hold out as long as was humanly possible.