

# PLANET STORIES



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In the dim Water Temple, where the dead grinned down on the dead, Hale met his D-day. Should he give an ex-comrade to the torturing Lhrai or chance the massacre of Terrestrial thousands?



*"I know," Randy said, "I was waiting for that," and he brought the gun down in a calculated arc.*

# VENGEANCE ON MARS!

by D. B. LEWIS

**H**ALE CUT THE MOTOR AS HE swerved off the ancient plastic roadway. His one-man beetle thumped over the shoulder and, wheels whispering, coasted down the sandy, moonlit slope. It threaded between mighty *linla* cacti that had the size and shape of spaceships towering

grey in the night. He braked it to a slanting stop and got out, a big, long-legged man who carefully kept the little car between himself and the Martian water-temple that sat a short distance away where the dunes of the desert began. He thought, Strange to be afraid of getting

shot by Randy.

Weiss said, from the shadows, "Better get out of the moonlight, Hale. That beetle won't stop a blaster bolt."

Hale crossed to the clot of men that made dark blurs under the *linla*. Weiss said, "What took you so long?"

Hale said, "I had to get my gun recharged. Sturm was working on it when Sam came busting in the shop and told me you'd cornered Randy." He touched the blaster at his belt, then brought up the hand to get out a cigarette from his jacket pocket. He struck a match on the blaster butt. "Why call me? Why not call the Patrol?"

Someone stirred in the darkness, clearing a throat. "Patrol never hung a looter yet and as long as Boss Ricco kicks back to Patrol brass, they never will. This one, we'll take care of personally. The redboys want him."

OVER the cupped match flame, Hale sent a hard glance in the direction of the voice. "Eight, ten men aren't enough."

Weiss said placatingly, "We were tipped that he'd try this temple. We were waiting for him, but he got past us. First thing we knew, he killed the guardian inside. We heard the shot. We called on him to surrender, but hell, he knows what the redboys will do to him if we get him alive."

Hale said again, "Why call me?"

"You know these old water-temples. One narrow entrance, no windows. He can't get out, that's for sure, but we can't get at him without losing a lot of men." Weiss put a hand on Hale's arm, and Hale moved impatiently and Weiss took it away, saying, "You know Randy better'n any of us."

"We came to Mars together," said Hale. "We worked our way out on the same crate. We started our farm, but Randy didn't stick. He said there was always easy money on a frontier, and Mars shouldn't be any different. Said he preferred four ladies to a hoe."

"He should've stuck to cards," said the man who had cleared his throat.

George Weiss said, firmly, "We want you to go in and talk to him. You were

his best friend. He'll listen to you. Tell him it's no use."

Hale said, "That's what I figured." He turned to look at the temple, squat and white in the gloom. The doorway was tall and thin and dead black, and behind it, part of the blackness, was Randy and his gun. And he'd be desperate. As Hale turned back he caught a faint, acrid odor, and he knew that a Martian was nearby, crouching, waiting to see that this was done right.

"There've been a hundred temples stripped of their twin-stones in the past year," Weiss said. "Our redboys are getting fed up with it. The C. A.'s too busy whipping the climate to tend to looters, and the Patrol buys its liquor and mammas with loot money. Half the law is too damned busy, and the other half's crooked—and we're in the middle. The redboys have run out of patience."

Hale nodded. "My own redboys are ready to go on the warpath. Okay. So Randy's the goat elect. So relax and starve him out."

"They want him tonight. We promised —"

"All right, go keep it. Hell, I didn't promise anything. Damned if I'll risk my neck to—"

"—promised to deliver," Weiss went on flatly, "bacuse we had to. We're in a nut-cracker, Hale. The *Ihrai* priests are set to trigger another Green Spot unless they get Randy to play with. Deadline's dawn."

Hale remembered Green Spot. It was a bloody, terrible memory. Green Spot had been one of the earliest and largest farm-settlements on Mars. One night, for some other-worldly reason that the Colonial Authority was still puzzling about, the Martian workers had slit two hundred Terrestrial throats and vanished into the red desert. The *Ihrai* priests had conveyed regrets, assuring the Authority at the same time that there had been adequate provocation for the act. And the Authority, horrified for its sixty thousand colonists, had admitted that there must have been.

Hale thought back, in conflicting terms of personal friendship and unit survival. These men in the shadows; most of them were his friends. He had worked with

them, leaning on hoes in the fields or sitting in the enclosed warmth of a back porch discussing the perversities of Martian geochemistry. He had helled around Firstport with them, had often led them in the helling. His wife was the friend of their wives. While Randy—

Randy was five years ago. Randy was thirty acres of crops dumped in Hale's lap when they'd needed working. Randy was a bitter girl named Susan who waited on tables in New Chicago halfway across Mars, and the son he never cared that he'd given her before he went away.

"Wait here," said Hale in a sour voice, and tossed away his cigarette. "I'll see what I can do."

**T**HE TEMPLE was hexagonal, featureless save for the black slit of the doorway, smooth native marble gleaming under Phobos' dim silver.

He stopped a few feet away and called, "Randy, it's me. Hale. Don't shoot. I'm coming in to talk to you."

Randy's voice, soft and oddly echoed by the temple walls, floated from the black slit. "Come on in, Hale. I won a bet with myself, that they'd holler for you."

Hale walked on, slowly, one hand brushing his blaster butt at each step. Again the sensation of strangeness, of wrongness, that he should be afraid of being shot by Randy. Five years ago Randy had been a lean, fox-eyed kid, inclined to be touchy, but no hard-case. But after five years in the excrement canal-towns, the smoke-filled dives where a coin on the bar bought a drink or a drug and, more covertly tendered, a life—five years in a sour pool, floating with the scums that even fresh water collects when it settles—and now, a looting and a killing—

Hale felt cold, and he was perspiring. The blaster was a solid weight on his thigh.

He reached the doorway and stood uncertainly, knowing the men behind him were watching him. Wondering if he'll kill me, he thought. Maybe he's turned into a ring-tailed killer. Kid, kid, why did you have to do it? Why didn't you get off Mars, like I told you to?

The hollow, echoed voice said, "Come on in. I wouldn't shoot you, Hale." But

the voice had a thin sound to it, and Hale thought, He might.

The doorway was about two feet across, in a wall six feet thick. Smooth marble rustled the leather at Hale's shoulders as he entered the thick blackness. Three paces, echoing, and his fingertips told him he had reached the interior. He felt with his feet, located the top of the shallow steps that every such temple contained—five steps down into a trench which had once held precious water, then three steps up to the temple floor. His bootheels rang sharply—five, two across the trench, three—then he stood in darkness, waiting.

Randy said, "You've gained some weight, Hale. Or is it the jacket?" Sort of amused, but with that same thin sound.

Hale said, "Both." He took a forward step, at an angle, and saw the faint flood of moonlight appear on the temple floor and knew that Randy could no longer see him. He said, "Weiss said to tell you it's no use."

"George's out there, eh? Thought I recognized his voice. I wonder who tipped them off. I've made some enemies along the canals, I suppose."

Startlingly, a match flamed in the blackness, became an orange glow that rose to the cigarette between Randy's lips. He was over near a wall, his gun in his other hand. He puffed hard and his face glowed masklike, his eyes seeking Hale.

Hale, blinking, saw that Randy hadn't changed much. He was still dark and slender, his brown eyes large and bright. But now his hair came down fully to the fur collar of his jacket, in the manner of the canal crowd. The movement that brought him to Hale's side was graceful.

"How many are they, Hale? Think I could break for it?"

Hale said, "It'd be quicker than the redboys."

Randy pulled in a hard breath. "My blaster's jammed. They could've nailed me any time they felt like it. It's been hell, waiting for that." He looked at the gun. The hand that held it was trembling.

Hale sighed. "I guess I could walk you out at gunpoint, then, but I don't want to do that. Come out with me on your own hook, Randy. You've played your four

queens till now, but you drew a bad hand tonight."

RANDY drew unsteadily on his cigarette. Hale, looking beyond, saw the dark mass near one wall that must be the guardian. The stain on the fur robe was black. The blind sockets in the skull of the *Lhari*, who sprawled batlike against the chanting wall, were black too.

"I didn't want to shoot the redboy." Randy slowly holstered the gun. "I slugged him, but he had a hard head. He came at me with a knife while I was prying the twin-stones out of the idol. Why couldn't he lay quiet? I never wanted to kill anybody." His eyes found Hale's in the gloom, and the brightness in them tonight was mostly fear. "You always said I ought to get off Mars. Last week, I decided to. But I didn't have any money, so I went to Ricco. He wouldn't trust me off-world with his money, but he said he had a tourist interested in a good set of twin-stones. He said there was five thousand in it for me. He said there was a good pair here, and—"

He stopped short, his young face hardening with shocking suddenness. "By the red gods, *Ricco!*" he ground out. "Of course—he tipped them off I'd be here. So he'd have me killed over a girl, damn his black soul." He spun away from Hale in a violent motion, his thin mouth feral with rage. Hale waited in the blackness and slowly Randy turned back. Carefully he flattened the cigarette his clenching fist had bruised. "Why didn't I think?" he almost whispered. "They told me he was after my skin—"

Hale started to say something, but Randy's hands were suddenly tight on Hale's arms, and his breath carried the taint of *inque* liquor to Hale's nostrils. "Hale, you've got to help me. I want to get off Mars. That was why I did it. It was my first mark. Oh, I've drifted the canals and chilled some decks, but this was my first mark—"

Hale said, "I came in to try to help, Randy. If you'll walk out with me, it'll be easier all around."

Randy shook his head fiercely. "Lord, you don't want them to turn me over to

the redboys, do you? The *lhrai* priests can peel a man and keep him alive for days—"

Uncomfortably, Hale said, "I couldn't help you if I wanted to. They're waiting outside."

Randy took breath through his teeth. "Just stay here. Let me walk out. They won't blast, thinking it's you. Is your beetle anywhere near the temple?"

"They're practically sitting on it."

"Then I can break for the desert. It's a good chance in the dark. I can cut up along Coprates to Freightport and—"

Hal said, "No, Randy."

Randy laughed softly, and the laugh had all the old familiar recklessness in it, but it couldn't hide the fear. "You will, Hale. I got into this mess trying to do what you always told me to—get a new start on some other clod. There are plenty of jobs on Venus. Maybe I can still stowaway to Venus. I swear that's where I'll go, if you'll only let me through that door."

"Venus has a skid-row, too."

"I'm through with it. So help me!"

"You killed that redboy."

"He tried to kill me. He knew I had a gun. What was I supposed to do? Only a redboy—"

Hale said slowly, "What about George and the others? I'll have to face them on this."

"They'll find you on the floor with a lump on your head. They'll never hold it against you." Randy spread his hands. "I'd rather you'd kill me—now—than take me out there for the redboys."

HALE felt baffled. It had been like this in the old days, Randy had always had his way. Coming to Mars in the first place had been Randy's idea, and he'd pressed it, and Hale had done well on Mars. Maybe Randy had a break coming. Hale thought, five years isn't such a long time, after all. He said tiredly, "All right. You can have your chance. Good luck. And I'll take those twin-stones, Randy."

Randy let out a long sigh and looked up at the roof of the temple, as if he could see far-off Venus in that thick blackness. He brought the glowing stones from a pocket. "Here's Phobos—here's Deimos," he

said wryly. "I thought maybe you'd forget."

They were heavy in Hale's hand. He said, "So long."

Randy said, "One more thing, friend," and there was an undefinable something in his voice. "I'll need a gun. You'll lend me yours, won't you? They'll think I took it." He reached over and slid Hale's blaster from his holster, and brought the glowing coal of his cigarette close to the dial on the butt. "Fully charged. Well, I may need every shot—" his eyes met Hale's, and that undefinable something was in them too—"for those meddling bastards outside. I owe them for tonight. Now—" He took a step toward Hale, hefting the gun and raising it to strike.

Without thought, with only a sick feeling all over, Hale stepped back. The twin-stones clicked on the floor at his feet. "Wait, Randy. You should've slugged me first. I don't think I want to let you go after all."

Randy's grin was frozen, and Hale now had a name for that something, a kind of shame. "I know," Randy said, "I was waiting for that," and he brought the gun down in a calculated arc.

Hale tried to duck, but Randy had the edge. The gun-barrel slammed into his temple. Agonized, he threw up an arm. It chopped against Randy's wrist, and fire and thunder erupted in the blackness. The gun clattered on stone and from somewhere came Randy's furious cursing, "Damn you, Hale, you did that! Now I'll never—" Then Hale was alone in the temple with his pain.

He heard the click of bootheels as Randy leaped over the trench, the hollow thudding

down the corridor doorway—then the shouts and the roar of blasters and the intolerable glare, a stark wavering white rectangle that washed across the floor from the doorway to flicker upon the stony wings and beast-face of *Lhrat*—and the spasmic scream of a man dissolved in flame.

He got to his feet and leaned wearily against the wall, face gaunted by pain, wondering if Randy had known only at the last how ruthless he had become. Life was cheap enough out here on a red world where red insects bred in your eyes and red beasts swallowed you and let their juices do the killing, and it took a good man to fight the alien fight. But when the wrong kind of man came along, it was a knife in the back and life had no price at all. That kind of man had to be reckoned on, Hale thought bleakly—the bad penny that wouldn't even go away, hard and shiny and newly made, like Randy—for values slipped in the rat-race that was any frontier, and the urge to prey, for profit, for power, lay close under a man's skin. Hale sighed. He had hoped for a while—but no; Randy's stamp had been the bloody stamp of the canals, and that stamp would sooner or later have cancelled out other lives, on Venus or wherever he took it.

Better now, Hale thought, than hunted down the years . . .

George Weiss said, from close by in the darkness, "We got him, Hale. Are you bad hurt?"

Hale pressed his temple, and said, "I'll get over it," and meant the pain in his head. Time would have to work to erase the deeper ache.

