

V0.8 HOW THE HEROES DIE

Only sheer ruthlessness could have taken him out of town Alive. The mob behind Carter hadn't tried to guard the Marsbuggies, since Carter would have needed too much time to take a buggy through the vehicular airlock. They could have caught him there, and they knew it. Some were guarding the personnel lock, hoping he'd try for that. He might have; for if he could have closed the one door in their faces and opened the next, the safeties would have protected him while he went through the third and fourth and outside. On the Marsbuggy he was trapped in the bubble.

There was room to drive around in. Less than half the prefab houses had been erected so far. The rest of the bubbletown's floor was flat fused sand, empty but for scattered piles of foam-plastic walls and ceilings and floors. But they'd get him eventually. Already they were starting up another buggy.

They never expected him to run his vehicle through the bubble wall.

The Marsbuggy tilted, then righted itself. A blast of breathing-air roared out around him, picked up a cloud of fine sand, and hurled it explosively away into the thin, poisoned atmosphere. Carter grinned as he looked behind him. They would die now, all of them. He was the only one wearing a pressure suit. In an hour he could come back and repair the rip in the bubble. He'd have to dream up a fancy story to tell when the next ship came . . .

Carter frowned. What were they

At least ten wind-harried men were wrestling with the wall of a prefab house. As Carter watched, they picked the wall up off the fused sand, balanced it almost upright, and let go. The foam-plastic wall rose into the wind and slapped hard against the bubble, over the ten-foot rip.

Carter stopped his buggy to see what would happen.

Nobody was dead. The air was not shrieking away but leaking away. Slowly, methodically, a line of men climbed into their suits and filed through the personnel lock to repair the bubble.

A buggy entered the vehicular lock. The third and last was starting to life. Carter turned his buggy and was off.

Top speed for a Marsbuggy is about twenty-five miles per hour. 'The buggy rides on three wide balloon-tired wheels, each mounted at the end of a five-foot arm. What those wheels can't go over, the buggy can generally hop over on the compressed-air jet mounted underneath. The motor and the compressor are both powered by a Litton battery holding a tenth as much energy as the original Hiroshima bomb.

Carter had been careful, as careful as he had had time for. He was carrying a full load of oxygen, twelve four-hour tanks in the air bin behind him, and an extra tank rested against his knees. His batteries were nearly full; he would be out of air long before his power ran low. When the other buggies gave up he could circle round and return to the bubble in the time his extra tank would give him.

His own buggy and the two behind him were the only such vehicles on Mars. At twenty-five miles per hour he fled, and at twenty-five miles per hour they followed. The closest was half a mile behind.

Carter turned on his radio.

He found the middle of a conversation. "-Can't afford it. One of you will have to come back. We could lose two of the buggies, but not all three."

That was Shute, the bubbletown's research director and sole military man. The next voice, deep and sarcastic, belonged to Rufus Doolittle, the biochemist. "What'll we do, flip a coin?"

"Let me go," the third voice said tightly. "I've got a stake in this."

Carter felt apprehension touch the nape of his neck.

"Okay, Alf. Good luck," said Rufus. "Good hunting," he added maliciously, as if he knew

Carter were listening.

"You concentrate on getting the bubble fixed. I'll see that Carter doesn't come back."

Behind Carter, the rearmost buggy swung in a wide loop toward town. The other came on. And it was driven by the linguist, Alf Harness.

Most of the bubble's dozen men were busy repairing the ten-foot rip with heaters and plastic sheeting. It would be a long job but an easy one, for by Shute's orders the bubble had been deflated. The transparent [sic] plastic had fallen in folds across the prefab houses, forming a series of interconnected tents. One could move about underneath with little difficulty.

Lieutenant-Major Michael Shute watched the men at work and decided they had things under control. He walked away like a soldier on parade, stooping as little as possible as he moved beneath the dropping folds.

He stopped and watched Gondot operating the airmaker. Gondot noticed him and spoke without looking up.

"Mayor, why'd you let Alf chase Carter alone?"

Shute accepted his nickname. "We couldn't lose both tractors."

"Why not just post them on guard duty for two days?"

"And what if Carter got through the guard? He must be determined to wreck the dome. He'd catch us with our pants down. Even if some of us got into suits, could we stand another rip in the bubble?"

Gondot reached to scratch his short beard. His fingertips rapped helmet plastic and he looked annoyed. "Maybe not. I can fill the bubble anytime you're ready, but then the airmaker'll be empty. We'll be almost out of tanked air by the time they finish mending that rip. Another'd finish us."

Shute nodded and turned away. All the air anyone could use- tons of nitrogen and oxygen-was right outside; but it was in the form of nitrogen dioxide gas. The -airmaker could convert it three times as fast as men could use it. But if Carter tore the dome again, that would be too slow.

But Carter wouldn't. Alf would see to that. The emergency was over-this time.

And so Lieutenant Major Shute could go back to worrying about the emergency's underlying causes.

His report on those causes had been finished a month ago. He

had reread it several times since, and always it had seemed complete and to the point. Yet he had the feeling it could be written better. He ought to make it as effective as possible. What he had to say could only be said once, and then his career would be over and his voice silenced.

Cousins had sold some fiction once, writing as a hobby. Perhaps he would help. But Shute was reluctant to involve anyone else in what amounted to his own rebellion.

Yet -he'd have to rewrite that report now, or at least add to it. Lew Harness was dead, murdered. John Carter would be dead within two days. All Shute's responsibility. All pertinent.

The decision wasn't urgent. It would be a month before Earth was in reach of the bubbletown's sending station.

Most of the asteroids spend most of their time between Mars and Jupiter, and it often happens that one of them crosses a planet where theretofore it had crossed only an orbit. There are asteroid craters all over Mars. Old eroded ones, sharp new ones, big ones, little ones, ragged and smooth ones. The bubbletown was at the center of a large, fairly recent crater four miles across: an enormous, poorly cast ashtray discarded on the reddish sand.

The buggies ran over cracked glass, avoiding the occasional tilted blocks, running uphill toward the broken rim. A sky the color of blood surrounded a tiny, brilliant sun set precisely at the zenith.

Inevitably Alf was getting closer. When they crossed the rim and started downhill they would pull apart. It was going to be a long chase.

Now was the time for regrets, if there ever was such a time. But Carter wasn't the type, and he had nothing to be ashamed of anyway. Lew Harness had needed to die; had as much as *asked* to die. Carter was only puzzled that his death should have provoked so violent a reaction. Could they all be-the way Lew had been? Unlikely. If he'd stayed and explained- They'd have torn him apart. Those vulpine faces, with the distended nostrils and the bared teeth!

And now he was being chased by one man. But that man was Lew's brother.

Here was the rim, and Alf was still well behind. Carter slowed as he went over, knowing that the way down would be rougher. He was just going over the edge when a rock ten yards away exploded in white fire.

Alf had a flare pistol.

Carter just stopped himself from scrambling out of the buggy to hide in the rocks. The buggy lurched downward and, like it or not, Carter had to forget his terror to keep the vehicle upright. The rubble around the crater's rim slowed him still further. Carter angled the buggy for the nearest rise of sloping sand. As he reached it, Alf came over the rim, a quarter-mile behind. His silhouette hesitated there against the bloody sky, and another flare exploded, blinding bright and terrifyingly close.

Then Carter was on the straightaway, rolling down sloping sand to a perfectly flat horizon.

The radio said, "Gonna be a long one, Jack."

Carter pushed to transmit. "Right. How many flares do you have left?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I won't. Not the way you're throwing them away."

Alf didn't answer. Carter left the radio band open, knowing that ultimately Alf must talk to the man he needed to kill.

The crater which was home dropped behind and was gone. Endless flat desert rose before the buggies, flowed under the oversized wheels and dropped behind. Gentle crescent dunes patterned the sand, but they were no barrier to a buggy. Once there was a Martian well. It stood all alone on the sand, a weathered cylindrical wall seven feet high and ten in circumference, made of cut diamond blocks. The wells, and the slanting script written deep into their "dedication blocks," were responsible for the town's presence on Mars. Since the only Martian ever found—a mummy centuries dead, at least—had exploded at the first contact with water, it was generally assumed that the wells were crematoriums. But it wasn't certain. Nothing was certain about Mars.

The radio maintained an eerie silence. Hours rolled past; the sun slid toward the deep red horizon, and still Alf did not speak. It was as if Alf had said everything there was to say to Jack Carter. And that was wrong! Alf should have needed to justify himself!

It was Carter who sighed and gave up. "You can't catch me, Alf"

"No but I can stay behind you as long as I need to."

"You can stay behind me just twenty-four hours. You've got , forty-eight

hours of air. I don't believe you'll kill yourself just to kill me."

¹⁴Don't count on it. But I won't need to. Noon tomorrow, you'll be chasing me. You need to breathe, just like I do."

"Watch this," said Carter. The O-tank resting against his knee was empty. He tipped it over the side and watched, it roll away.

"I had _____ said. He smiled in relief at his release

from that an extra tank, he damning

weight. "I can live four hours longer than

you

can. Want to turn back, Alf?"

"No."

"He's not worth it, Alf. He was nothing but a queer."

"Does that mean he's got to die?"

"It does if the son of a bitch propositions me. Maybe you're a little that way yourself?"

"No. And Lew wasn't queer till he came here. They should have sent half men, half women."

"Amen."

You know, lots of people get a little sick to their stomachs about homosexuals. I do myself, and it hurt to see it happening to Lew. But there's only one type who goes looking for 'em so he can beat up

on em.

Carter frowned.

Latents. Guys who think they might turn queer themselves if you gave 'em the opportunity.

They can't stand queers around because queers are temptation."

"You're just returning the compliment."

"Maybe."

Anyway, the town has enough problems without-things like that going on. This whole project could have been wrecked by someone like your brother."

"How bad do we need killers?"

"Pretty badly, this time." Suddenly Carter knew that he was now his own defense attorney. If he

could convince Alf that he shouldn't be executed,
he could convince the rest of them. If he couldn't-
then he must destroy the bubble, or die. He went on talking as persuasively as he knew how.
"You see, Alf, the town has two purposes. One is to find out if we can live in an environment
as hostile as this one. The other is to contact the Martians. Now there are just fifteen of us
in town-"
"Twelve. Thirteen when I get back."
"Fourteen if we both do. Okay. Each of us is more or less necessary to the functioning of the
town. But I'm needed in both fields. I'm the ecologist, Alf I not only have to keep the town
from dying from some sort of imbalance, I also have to figure out how the Martians live,
what they live on, how Martian life forms depend on each other. You see?"
"Sure. How 'bout Lew? Was he necessary?"
"We can get along without him. He was the radio man. At least a couple of us have training
enough to take over communications."
"You make me so happy. Doesn't the same go for you?"
Carter thought hard and fast. Yes, Gondot in particular could keep the town's life-support
system going with little help. But- "Not with the Martian ecology. There isn't-"
"There isn't any Martian ecology. Jack, has anyone ever found any life on Mars besides that
man-shaped mummy? You can't be an ecologist without something to make deductions
from. You've got nothing to investigate. So what good are you?"
Carter kept talking. He was still arguing as the sun dropped into the sea of sand and
darkness closed down with a snap. But he knew now it was no use. Alf's mind was closed.

By sunset the bubble was taut, and the tortured scream of incoming breathing-air had
dropped to a tired sigh. Lieutenant-Major Shute unfastened the clamps at his shoulders and
lifted his helmet, ready to jam it down fast if the air was too thin. It wasn't. He set the helmet
down and signaled thumbs-up to the men watching him.

Ritual. Those dozen men had known the air would be safe. But rituals had grown fast where
men worked in space, and the most rigid was that the man in charge fastened his helmet
last and unfastened it first. Now suits were being removed. Men moved about
their duties. Some moved toward the kitchen to clean up the vacuum-induced havoc so
Hurley could get dinner.

Shute stopped Lee Cousins as he went by. "Lee, could I see you a minute?"

"Sure, Mayor." Shute was "the Mayor" to all bubbletown.

"I want your help as a writer," said Shute. "I'm going to send in a quite controversial report
when we get within range of Earth, and I'd like you to help me make it convincing."

"Fine. Let's see it."

The ten streetlamps came on, dispelling the darkness which had fallen so suddenly. Shute
led the way to his prefab bungalow, unlocked the safe, and handed Cousins the manuscript.
Cousins hefted it. "Big," he said. "Might pay to cut it."

"By all means, if you can find anything unnecessary."

"I'll bet I can," Cousins grinned. He dropped on the bed and began to read.

Ten minutes later he asked, "Just what is the incidence of homosexuality in the Navy?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Then it's not powerful evidence. You might quote a limerick to show that the problem's
proverbial. I know a few."

"Good."

A little later Cousins said, "A lot of schools in England are coeducational. More every year."

"I know. But the present problem is among men who graduated from boys' schools when
they were much younger."

"Make that clearer. Incidentally, was your high-school coeducational?"

No.

"Any queers?"

"A few. At least one in every class. The seniors used to use paddles on the ones they
suspected."

"Did it help?"

"No. Of course not."

"Okay. You've got two sets of circumstances under which a high rate of homosexuality occurs. In both cases you've got three conditions: a reasonable amount of leisure, no women, and a disciplinary pecking order. You need a third example."

"I couldn't think of one."

"The Nazi organization."

"Oh?"

"I'll give you details." Cousins went on reading. He finished the report and put it aside. "This'll cause merry hell," he said.

"I know."

"The worst thing about it is your threat to give the whole thing to the newspapers. If I were you I'd leave that out."

"If you were me you wouldn't," said Shute. "Everyone who had anything to do with WARGOD knew they were risking everything that's happened. They preferred to let us take that risk rather than risk public opinion themselves. There are hundreds of Decency Leagues in the United States. Maybe thousands, I don't know. But they'll all come down on the government like harpies if anyone tried to send a mixed crew to Mars or anywhere else in space. The only way I can make the government act is to give them a greater threat."

"You win. This is a greater threat."

"Did you find anything else to cut out?"

"Oh, hell yes. I'll go through this again with a red pencil. You talk too much, and use too many words that are too long, and you generalize. You'll have to give details or you'll lose impact."

"I'll be ruining some reputations."

"Can't be helped. We've got to have women on Mars, and right now. Rufe and Timmy are building up to a real spitting fight. Rufe thinks he caused Lew's death by leaving him. Timmy keeps taunting him with it."

"All right," said Shute. He stood up. He had been sitting erect throughout the discussion, as if sitting at attention. "Are the buggies still in radio range?"

"They can't hear us, but we can hear them. Timmy's working the radio."

"Good. I'll keep him on it until they go out of range. Shall we get dinner?"

Phobos rose where the sun had set, a scattering of moving dots of light, like a crescent of dim stars. It grew brighter as it rose: a new moon becoming a half-moon in hours. Then it was too high to look at. Carter had to keep his eyes on the triangle of desert lit by his

headlights. The headlight beams were the color of earthly sunlight, but to Carter's Mars-adapted eyes they turned everything blue.

He had chosen his course well. The desert ahead was flat for more than seven hundred miles. There would be no low hills rising suddenly before him to trap him into jet-jumping in faint moonlight or waiting for Alf to come down on him. Alf's turnover point would come at high noon tomorrow, and then Carter would have won.

For Alf would turn back toward the bubble, and Carter would go on into the desert. When Alf was safely over the horizon, Carter would turn left or right, go on for an hour, and then follow a course parallel to Alf's. He would be in sight of the bubble an hour later than Alf, with three hours in which to plan.

Then would come the hardest part. Certainly there would be someone on guard. Carter would have to charge past the guard who might be armed with a flare pistol- tear the bubble open, and somehow confiscate the supply of O-tanks. Ripping the bubble open would probably kill everyone inside, but there would be men in suits outside. He would have to load some of the O-tanks on his buggy and open the stopcocks of the rest, all before anyone reached him.

What bothered him was the idea of charging a flare pistol . . . But perhaps he could just aim the buggy and jump out. He would have to see.

His eyelids were getting heavy, and his hands were cramped. But he dare not slow down, and he dared not sleep.

Several times he had thought of smashing the come-hither in his suit radio. With that thing constantly beeping, Alf could find him anytime he pleased. But Alf could find him anyway. His headlights were always behind, never catching up, never dropping away. If he ever got out of Alf's sight, that come-hither would have to go. But there was no point in letting Alf know that. Not yet.

Stars dropped into the black western horizon. Phobos rose again, brighter this time, and

again became too high to watch. Deimos now showed above the steady shine of Alf's headlights.

Suddenly it was day, and there were thin black shadows pointing to a yellow horizon. Stars still glowed in a red-black sky. There was a crater ahead, a glass dish set in the desert, not too big to circle around. Carter angled left. The buggy behind him also angled. If he kept turning like this, Alf couldn't help but gain on him. Carter sucked water and nutrient solution from the nipples in his helmet, and concentrated on steering. His eyes felt gritty, and his mouth belonged to a Martian mummy.

"Morning," said Alf.

"Morning. Get plenty of sleep?"

"Not enough. I only slept about six hours, in snatches. I kept worrying you'd turn off and lose me." For a moment Carter went hot and cold. Then he knew that Alf was needling him. He'd no more slept than Carter had.

"Look to your right," said Alf.

To their right was the crater wall. And -Carter looked again to be sure-there was a silhouette on the rim, a man-shaped shadow against the red sky. With one hand it balanced something tall and thin.

"A Martian," Carter said softly. Without thinking he turned his buggy to climb the wall. Two flares exploded in front of him, a second apart, and he frantically jammed the tiller bar hard left.:

"God damn it, Alf! That was a *Martian!* We've got to go *after* it!"

The silhouette was gone. No doubt the Martian had run for its life when it saw the flares.

Alf said nothing. Nothing at all. And Carter rode on, past the crater, with a murderous fury building in him.

It was eleven o'clock. The tips of a range of hills were pushing above the western horizon.

"I'm just curious," Alf said, "but what would you have said to that Martian?"

Carter's voice was tight and bitter. "Does it matter?"

"Yah. The best you could have done was scare him. When we get in touch with the Martians, we'll do it just the way we planned."

Carter ground his teeth. Even without the accident of Lew Harness's death, there was no telling how long the translation plan would take. It involved three steps: sending pictures of the writings on the crematory wells and other artifacts to Earth, so that computers could translate the language; writing messages in that language to leave near the wells where Martians would find them; and then waiting for the Martians to make a move. But there was no reason to

believe that the script on the wells wasn't from more than one language, or from the same language as it had changed over thousands of years. There was no reason to assume the Martians would be interested in strange beings living in a glorified balloon, regardless of whether the invaders knew how to write. And could the Martians read their own ancestors' script?

An idea . . . "You're a linguist," said Carter.

No answer.

"Alf, we've talked about whether the town needed Lew, and we've talked about whether the town needs me. How about you? Without you we'd *never* get the well-script translated."

"I doubt that. The Cal Tech computers are doing most of the work, and anyhow I left notes. But so what?"

"If you keep chasing me you'll force me to kill you. Can the town afford to lose you?"

"You can't do it. But I'll make you a deal if you want. It's eleven now. Give me two of your O-tanks, and we'll go back to town. We'll stop two hours from town, leave your buggy; and you'll ride the rest of the way tied up in the air bin. Then you can stand trial."

"You think they'll let me off?"

"Not after the way you ripped the bubble open on your way out. That was a blunder, Jack."

"Why don't you just take one tank?" If Alf did that, Carter would get back with two hours to spare. He knew, now, that he would have to wreck the bubble. He had no alternative. But Alf would be right behind him with the flare gun . . .

"No deal. I wouldn't feel safe if I didn't know you'd run out of air two hours before we got back. You want me to feel safe, don't you?"

It was better the other way. Let Alf turn back in an hour. Let Alf be in the bubble when Carter returned to tear it open.

"Carter turned him down," said Timmy. He hunched over the radio, holding his earphones

with both hands, listening with every nerve for voices which had almost died into the distance.

"He's planning something," Gondot said uneasily.

"Naturally," said Shute. "He wants to lose Alf, return to the bubble, and wreck it. What other hope has he?"

"But he'd die too," said Timmy.

"Not necessarily. If he killed us all, he could mend the new rip while he lived on the O-tanks we've got left. I think he could keep the bubble in good enough repair to keep one man alive."

"My Lord! What can we do?"

"Relax, Timmy. It's simple math." It was easy for Lieutenant-Major Shute to keep his voice light, and he didn't want Timmy to start a panic. "If Alf turns back at noon, Carter can't get here before noon tomorrow. At four he'll be out of air. We'll just keep everyone in suits for four hours." Privately he wondered if twelve men could repair even a small rip before they used up the bottled air. It would be one tank every twenty minutes . . . but perhaps they wouldn't be tested.

"Five minutes of twelve," said Carter. "Turn back, Alf. You'll only get home with ten minutes to spare."

The linguist chuckled. A quarter mile behind, the blue dot of his buggy didn't move.

"You can't fight mathematics, Alf. Turn back."

"Too late."

"In five minutes it will be."

"I started this trip short of an O-tank. I should have turned two hours ago."

Carter had to wet his lips from the water nipple before he answered. "You're lying. Will you stop bugging me? Stop it!"

Alf laughed. "Watch me turn back."

His buggy came on.

It was noon, and the chase would not end. At twenty-five miles per, two Marsbuggies a quarter of a mile apart moved serenely through an orange desert. Chemical stains of green rose ahead and fell behind. Crescent dunes drifted by, as regular as waves on an ocean. The ghostly path of a meteorite touched the northern horizon in a momentary white flash. The hills were higher now, humps of smooth rock like animals sleeping beyond the horizon. The sun burned small and bright in a sky reddened by nitrogen dioxide and, near the horizon, blackened by its thinness to the color of bloody India ink.

Had the chase really started at noon? Exactly noon? But it was twelve-thirty now, and he was sure that was too late.

Alf had doomed himself to doom Carter.

But he *wouldn't*.

"Great minds think alike," he told the radio.

"Really?" Alf's tone said he couldn't have cared less.

"You took an extra tank. Just like me."

"No I didn't, Jack."

"You must have. If there's one thing I'm sure of in life, it's that you are *not* the type to kill yourself. All right, Alf, I quit. Let's go back."

"Let's not."

"We'd have three hours to chase that Martian."

A flare exploded behind his buggy. Carter sighed raggedly. At two o'clock both buggies would turn back to bubbletown, where Carter would probably be executed.

But suppose I turn back now?

That's easy. Alf will shoot me with the flare gun.

He might miss. If I let him choose my course, I'll die for certain.

Carter sweated and cursed himself, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't deliberately turn into Alf's gun.

At two o'clock the base of the range came over the horizon. The hills were incredibly clear, almost as clear as they would have been on the moon. But they were horribly weathered, and the sea of sand lapped around them as if eager to finish them off, to drag them down.

Carter rode with his eyes turned behind. His watch hands moved on, minute to minute, and

Carter watched in disbelief as Alf's vehicle continued to follow. As the time approached and reached two-thirds, Carter's disbelief faded. It didn't matter, now, how much oxygen Alf had. They had passed Carter's turnover point.

"You've killed me," he said.

No answer.

"I killed Lew in a fistfight. What you've done to me is much worse. You're killing me by slow torture. You're a demon, Alf."

"Fistfight my aunt's purple asterisk. You hit Lew in the throat and watched him drown in his own blood. Don't tell me you didn't know what you were doing. Everybody in town knows you know karate."

"He died in minutes. I'll need a whole day!"

"You don't like that? Turn around and rush my gun. It's right here waiting."

"We could get back to the crater in time to search for that Martian. That's why I came to Mars. To learn what's here. So did you, Alf. Come on, let's turn back."

"You first."

But he couldn't. He *couldn't*. Karate can defeat any hand-to-hand weapon but a quarterstaff, and Carter had quarterstaff training too. But he couldn't charge a flare gun! Not even if Alf meant to turn back. And Alf didn't.

A faint whine vibrated through the bubble. The sandstorm was at the height of its fury, which made it about as dangerous as an enraged caterpillar. At worst it was an annoyance. The shrill, barely audible whine could get on one's nerves, and the darkness made streetlamps necessary. Tomorrow the bubble would be covered a tenth of an inch deep in fine, moon-dry silt. Inside the bubble it would be darker than night until someone blew the silt away with an O-tank.

To Shute the storm was depressing. Here on Mars was Lieutenant-Major Shute, Boy Hero, facing terrifying dangers on the frontiers of human exploration! A sandstorm that wouldn't have harmed an infant. Nobody here faced a single danger that he had not brought with him.

Would it be like this forever? Men traveling enormous distances to face themselves?

There had been little work done since noon today. Shute had given up on that. On a stack of walls sat Timmy, practically surrounding the buggy-pickup radio, surrounded in turn by the bubble's population.

Timmy stood up as Shute approached the group. "They're gone," he announced, sounding very tired. He turned off the radio. The men looked at each other, and some got to their feet.

"Tim! How'd you lose them?"

Timmy noticed him. "They're too far away, Mayor."

"They never turned around?"

"They never did. They just kept going out into the desert. Alf must have gone insane. Carter's not worth dying for."

Shute thought, *But he was once*. Carter had been one of the best: tough, fearless, bright, enthusiastic. Shute had watched him deteriorate under the boredom and the close quarters aboard ship. He had seemed to recover when they reached Mars, when all of them suddenly had work to do. Then, yesterday morning- murder.

Alf. It was hard to lose Alf. Lew had been little loss, but Alf-Cousins dropped into step beside him. "I've got that red-pencil work done."

"Thanks, Lee. I'll have to do it all over now."

"Don't do it over. Write an addendum. Show how and why three men died. Then you can say, 'I told you so.'"

"You think so?"

"My professional judgment. When's the funeral?"

"Day after tomorrow. That's Sunday. I thought it would be appropriate."

"You can say all three services at once. Good timing."

To all bubbletown, Jack Carter and Alf Harness were dead. But they still breathed-

The mountains came toward them: the only fixed points in an ocean of sand. Alf was closer

now, something less than four hundred yards behind. At five o'clock Carter reached the base of the mountains.

They were too high to go over on the air jet. He could see spots where he might have landed the buggy while the pump filled the jet tank for another hop. But for what?

Better to wait for Alf

Suddenly Carter knew that that was the one thing in the world Alf wanted. To roll up alongside in his buggy. To watch Carter's face until he was sure Carter knew exactly what was to come. And then to blast Carter down in flames from ten feet away, and watch while a bright magnesium-oxidizer flare burned through his suit and skin and vitals.

The hills were low and shallow. Even from yards away he might have been looking at the smooth flank of a sleeping beast-except that this beast was not breathing. Carter took a deep breath, noticing;

how stale the air had become despite the purifier unit, and turned on the compressed-air jet.

The air of Mars is terribly thin, but it can be compressed; and a rocket will work anywhere, even a compressed-air rocket. Carter went up, leaning as far back in the cabin as he could to compensate for the loss of weight in the O-tanks behind him, to put as little work as possible on gyroscopes meant to spin only in emergencies. He rose fast, and he tilted the buggy to send it skating along the thirty-degree slope of the hill. There were flat places along the slope, but not many. He should reach the first one easily . . .

A flare exploded in his eyes. Carter clenched his teeth and fought the urge to look behind.

He tilted the buggy backward to slow him down. The jet pressure was dropping.

He came down like a feather two hundred feet above the desert. When he turned off the jet he could hear the gyros whining. He turned the stabilizer off and let them run down. Now there was only the chugging of the compressor, vibrating through his suit.

Alf was out of his buggy, standing at the base of the mountains, looking up.

"Come on," said Carter. "What are you waiting for?"

"Go on over if you want to."

"What's the matter? Are your gyros fouled?"

"Your brain is fouled, Carter. Go on over." Alf raised one arm stiffly out. The hand showed flame, and Carter ducked instinctively.

The compressor had almost stopped, which meant the tank was nearly full. But Carter would be a fool to take off before it was completely full. You got the greatest acceleration from an air jet during the first seconds of flight. The rest of the flight you got just enough pressure to keep you going.

But-Alf was getting into his buggy. Now the buggy was rising.

Carter turned on his jet and went up.

He came down hard, three hundred feet high, and only then dared to look down. He heard Alf's nasty laugh, and he saw that Alf was still at the foot of the mountains. It had been a bluff!

But why wasn't Alf coming after him?

The third hop took him to the top. The first downhill hop was the first he'd ever made, and it almost killed him. He had to do his de-

celerating on the last remnants of pressure in the jet tank! He waited until his hands stopped shaking, then continued the rest of the way on the wheels. There was no sign of Alf as he reached the foot of the range and started out into the desert.

Already the sun was about to go. Faint bluish stars in a red-black sky outlined the yellow hills behind him.

Still no sign of Alf.

Alf spoke in his ear, gently, almost kindly. "You'll just have to come back, Jack."

"Don't hold your breath."

"I'd rather not have to. That's why I'm telling you this. Look at your watch."

It was about six-thirty.

"Did you look? Now count it up. I started with forty-four hours of air. You started with fifty-two. That gave us ninety-six breathing hours between us. Together we've used up sixty-one hours. That leaves thirty-five between us.

"Now, I stopped moving an hour ago. From where I am it's almost thirty hours back to base. Sometime in the next two and a half hours, you've got to get my air and stop me from breathing. Or I've got to do the same for you."

It made sense. Finally, everything made sense. "Alf, are you listening? Listen," said Carter, and he opened his radio panel and, moving by touch, found a wire he'd located long ago. He jerked it loose. His radio crackled deafeningly, then stopped.

"Did you hear that, Alf? I just jerked my come-hither loose. Now you couldn't find me even if you wanted to."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Then Carter realized what he'd done. There was now no possibility of Alf finding him. After all the miles and hours of the chase, now it was Carter chasing Alf. All Alf had to do was wait.

The dark fell on the west like a heavy curtain.

Carter went south, and he went immediately. It would take him an hour or more to cross the range. He would have to leapfrog to the top with only his headlights to guide him. His motor would not take him uphill over such a slope. He could use the wheels going down, with luck, but he would have to do so in total darkness. Deimos would not have risen; Phobos was not bright enough to help.

It had gone exactly as Alf had planned. Chase Carter to the range. If he attacks there, take his tanks and go home. If he makes it, show him why he has to come back. Time it so he has to come back in darkness. If by some miracle he makes it this time-well, there's always the flare gun.

Carter could give him only one surprise. He would cross six miles south of where he was expected, and approach Alf's buggy from the *southeast*.

Or was Alf expecting that too?

It didn't matter. Carter was beyond free will.

The first jump was like jumping blindfolded from a ship's airlock. He pointed the headlights straight down, and as he went up he watched the circle of light expand and dim. He angled east. First he wasn't moving at all. Then the slope slid toward him, far too fast. He back-angled. Nothing seemed to happen. The pressure under him died slowly, but it was dying, and the slope was a wavering blur surrounded by dark.

It came up, clarifying fast.

The landing jarred him from coccyx to cranium. He held himself rigid, waiting for the buggy to tumble end-for-end down the hill. But though the buggy was tilted at a horrifying angle, it stayed.

Carter sagged and buried his helmet in his arms. Two enormous hanging tears, swollen to pinballs in the low gravity, dropped onto his faceplate and spread. For the first time he regretted all of it. Killing Lew, when a kick to the kneecap would have put him out of action and taught him a permanent, memorable lesson. Snatching the buggy instead of surrendering himself for trial. Driving through the bubble-and making every man on Mars his mortal enemy. Hanging around to watch what would happen-when, perhaps, he could have run beyond the horizon before Alf came out the vehicular airlock. He clenched his fists and pressed them against his faceplate, remembering his attitude of mild interest as he sat watching Alf's buggy roll into the lock.

Time to go. Carter readied himself for another jump. This one would be horrible. He'd be taking off with the buggy canted thirty degrees backward . . .

Wait a minute.

There was something wrong with that picture of Alf's buggy as it rolled toward the lock surrounded by trotting men. Definitely something wrong there. But what?

It would come to him. He gripped the jet throttle and readied his other hand to flip on the gyros the moment he was airborne.

-Alf had planned so carefully. How had he come away with one O-tank too few?

And-- if he really had everything planned, how *did Alf expect to get Carter's tanks if Carter crashed?*

Suppose Carter crashed his buggy against a hill, right now, on his second jump. How would Alf know? He wouldn't, not until nine o'clock came and Carter hadn't shown up. Then he'd know Carter had crashed somewhere. But it would be too late!

Unless Alf had lied.

That was it, that was what was wrong with his picture of Alf in the vehicular airlock. Put one O-tank in the air bin and it would stand out like a sore thumb. Fill the air bin and then remove one tank, and the hole in the hexagonal array would show like Sammy Davis III on the Berlin Nazis

football team! There had been no such hole.

Let Carter crash now, and Alf would know it with four hours in which to search for his buggy. Carter swung his headlights up to normal position, then moved the buggy backward in a dead-slow half circle. The buggy swayed but didn't topple. Now he could move down behind his headlights . . .

Nine o'clock. If Carter was wrong then he was dead now. Even now Alf might be unfastening his helmet, his eyes blank with the ultimate despair, still wondering where Carter had got to. But if he was right . . .

Then Alf was nodding to himself, not smiling, merely confirming a guess. Now he was deciding whether to wait five minutes on the chance that Carter was late, or to start searching now. Carter sat in his dark cabin at the foot of the black mountains, his left hand clutching a wrench, his eyes riveted on the luminous needle of the direction finder.

The wrench had been the heaviest in his toolbox. He'd found nothing sharper than a screwdriver, and that wouldn't have penetrated suit fabric.

The needle pointed straight toward Alf

And it wasn't moving.

Alf had decided to wait.

How long would he wait?

Carter caught himself whispering, not loudly. *Move, idiot. You've got to search both sides of the range. Both sides and the top. Move. Move!*

Ye gods! Had he shut off his radio? Yes, the switch was down.

Move.

The needle moved. It jerked once, infinitesimally, and was quiet. It was quiet a long time-seven or eight minutes. Then it jerked in the opposite direction. Alf was searching the wrong side of the hills!

And then Carter saw the flaw in his own plan. Alf must now assume he was dead. And if he, Carter, was dead, then he wasn't using air. Alf had two hours extra, but he thought he had four!

The needle twitched and moved-a good distance. Carter sighed and closed his eyes. Alf was coming over. He had sensibly decided to search this side first; for if Carter was on this side, dead, then Alf would have to cross the range again to reach home.

Twitch.

Twitch. He must be at the top.

Then the long, slow, steady movement down.

Headlights. Very faint, to the north. Would Alf turn north?

He turned south. Perfect. The headlights grew brighter . . . and Carter waited, with his buggy buried to the windshield in the sand at the base of the range.

Alf still had the flare gun. Despite all his certainty that Carter was dead, he was probably riding with the gun in his hand. But he was using his headlights, and he was going slowly, perhaps fifteen miles per hour.

He would pass . . . twenty yards west . . .

Carter gripped the wrench. *Here he comes.*

There was light in his eyes. *Don't see me.* And then there wasn't. Carter swarmed out of the buggy and down the sloping sand. The headlights moved away, and Carter was after them, leaping as a Moonie leaps, both feet pushing at once into the sand, a second spent in flying, legs straddled and feet reaching forward for the landing and another leap.

One last enormous kangaroo jump-and he was on the O-tanks, falling on knees and forearms with feet lifted high so the metal wouldn't clang. One arm landed on nothing at all where empty O-tanks were missing. His body tried to roll off onto the sand. He wouldn't let it.

The transparent bubble of Alf's helmet was before him. The head inside swept back and forth, sweeping the triangle created by the headlights.

Carter crept forward. He poised himself over Alf's head, raised the wrench high, and brought it down with all his strength.

Cracks starred out in the plastic. Alf looked up with his eyes and mouth all wide open, his amazement unalloyed by rage or terror. Carter brought the weight down again.

There were more cracks, longer cracks. Alf winced and -finally brought up the flare gun. Carter's muscles froze for an instant as he looked into its hellish mouth. Then he struck for what he knew must be the last time.

The wrench smashed through transparent plastic and scalp and skull. Carter knelt on the O-tanks for a moment, looking at the unpleasant thing he'd done. Then he lifted the body out by the shoulders, tumbled it over the side, and climbed into the cabin to stop the buggy.

It took him a few minutes to find his own buggy where he'd buried it in the sand. It took longer to uncover it. That was all right. He had plenty of time. If he crossed the range by twelve-thirty he would reach bubbletown on the last of his air.

There would be little room for finesse. On the other hand, he would be arriving an hour before dawn. They'd never see him. They would have stopped expecting him, or Alf, at noon tomorrow-even assuming they didn't know Alf had refused to turn back.

The bubble would be empty of air before anyone could get into a suit.

Later he could repair and fill the bubble. In a month Earth would hear of the disaster: how a meteorite had touched down at a corner of the dome, how John Carter had been outside at the time, the only man in a suit. They'd take him home and he could spend the rest of his life trying to forget.

He knew which tanks were his empties. Like every man in town,

he had his own method of arranging them in the air bin. He dumped six and stopped. It was a shame to throw away empties. The tanks were too hard to replace.

He didn't know Alf's arrangement scheme. He'd have to test Alf's empties individually.

Already Alf had thrown some away. (To leave space for Carter's tanks?) One by one, Carter turned the valve of each tank. If it hissed, he put it in his own air bin. If it didn't, he dropped it.

One of them hissed. Just one.

Five O-tanks. He couldn't possibly make a thirty-hour trip on five O-tanks.

Somewhere, Alf had left three O-tanks where he could find them again. Just on the off chance: just in case something went terribly wrong for Alf, and Carter captured his buggy, Carter still wouldn't go home alive.

Alf must have left the tanks where he could find them easily. He must have left them near here; for he had never been out of Carter's sight until Carter crossed the range, and furthermore he'd kept just one tank to reach them. The tanks were nearby, and Carter had just two hours to find them.

In fact, he realized, they must be on the other side of the range. Alf hadn't stopped anywhere on this side.

But he could have left them on the hillside during his jumps to the top...

In a sudden frenzy of hurry, Carter jumped into his buggy and took it up. The headlights showed his progress to the top and over.

The first red rays of sunlight found Lee Cousins and Rufe Doolittle already outside the bubble. They were digging a grave. Cousins dug in stoic silence. In a mixture of pity and disgust he endured Rufe's constant compulsive flow of words.

"... first man to be buried on another planet. Do you think Lew would have liked that? No, he'd hate it. He'd say it wasn't worth dying for. He wanted to go home. He would have, too, on the next ship. . ."

The sand came up in loose, dry shovelfuls. Practice was needed to keep it on the shovel. It tried to flow like a viscous liquid.

"I tried to tell the Mayor he'd have liked a well burial. The Mayor wouldn't listen. He said the Martians might not-hey!" Cousins's eyes jerked up, and the movement caught them-a steadily moving fleck on the crater wall. Martian! was his first thought. What else could be moving out there? And then he saw that it was a buggy.

To Lee Cousins it was like a corpse rising from its grave. The buggy moved like a blind thing down the tilted blocks of old glass, touched the drifted sand in the crater floor, all while he stood immobile. At the corner of his eye he saw Doolittle's shovel flying wide as Doolittle ran for the bubble.

The buggy only grazed the sand, then began reclimbing the crater. Cousins's paralysis left him and he ran for the town's remaining buggy.

The ghost was moving at half speed. He caught it a mile beyond the crater rim. Carter was in the cockpit. His helmet was in his lap clutched in a rigid death-grip.

Cousins reported. "He must have aimed the buggy along his direction finder when he felt his air going. Give him credit," he added, and lifted a shovelful from the second grave. "He did that much. He sent back the buggy."

Just after dawn a small biped form came around a hill to the east. It walked directly to the sprawled body of Alf Harness, picked up a foot in both delicate-looking hands, and began to tug the corpse across the sand, looking rather like an ant tugging a heavy bread crumb. In the twenty minutes it needed to reach Alf's buggy the figure never stopped to rest.

Dropping its prize, the Martian climbed the pile of empty O-tanks and peered into the air bin, then down at the body. But there was no way such a small, weak being could lift such a mass.

The Martian seemed to remember something. It scrambled down the O-tanks and crawled under

the buggy's belly.

Minutes later it came out, dragging a length of nylon line. It tied each end of the line to one of Alf's ankles, then dropped the loop over the buggy's trailer-attachment knob.

For a time the figure stood motionless above Alf's broken helmet, contemplating its work. Alf's head might take a beating, riding that way; but as a specimen Alf's head was useless. Wherever nitrogen

dioxide gas had touched moisture, red fuming nitric acid had formed. By now the rest of the body was dry and hard, fairly well preserved.

The figure climbed into the buggy. A little fumbling, surprisingly little, and the buggy was rolling.

Twenty yards away it stopped with a jerk. The Martian climbed out and walked back. It knelt beside the three O-tanks which had been tied beneath the buggy with the borrowed nylon line, and it opened the stopcocks of each in turn. It leapt back in horrified haste when the noxious gas began hissing out.

Minutes later the buggy was moving south. The O-tanks hissed for a time, then were quiet.