

## Martian Quest

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Rikatva and Tchava, the Martian Reclaimed Areas. The Tri-Council--great minds of three worlds--had poured money into them in an effort to give the unwanted overflow of a crowded civilization a chance to get off the public charity rolls. Water, brought in tanker ships from wetter worlds; Venusian humus, acid phosphate, nitrate nitrogen, to make the alkaline desert fruitful; after that, crude shacks and cruder implements, scripped together with what was left from the funds wrung so hardly from resentful taxpayers.

It was common talk throughout the Solar System that the Areas were a failure. Only the destitute still had hope.

The young man breathed the thin air and shivered. When special guards herded the mob across the landing field to the supply houses, he followed with the quiet obedience of a well-broken beast.

He presented his papers at last to the Assistant Commissioner, a lean, saturnine Martian from over Tchava way.

"Martin Drake," read the Commissioner. "Single. Occupation, secretary." He scrawled his name as though sick of seeing it and grunted, "Secretary! And not a farmer in the lot of 'em, I'll wager! All right, Martin Drake; you're out on the edge of the settlement, with the other single men. Makes less fuss when we lose 'em."

And while Martin Drake was pondering that remark, the long line pushed him on, down to tables where guards rummaged in the scanty luggage of the newcomers.

Drake submitted his for inspection. "Any firearms?" demanded the guard, and patted him expertly. Drake shook his head.

The man next ahead of him in line had an automatic taken from him, and commented, "Still remembering last year's outbreak, eh? Made you work for your keep, then, didn't they?"

"I wouldn't be too smart," the guard retorted. "If the guys that have to foot the bill for this outlay keep on howling, and you yellow-bellies don't make a better showing on the credit side, we'll still have army pay, and you'll be right back on the streets!"

The line shoved Drake on and on. Eventually he found himself in the one street of Thern, clutching his allotment of tools, seeds, and clothing, and the halter of a vaard; an ugly, hairless Martian edition of the horse, with harness-galls and a waiting malice in its little yellow eyes. And there was something about them, unscreened now by sheds and hangars, that made the lost, old look deepen on Drake's face.

Huddled and squalid under the huge loom of the water tanks, the cheerlessness of them was horrible; here and there rose the shattered marble spires of the ancient city, mute prophets of futility.

Drake sighed and drew out his land card.

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The words meant nothing to him. He looked about for a source of information, and was abruptly conscious of a clamor arising down the street. People began to pour out of the bars and happy joints in a drab, morbidly curious crowd, and the red dust of the unpaved way rose in a choking cloud. Only one man stayed behind, a tall Venusian, his boots spread wide apart, his cloud-colored eyes narrowed as he watched the crowd mill and turn back upon itself. A sun-browned man of slow, massive strength, with something of the Earth's hard honesty in the set of his big-boned head and curling yellow beard. Drake became painfully aware of his white skin and undeveloped body. But he had to find his

home. He gripped his land card and tapped the tall stranger hesitantly on the shoulder.

The cloud-colored gaze flicked half contemptuously over the Earthman's stooped thinness. "Well?"

Drake showed his card. "Can you tell me —?" The tall man cut him short with an unenthusiastic grunt. "Your land is next to mine. I'm going home now. Come if you like." He gestured to a two-wheeled cart with a vaard between the shafts. "Get in, and tie your beast behind." Drake bent over the cart tail, fumbling clumsily with the halter end. The vaard jerked its head perversely, and the knot would not make. He heard the



Venusian's derisive grunt, and went scarlet. Then slim brown hands reached over his, and a clear voice spoke in his ear.

"May I help?"

Drake looked up. A girl stood beside him, a slender, smiling angel in patched overalls, crowned with a tangle of black curls that danced in the breeze. She was glowing and strong and confident, and Drake stood in awe before her. She took the rein from his hand, tying it deftly while he stared and could not take his eyes away.

He was still staring when she looked up to ask his name. Drake stammered it out,

drinking her in as though she were something he had never dreamed existed, and wanted never to forget. He saw her flush, and never thought of rudeness. Dimly he knew that the crowd was swirling back toward them, but her voice came clearly.

"I'm Terra Brooke. My father has the farm next to Tels'." Terra. Earth. No other name would have fitted her. Just looking at her roused a strange new joy in Drake, something that sang for no reason except that he was looking at her.

The shock of Tels' great hand on his shoulder was like a physical pain. "Have you never seen a woman?" demanded the Venusian shortly, spinning

him round. Drake gasped out "No!" just as the edge of the crowd curled round them. Terra's brown face paled, and she turned her head away.

"Let's go, Tels," she pleaded, climbing into the cart. "I don't want to see." Tels didn't hear her. Harsh-faced, he tightened his grip on Drake's shoulder, thrust him bodily through the crush, to where men carried a blanket-covered thing on a stretcher.

"Look there, Earthpuppy! That's what's driving us from the land. That's what you city-bred weaklings can't fight. But Khom doesn't care. He gives no quarter to weaklings. Go on. Look!"

He ripped the blanket savagely from the huddle on the stretcher. Drake retched and held down a writhing stomach. The man beneath was dead. Naked to the waist, the manner of his dying was horribly plain. Something had struck him in the side, crushed his ribs and snapped his spine and laid his entrails bare. Something had done that with one blow.

"Khom?" faltered Drake. Martian for Destroyer. "But what . . . what is it?" Tels' strange burst of savagery had burned out with the sight of death. He muttered, "The great desert lizard," and turned to his cart. Drake stumbled after him, white and shaken.

The road they followed out of Thern ran

between dusty fields, set to beans and alfalfa and yellow Martian grapes. Here and there the land was stripped bare of green things, as though a plague of giant locusts had descended. Irrigation ditches, a stink of fertilizer, furrows cut square across the wind, weathered shacks without a shrub or a shade tree, and ahead, the open desert. Drake looked out across the flat emptiness of it, and heard for the first time the low laughter of its drifting earth under the hand of a wind that never stopped.

"Ugly, isn't it?" said Terra Brooke's low voice. "But it's all we have."

"It's better than nothing at all," said

Drake with a queer, cold bitterness.

"Anything is better than that!"

Tels studied him in his slow way. "Your clothes are good," he said finally,

"and your thinness is not from starvation. I think you don't know what

'nothing at all' can mean."

Drake flushed. "I didn't mean—" He broke off, staring. "Look at that vineyard!"

The others looked, startled; then they turned questioningly to Drake.

"What about the vineyard?" growled Tels, and Terra added, more kindly, "It's only one that Khom has stripped."

"Yes," said Drake excitedly, "but look at the vines! They're eaten right down to the ground."

Tels stared at him. "Of course. So is the desert scrub he eats. So is everything he touches. What of it?"

"But how strange for a lizard to eat wood!"

"Perhaps," said Tels. "But he eats it, Earthman, and everything else beside."

"I suppose," added Terra gently, "it's

because there's so little food in the desert; only the scrub and the cactus. Khom needs a lot of food, and I guess he's learned to use all there is. He even gets his water from the cactus, you know."

Drake nodded; for the first time his face was animated. "Odd, isn't it?"

Adaptability—"

"All that interests me, "Tels interrupted, "is dinner. And even that I hate. Beans! When my melon ripens, I'll have something sour to cut the rotten dust from my throat!"

\* \* \*



Drake had dinner at Tels' shack that night. Terra wanted it. She explained that she often cooked Tels' supper when he was late in town. Khom the Destroyer had stripped their vineyards not long before, and her father was not well, so any company Terra had, she had at Tels' place. Tels came for Drake, to show him the way, and before they left Drake's shack, the Venusian faced him.

"For Terra's sake you are welcome," he said, his eyes embarrassingly steady on the Earthman's thin face. "But look you, stranger." The curling blond beard was thrust rockily forward. "I will marry Terra when my farm is settled. And she is no street wench, to be stared at. You

come for dinner, that is all!" Drake's face flushed angry scarlet, but Tels' broad back was turned. They went in silence to the neighboring farm.

Terra was an expert cook. The strong desert hen was like pheasant, the baked red cactus and mixed beans from the fields fit for a potentate, for all Tels'

grumbling. Drake's dinner went down in a dream; a dream filled with a black-haired angel rattling dishes on an ancient stove. The overalls had been replaced by a simple print dress, and the sweet slim lines of her made Drake's throat ache. He was a confusion of unfamiliar feelings. He flushed and choked and stammered, and wished himself a

hundred miles away, and yet nothing would have made him go. Terra talked to him a good deal, about the Areas; Tchava, she said, was no better off than Rikatva, and the whispers of a sudden stoppage of funds grew steadily louder. The lizards were worse than any Biblical scourge, killing without mercy when disturbed at their feeding. Khom was the greatest enemy; dust storms and dryness and grudging fertility could be whipped in time, but Khom was the harvester of the crops.

Terra smiled suddenly at Drake. "Never been on your own before, have you?"

"No," Drake admitted humbly. "My

uncle raised me." Tels snorted. "You picked a fine place to come to," he growled. "Dust and wind and barrenness." He rose abruptly, thudding his fist with savage gentleness against the wall. "On Venus," he said softly, "there is dark earth that doesn't blow, and rain. Rain!"

Terra laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "It is a hard place, Martin. And since the trouble last year, they won't let us have guns." Drake remembered the man in the supply shed. "What happened?"

"Some of the settlers here got tired of fighting. There are barbarian tribes in the desert; they live by plunder. North of

us are the radium mines. The settlers sent the barbarians against Rikatva to keep the soldiers busy, and went and attacked the radium mines. There was fighting, and a lot of men died before it was over. So all guns are forbidden here."

"But the lizards! Haven't you any protection?" Tels shrugged. "Guns are not much use against Khom. Only his eye and his throat are vulnerable, and since he feeds only at night, it's hard to hit them. We all keep flares; the light sometimes drives him off. So far he has let me alone."

Changing the subject abruptly, he said,

"Here, you, Earthman; see what I have raised."

There was a box full of black earth in the warmest corner by the stove. Drake saw that the conditions were as much like Venus' sultry dampness as anyone could make on Mars. He studied the pallid melon vine with its two long fruits, and said:

"Wouldn't it have been better to grow it in a culture?" Tels glared. "A culture!" he snorted, and held out his hands. "Not while I have these to dig in the earth!"

Terra's eyes were suddenly shining. "First the lizards, now growth-cultures. Are you a scientist?"

Drake's thin face showed sudden lines. "No," he said dully. "No, I'm not a scientist. I'm a—secretary."

Terra studied him. "Show me your hands, Martin Drake." Puzzled, he held them out. Then, abruptly realizing, he snatched them back, thrust them deep in his pockets. Terra smiled and shook her head slowly.

"Stains, and acid burns. You're no secretary; you're a chemist." Drake was shaking, and his eyes were hollow. "I thought I was, once," he muttered. "Now I'm just a farmer, out on the edge of things where Khom can get me without making a fuss!"

"Why did you lie?" demanded Tels.

Terra, tense with some strange urgency, rushed on uncaring.

"Martin, I think a scientist could save the Reclaimed Areas! We can't do it ourselves, and the Tri-Council can't afford to send experts out here to work, perhaps for months and months. But you're one of us, Martin. You could try!"

"Try—what?"

"To destroy Khom! Guns and poison won't do it, but science could find some way, I know it!" She caught the Earthman's bony shoulders impulsively. "Will you do it?"



And while Drake stared at her, trembling, while Tels' harsh laughter rocked the room, there came from outside a horrible hoarse screaming; a rasping shriek of fear that set the hair prickling down their necks. Tels swore a furious oath and sprang for the door, catching a flare from a shelf as he ran. Terra's brown face paled, and she said one word: "Khom!"

\* \* \*

The frosty air bit into Drake as he followed them outside. Both moons were up, throwing crazy shifting patterns on the fields. Tels was leaping for the vineyard, shouting terrible things in his own tongue. Drake made out several

blots of darkness, eight or ten, that had independent movement. They were among the grapes, and the neat rows of vines were broken now like crumbling battlements.

Tels threw the flare. A lurid glare burst over the vineyard, and Drake saw Khom, disturbed at his feeding.

Wicked triangular heads shot up from the ruined vines, horny reptilian heads framed in ruffs like Triceratops. Bodies two feet longer than a tall man raised high in ominous preparation on strong clawed legs, and tails—

Drake shivered, remembering the dead man on the stretcher, torn in two with

one blow. Khom had a tail as long as his body and his head together; a mighty, supple flail armed with rows of deadly spikes.

Tels was still running toward the invaders, mad with the rage that takes a man when he sees the work of his hands destroyed. The vaard in the stable screamed on monotonously, terrified by the rank scent of the lizards. Tels stopped suddenly, began throwing clods of earth, shaking with a bitter, dreadful wrath.

Terra yelled a frantic warning. Eight of the lizards turned abruptly from the glaring light of the flare, running swiftly, high on their legs like monstrous

crocodiles. But one, larger than the rest, stayed behind to do battle. A clod burst squarely between its eyes. Opening wide a gaping mouth set with strange rodential teeth, Khom charged.

Tels turned to run, twisting frantically aside from the sweep of the wicked tail. But Khom was swift. The spiked bludgeon swung, struck viciously. Tels, a hoarse scream of agony stifled in his throat, was tumbled limply aside into his broken vines.

Drake had a momentary glimpse of a back armor-plated like a battle cruiser, and huge jaws agape with silent laughter. Then Khom had shot by them,

out into the dark, whispering desert.

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Tels was still breathing. Straining, panting, Drake and Terra carried him back to the shack. The girl was white, dry-eyed. Unhesitatingly she stripped the blood-sodden shirt from the Venusian; drew a long, shuddering breath.

"Right arm and shoulder broken," she whispered; "and I think some ribs. Poor Tels, to be so foolish!" Her fingers bit into Drake's soft muscles. "Get the doctor, Martin. The hospital is the big white house in Thorn. Ride Tels'

vaard. And hurry!"

Drake hurried. But the one thought in his mind was: "She loves Tels. Terra loves Tels."

Later that night he sat with Terra beside the Venusian's cot. The doctor had set the broken bones, molded a great clumsy cast around Tels' upper body.

"He'll live," he said, and left.

Terra placed her hand on Drake's. "You see now why you must try to destroy the lizards?"

Drake spread his hands. "Why not men with flame guns, or atomic bombs?"

"It would take years, and there's no

money."

"Poison, then."

Terra shook her head. "Khom eats no flesh, drinks no water. We can't poison our crops. No, Martin"—her eyes caught his, held them—"only science has a chance. It's up to you!"

There was a sudden sound from the cot; a feeble ghost of Tels' booming laughter. The Venusian had wakened.

"You ask too much, Terra," he whispered. "You ask a little weakling to lift the land on his shoulders."

Drake rose, flushing. Terra said quietly:

"What are you afraid of, Martin Drake?"

Again the husky laughter. "He's afraid of death, girl! He's afraid of work and pain and hunger, but most of all he's afraid of death. I saw his face when he looked at the dead man in Thern!"

Drake stood like a stooped, taut thing of marble, head averted, while Terra shook her dark curls and answered.

"No, Tels. You're wrong. It's life Martin Drake's afraid of!" Drake swung suddenly to face them, his thin hands clenched until the bones gleamed white.

"You can judge me, you people!" he burst out at them. "You weren't born



owing your life, food, clothing and the schooling you had, to someone else. My uncle took me; I had nothing when my parents died. I've never had anything. Since I was old enough to talk, I've been paying my uncle back what I owed him.

"He had me taught chemistry, not because I liked it, but because he thought I'd be the most use to him in the laboratories. George Breckner, of Interworld Enterprises, who hated his sister because she defied him to marry my father. My father, you see, was a failure, a visionary scientist who died a pauper. Uncle George had little hope for me, but he made me work! I took orders and cleaned test tubes and mixed

solutions, but I never worked as an independent chemist. I wasn't worth it. I was my father's son, and dependent on my uncle for my bed and my dinner.

"It's easy for you to be strong and independent! You weren't taught from babyhood that you were utterly worthless and incompetent, existing on charity. There did come a day when I had my doubts. I thought I had stumbled on something in the laboratory. I thought I could prove to my uncle that I was worthy of consideration as an individual. I thought . . . I thought I could prove it to myself."

His voice faltered. He pressed his palms to his throbbing temples, and his words

were almost inaudible when he went on.

"I made my experiment; secretly, because I wanted it to be a surprise, something no one could ignore. Well, I succeeded!

"I destroyed five thousand dollars worth of equipment in the resulting explosion. How I escaped death, I don't know; I wish I hadn't. But I had made a stupid, foolish mistake; if it hadn't been after hours, I might have killed every man in the laboratory. I knew then that my uncle was right. I . . . I ran away—"

Terra put her hands gently on his trembling shoulders. "You can help us here, Martin. I believe in you."

Martin Drake met her eyes. "You don't understand, Terra," he said simply. "I can't help anyone. I haven't it in me."

He turned and went out, walking slowly across the ravaged fields where the stumps of the grapevines were gnawed clear to the earth, and behind him there was silence in the cabin.

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Next morning every house in the Reclaimed Areas found a printed proclamation at its door.

Due to the high cost involved and the untenability of the land, it has become impossible for the Tri-Council to

continue to finance the Reclaimed Areas in their present state.

Wishing to give the Areas every possible chance, the Tri-Council has arranged a public hearing on the fourth of November, two Martian weeks from today. If, at this time, reasonable proof can be shown that the Areas may be placed on a sounder basis, the Tri-Council will take the matter under advisement. However, all residents are requested to hold themselves in readiness for immediate abandonment of Rikatva and Tchava.

Drake was sitting on his bunk, the crumpled paper at his feet, when Terra Brooke came in. She came without

knocking; standing there, her black curls disheveled, her eyes strained and tired in her white face, she seemed dazed and queerly uncertain.

Drake stared at her blindly. "There's nothing left now," he said tonelessly.

"I've got to go back to my uncle. There's no place else where they'd take me. He . . . he said I'd come back."

Terra's hands made an aimless gesture. Her lips moved, but whatever words were back of them died in her throat.

"Why did you come?" asked Drake.

"I . . . I don't know. Perhaps I thought—"

She broke suddenly, covering her face with her hands. Drake could see the tears shining between her fingers.

"—I thought you might still save us, Martin Drake," she said, very low. "But you couldn't. Maybe Tels was right. Maybe you are a weakling!" Her eyes were suddenly shining fiercely into his. "What about Tels? He has to go back too, to a stinking swamp that swallowed his land on Venus. What about the hundreds of people who hoped to live here; the thousands more who might have found new life here? They have to go back, to the charity rolls. What about my father and me, Martin Drake?"

Somehow Drake found himself on his

feet and repeated, "Why did you come?"

"Because—" The fierce tenseness went suddenly out of Terra's body. Her head dropped; Drake strained for her whispered, "I don't know—" There was nothing sane, nothing ordered. In the last day and night he had lived a hundred years. He had lost all identity with himself, all sense of the ordered pattern of things. He tilted Terra's tear-streaked face up and looked into her eyes. It wasn't a conscious act; some strange, hungry yearning, something beyond anything he had ever in his narrow existence known before, took his body and moved it.



He took Terra Brooke in his arms and kissed her.

For a long moment she lay quivering against him. Abruptly, like a wild thing, she wrenched away and struck him, hard, across the face. Then she was gone, running like a deer across the naked fields.

Drake stood still, his fingers against his bruised cheek. "I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know! But what difference can it make? I've failed anyway!

Two Martian weeks. That's ten Earth days. Ten days!"

\* \* \*

Eight of those precious days went by in a hopeless search for some point of attack. There seemed no way to begin; Khom didn't offer himself to be studied, there were no research laboratories, no fellow scientists to help. Then, on the eighth night, Khom made a raid across Drake's land into the inner circle of farms, and the furious, hate-filled settlers drove him back with flares, pursuing him right to the edge of the desert. Drake, caught in the forefront of that tide of battle, had barely time to turn his vaard loose to escape by itself, and then run for the comparative safety of Tels' shack. From there, he saw three men die under

Khom's tail, and saw his own shack go up in flames from a random flare.

Poking morbidly through the ashes in the morning, choking over a vile stench that rose and went streaming out to the desert on the steady wind, he found something. Holding his breath, he knelt and pawed the ashes away with his hands.

Charred, head and tail partially burned away, but body still intact, a young Khom lay in the ruins. Only eight feet long, but old enough to have musk glands that sent up a stench, along with the charred flesh, that could have been smelled in Tchava.

Drake gasped for air, but he didn't leave.

Here was a chance to study the enemy first hand. The armor plate had preserved the important parts of the carcass. He had no instruments, no facilities, but it was just possible—

He shook his head. This was the ninth day. Still—

He dragged the brute clear of the ashes, borrowed a tarpaulin and a sharp knife from Tels, and began his bloody task.

It was a sickening job, cutting and slicing and handling things that were never meant to be seen. The tarpaulin kept the sun off, and Drake stayed on the windward side, but all day that musky reek went trailing out into the desert,

seeped clingingly into his clothing.

And, at last, he sat back on his heels and whistled. "So that's how he gets away with his wood! An extra stomach, supplied with an enzyme culture—just like a termite. Protozoans, of course, to digest the cellulose for him. One-celled animals, living in an alkaline culture; got to be alkaline, because everything that grows here has an alkaline reaction in the digestive system.

"So Khom is just a big, four-legged termite!" To confirm his surmise, he borrowed litmus paper, used in soil testing, and the enzyme culture showed an alkaline reaction. For a moment Drake was enthusiastic. Then his

shoulders sagged. Interesting, but it didn't help him any. It didn't show him any way to destroy the beasts. And tomorrow was the Council hearing.

He didn't even bury the carcass. In a few days there'd be nobody left to smell it.

There was smoke over Tels' cabin; Terra was getting supper. Drake crossed the fields, hating to see the two, to parade his failure, but unable to stay alone. After all, he had no place to go.

Somewhere, down the outer line of farms, a vaard voiced a querulous scream. As Drake entered the cabin he fancied he saw a stirring out in the desert, a flickering of low, swift

shadows, but the double moonlight was tricky and a freshening breeze was shifting the whispering sand. Terra turned from the stove; just for a second there was hope in her eyes. It flickered out, and Tels, propped up on his cot, wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"You stink," he said. "Go and wash off that damned lizard." Drake hadn't realized. Stammering an apology, he added, "My clothes were burned. I haven't—"

"Take mine," said Tels. "But wash!" Drake shivered under the cold shower in the crude bath, climbed gratefully into Tels' clothes. For lack of anything else to do with them, he left his own reeking

garments on the floor.

It was a gloomy meal, the more so because it seemed all the vaards in Rikatva were having the nervous terrors, and the incessant shrieking rasped nerves already ragged. Several times Drake and Terra looked out, but there was no sign of lizards. In the shifting moonlight the desert was always full of shadows.

"Get the melons," said Tels abruptly. "We might as well eat them as leave them here to rot."

Terra brought them. Drake's throat ached at the sight of her; the spring, the joy, the life was gone from her. She was a little



like him now, patient and defeated.

"Did you find anything?" she asked.

Drake spoke to them mechanically about Khom's digestive apparatus, accepting his share of the pale Venusian fruit. Tels found no joy in the prized melon now; his face was stony as he bit into his portion.

"Little animals living in his stomach?" he grunted around a mouthful, and shook his head. "It does not help us."

Drake sighed and took a bite. Instantly he choked and gasped over a corrosive sourness. The melon was acid, not pleasantly, like alkaline citrus fruits, but

with a biting, astringent acerbity comparable only to some mess in a test tube. He gagged and retched, snatching for water.

Tels' blond beard crinkled to a roar of laughter. "Earth puppy! If you ever come to Venus, you'd better get some little animals to live in your stomach and drink your acids for you!"

Drake was suddenly transfixed, staring at the melon with a sort of awe. "My God!" he whispered. "That's it!"

\* \* \*

Startled questions, sudden blazing inspiration, were drowned utterly in the

high, wild shriek from Tels' stable. Other vaards picked it up, until the shack was ringed with screaming beasts. And this time the running shadows in the desert were close in the fields, and solid.

They congregated, dozens of them, in a milling swirl around a charred and butchered corpse that sent its musky stench out on the wind. Tels, lips tight with pain, joined them at the window. "Never have I seen them like that. Look, they break a little; some are coming this way. But there is nothing in my fields!"

Drake's face was white in the lamplight. "There's something in your bath. My clothes, with the smell of Khom on them.

The corpse has brought them in; now they're coming here, after me!"

Terra's hands were clenched; the cords stood out on her wrists. "Martin," she said, "what did you mean just now, about the melon?" Drake's eyes were on those milling shapes. "Khom depends on wood-cellulose for his food. The protozoans that digest it for him live in an alkaline culture. This melon is acid. Introducing it into the culture would kill the protozoans—and Khom would starve to death!"

Tels snorted. "You talk nonsense! Khom will not be fed by hand, those melons will not grow here naturally, and

besides, there is but one plant."

"Hydroponics, Tels! Growth cultures. A ring of specially constructed tanks, fencing the Areas; nutrients, auxin, vitamins, intensifying chemicals. They can ship more vines from Venus; Khom can eat them as fast as they grow. Inside of six months, there won't be a lizard left in the desert!"

"You've got to get away, Martin." Terra caught his shoulders. "You've got to get that knowledge to the Council tomorrow. Khom will be all around us in a moment. You've got to get away!"

Drake stared at her unseeingly. "Get me pencil and paper, quickly." Tels turned

slowly, an unbelieving rage hardening his face. "You would go? You would leave Terra here?"

Drake was silent. The girl put paper on the table; he wrote, rapidly. Tels saw what he wrote.

"Will fear make you forget even your idea?" he said softly, and struck suddenly with his good arm.

Drake went down. Tels, white with pain and anger, cried: "Run, Martin Drake!

We'll hold off the lizards. Run, damn you!"

Drake staggered up, gripping the paper.

"We've all got to get out of here. Those brutes have the scent of my clothes now; in a few minutes they'll break in."

"He's right, Tels," sighed Terra. Drake caught her look and winced. She'd had hope before; now she knew he was a coward.

"The stable," he said, "is the only chance. They may not find us for a while. Bring the flares, Terra."

She took the webbing sack of them, offered her other arm for Tels to lean on. Drake opened the door, and stopped.

\* \* \*

Khom was everywhere. Great armor-plated shadows slid wide-jawed in nervous circles about the shack, drawing ever closer. The vaard in the stable screamed as Drake had never heard one scream before, and every beast in Rikatva was answering. There was a pregnant tension in the air; Death had come in from the desert.

Drake hurled a flare. Khom drew back, and the short path to the stable was momentarily clear. "Come on!" he yelled, and broke into a run, helping to bear Tels' half-helpless weight.

Glaring light and lashing tails, and armored heads that grinned hate at them. Then they were in the odorous dark of



the stable, with the vaard thrashing and shrieking. Drake caught its head-rein; something in the touch of his hand quieted it.

He held out the paper to Terra. "Take this to Thern. Get it into responsible hands. Then, if you can, bring help. Now go, before Khom closes in!" She didn't understand. She stared at him, clutching the paper with the fate of the Reclaimed Areas written on it. "But Martin! You . . . Tels—" Hardly knowing where the words came from, driven by something deep within him, Drake plunged on. "I don't matter; Tels doesn't matter. Nothing matters but getting that paper where it has to go. The Council meets tomorrow

morning! You ride better than I, you're lighter. The vaard will have a better chance to get away. Be you're . . . you're —"

He stopped abruptly, loosing the halter. "Go now, Terra. Hurry!" She was close to him in the dark; suddenly there were soft, warm lips on his, firm and vital. Then she was on the nervous beast, shoving the door wide.

"Throw a flare, Martin! Keep throwing them, until I come back!" Tels grinned. He hadn't seen that kiss. "Terra is a real woman! Where are the flares? I have one hand left!"

Drake saw her go, in the white glare,

low on the vaard's neck, flying in a wide circle for Thern. Then he looked at the prowling, silent things in the naked fields.

"Afraid?" growled Tels.

Martin shook his head. "I . . . I don't know. Look, Tels! There they go!" Khom had made up his mind at last. There was a crash and a splinter as Tels'

shack door went in; the flimsy walls rocked, cracking at the joints as the great bodies went hurtling in. They were mad, now. In a moment they would scent the humans in the stable.

"I'll kill a few!" snarled Tels, and

lobbed two flares in quick succession at his shack. Wood grows dry on Mars. In five minutes it was aflame.

"My God!" groaned Drake. "That's done it. Here they come!" Balking of their objective, the lizards turned to the stable. In a grim, silent horde they came through the blowing dust, the flames red behind them. The two men hurled the precious flares, trying to keep a ring of light around the stable, and Khom prowled in nervous jerks, beyond the blaze, stopped, but only momentarily.

Without warning, Tels crumpled to the floor. His face was gray, sweat on his forehead. "I can't—" he gasped, and fell back against the wall, half fainting.

Drake knew fear, then; the full impact of it, cold and brutal. Tels' strength was taken from him. He stood alone, Martin Drake against the Destroyer. And with that icy realization came another knowledge. He had a job to do, and it didn't matter whether he was afraid or not.

It occurred to him, fleetingly, that maybe this was the secret of living. Picking up the half-empty sack, Drake flung the door open; he could aim better from the outside. Two of the beasts had got through already. A well-placed flare drove them back, but he didn't dare let it happen again. Much closer, and he'd set fire to the barn. Just keep the circle

closed as long as the flares last. Why? Because Tels is in there, and maybe— Well, a man lives as long as he can.

He had the last flare in his hand when he stopped. "Tels!" he shouted. "Tels, look! Flares all along the fields there. Terra's brought the settlers. We're saved, Tels!"

He ran inside, seeing as he did so, that Khom was breaking his battle formation as the flares sizzled up from the rear, heading out into the desert again. Tels still leaned weakly against the wall, but he held up his hand. Drake took it, prepared to help them up.

"No!" said Tels. "I'll faint if I stand up. Shake it, Earthpuppy. Shake it!"