

CLASSICS TO GO

**VENGEANCE ON MARS!
AND THREE MORE STORIES**



JEROME BIXBY

Vengeance On Mars!

And three more Stories

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Vengeance on Mars!

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?

Hale 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, "because we had to. We're in a nut-cracker, Hale. The *Lhrai* 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 *Lhrai* 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