

The Martian Shore

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*Shaan made the longest
crawl in history—to avoid
crawling before tyrants!*



The lone figure trudged across the Hellas Desert toward Alpheus Canal. He moved fast in the low gravity of Mars, but the canal was miles away and the afternoon was far gone.

Robbo Shaan turned his marsuit temperature unit down a degree. He still perspired freely, but he didn't dare turn it any lower. Only a green Earthand would ignore any survival factor when stranded on the Martian desert.

Shaan had no map, no compass. But he remembered there was a private dome in the middle of the canal, just about due east from him. He didn't have enough oxygen to reach it. They had seen to that. But he'd try till he died.

The brand itched on his forehead, and scalded in the sweat that poured down from his close-cropped blond hair. With his marshelmet on, there was no way to scratch it. It throbbed.

Even if he reached the dome, or any dome, that brand guaranteed that he would be shot on sight.

Soldiers of the Imperial Government of Mars had dropped the jetcopter to the sand hours before, and turned Robbo Shaan out to die. He had stood on the red sand and watched the 'copter with the four-winged eagles painted on its sides, as it rose and fled away from him in the direction of Mars City.

He smiled grimly. The Imperial Constitution did not permit the Government to kill a man outright, no matter what his crime. This was the way they did it instead.

Robbo Shaan's crime was simple. He believed in the old democratic form of government the Martian dome-cities had had after the Martian people won their freedom from the Earth corporations in the Charax Uprising—and had recently lost. Shaan had talked democracy, and under the new Imperial Government that was treason.

There was no appeal from his sentence. If he lived—and how could he live without food or oxygen?—he was an outcast. It was a peculiar legal contradiction; the government was prohibited from executing him outright, but, once he had been branded, it was the duty of every loyal citizen to shoot him dead on sight.

Shaan checked his oxygen dial. There was only about an hour's supply left. He couldn't cut his use of it down.

Instinctively, his hand dropped to his belt, but the vial of suspensene he'd carried so long was not there. They wouldn't leave him that. Suspensene was a drug that would put a man in suspended animation for twenty-four hours. It was used in such emergencies when oxygen ran low, to preserve life until rescue came.

What good would it have done him, anyhow? There would be no rescue for him. The radio equipment had been removed from his marshelmet. Even if it hadn't, no one would help a branded man.

He saw the green expanse of the canal when he was still far away from it. It was a thin line that broadened as he approached, panting, getting the best he could from his weary legs with long, floating leaps.

He reached the edge of the cliff. The canal was a hundred feet below him, too far to jump, even on Mars. He walked a mile southward along the rim, seeking a downward ledge.

There was no ledge. But Shaan found a roughness of projecting rocks, where the cliff was not entirely perpendicular. He scrambled down.

He jumped down the last twenty feet. He landed with a muffled crunch of broken branches in the canal sage that stretched in unbroken gray-green expanse from the base of the cliff, as far as the eye could see.

He got to his feet. The canal sage was uniformly knee-high. It was so close-packed that the tops formed an apparently solid carpet on the canal bottom.

He checked his oxygen dial. Only fifteen minutes' supply left. Even if he were on course, the private dome was at least twenty miles away.

He was in the shadow of the cliff here. The small sun of Mars was low in the west. Above him, the brightest stars already shone in the dark blue sky.

The cold of night was beginning to descend. There was frost on the leaves of the canal sage. He switched his marsuit temperature control from "cool" to "heat," but left it low. His body temperature would keep him warm enough as long as he was moving.

Fifteen minutes and then death. Shaan shrugged. He started walking, straight away from the cliff toward the distant sunlight that still touched the canal sage to the east.

His passage through the plants left a path behind him, a path that slowly closed again as though the canal sage moved deliberately to heal the break.

His only hope in that fifteen minutes was to find a giant canal cactus. All Martian plants, the botanists had decided, kept their oxygen supply in their hollow interiors. A full-grown canal cactus was forty feet tall and twenty feet across. If he could break his way into one, it was big enough to supply him with both oxygen and water.

But there was no canal cactus in sight, and he could have seen one miles away above this flat expanse of knee-high sage.

He moved along stubbornly, the canal sage dragging at his feet. He watched the needle of the oxygen dial sink slowly toward the "empty" mark.

The needle hit zero. Shaan stopped. He shook the perspiration from his eyes and looked around him, straining for distance.

No friendly cactus reared anywhere above the gray-green sea of sage. No flash of sunlight revealed a distant dome. There was only the frost-rimed expanse of leaves stretching away, the dark cliff rising behind him and the cold, star-studded sky overhead.

Shaan felt that he was suffocating. Was the residue of oxygen in his marsuit really depleting that fast, or was it the frantic rebellion of his mind against inevitable death?

A great anger swept over him, and with it a bitter defiance. He fumbled at the winged nuts that locked his marshelmet in place. He loosened them, freed them, and dropped them in his pocket.

With a wrench, he unsealed the helmet and lifted it from his head. He lifted his naked face to the thin air of Mars.

Dizziness swept over him and, with it, nausea. The stars spun in the blue-black sky, and went out for him.

He toppled forward, the useless helmet falling from his hands. His unconscious body crashed through the frosty foliage of the canal sage to the turf beneath.

Shaan opened his eyes. At once, he was amazed. He had not expected to open them again, ever. It was impossible that he should.

He was cold. The cold of death? No. He wouldn't be feeling that.

He was in utter blackness, with a fragrant, woodsy aroma in his nostrils. He was lying flat on his stomach, on a surface that was not soft, but springy.

Had he been rescued? Was he in a hospital somewhere? In a dome?

He moved his fingers. They clutched chill, moldy sod.

But he was breathing. The air was sweet and keen, like the air of a terrestrial mountain top. He was alive.

He pulled his knees under him slowly and sat up. His bare head struck a flimsy, rustling barrier and thrust through. The air rushed from his lungs and he gasped in the thin, icy-cold Martian air. He had a single glimpse of jewelled stars in a velvet sky before he threw himself prone beneath the foliage again.

He lay there, recovering his breath. Slowly, realization came to him.

He was under the canopy formed by the foliage of myriads of canal sage plants. The leaves formed a tightly packed roof 18 inches above the ground. Perhaps the plants did store oxygen in their hollow stems. But they trapped it beneath the solid cover of their foliage, too, forming a thin layer of breathable atmosphere along the surface of the canal.

Shaan laughed, a harsh, dry laugh. For years people had been crunching around through the canal sage, harvesting it sometimes for fuel and other purposes. All that time they had not realized they were wading through a layer of breathable oxygen at their very ankles.

The foliage trapped the daytime heat, too. That was why Shaan was only cold, instead of nearly frozen.

Carefully, he got to hands and knees and began to crawl. At once, he ran into a tangle of plant stems. He could make no headway. He subsided and lay down again, thinking it over.

He was hungry and thirsty. Canal sage was better cooked, but it was edible raw. All he had to do was reach out his hands and cram the thick leaves in his mouth, being careful not to denude too much of the canopy above him.

After a while, he was well fed. The leaves had partially assuaged his thirst, too.

As long as he stayed below the canal sage foliage, he could live. He had air, food and water. The roof of plants kept out the night cold. But he could not get to his feet. If he wanted to reach the dome, he would have to crawl twenty miles on hands and knees, without the sun and stars to guide him through the tangled stems.

At least he was alive. That was more than he had expected. He went to sleep.

When he awoke, he was lying on his back and the canal sage foliage was a sheet of golden green above his face. It was daytime. No shaft of sunlight broke through the leaves, but they were a pulsing foam of translucence.

The sun itself was a brighter spot in the roof of light.

The stems of the canal sage plants were not nearly as close together as they had seemed in the darkness. Most of them were at least a foot and a half apart. There were no leaves on the plants below their bushy, flattened tops, and the ground below them was a springy mattress of decaying leaves and twigs. He could move through it, though it would be hard on his hands and knees.

The sun would show him his directions, if he knew what time it was. He had no watch—they didn't waste expensive items like that on men condemned to die in the desert. He thrust his head momentarily above the foliage and located the cliffs in the west. It was morning, apparently about 0800.

He had some difficulty rigging a harness, but at last he managed to attach the marshelmet to his belt. He might need it again.

He ate again and began crawling eastward. The plant stems were not hard to thrust aside with his shoulders when they could be seen.

But crawling was a lot harder than walking. After a while he realized that his marsuit heating unit was still on. He turned it off. He wouldn't need it again until—or unless—he reached a dome.

Twenty miles is a long way to crawl, even on Mars. At the end of two days, he had not found the dome he sought, and his palms and knees were raw.

He had learned to push his head into the foliage so he could still breathe a little, for a short time, and thrust his eyes above the canal sage to survey the terrain around him. He did this periodically, but there was no dome to be seen.

As the shadow of the distant cliff, now dim in the blue haze, crept across the canal sage toward him on the second day of his odyssey, he saw the rounded top of a canal cactus reared above the sage. It was about two miles away. He ducked beneath the leaves and crawled.

When darkness caught him, he forced himself to interrupt his quest. Trying to crawl at night, with nothing to indicate direction, might just take him farther from his objective.

Early the next morning, he reached the base of the cactus, a solid wall of olive green across the limited horizon of his nether world.

He had no knife, nothing at all with a cutting edge. He didn't want to break his marshelmet, even if he could. He began to crawl around the foot of the giant plant, almost hopelessly seeking an opening.

Surprisingly, he found one, but it was small. It was about eight inches in diameter, and it looked as though it had been gnawed.

Shaan propped his chin on his hands and considered. During the two days he had moved beneath the canal sage foliage, he had seen no sign of animal life.

Except for the Martian natives, intelligent creatures who did not breathe but assimilated oxygen from plants and soil and stored it compressed in their tissues, no animal life had been found on Mars. The Martians, with bodies of almost human size, walked on long, stilt-like legs and were strict vegetarians. Reports by occasional canal settlers that they had found traces of animal life—without seeing the animals—were discounted.

But this hole in the canal cactus looked like it had been made by an animal.

The stems of the canal sage were not large, but they were stiff and woody. Shaan found a dead stalk lying on the ground, broke it to a jagged point and started to work on the edges of the hole.

It took him most of the day, but near nightfall he had enlarged the opening until it would admit him. He crawled into the hollow cactus.

It was darker inside than outside, but not completely dark. He was in a giant, ovoid room lit by a dim green twilight.

It was good to stand up straight again, even though the floor curved downward from his entranceway. The occasional drip of water sounded in his ears. Moving forward slowly, he was able to distinguish a small, shallow pool in the low center of the cactus' hull. Since the shell of the big plant curved downward from the entrance, the pool must have been several feet below ground level.

Shaan had not tasted free water since he had emptied his canteen on the desert and thrown it away four days before. He dropped to his knees, unmindful of their rawness, and drank greedily. The water was fresh and cool, with some of the taste of the cactus plant in it.

It grew dark fast. As Shaan lay relaxed on the floor of his new haven, he heard a scurrying and a squeaking in the darkness. Then there came a muted splashing near him.

Shaan held his breath. He had no idea of the size or capabilities of the creatures which had joined him in the cactus. But if they were aware of his presence they had no fear of him. Nor did they molest him.

He saw them for a few moments early the next morning. They were furry, squirrel-like creatures without tails, that ran on their two hind legs and held hand-like paws against their chests. They stared at him with big bright eyes, about half a dozen of them, before they ran out through the hole he had enlarged.

Living in the cactus was more satisfactory than living outside. Shaan made it his headquarters. He slept in it at night, amid the

furry animals, which accepted his presence without question, merely avoiding any close approach.

By day, he crawled out in search of the dome. He did it systematically, going in a different direction each day. He tried sixteen directions without success.

A day just wasn't long enough. The second two-day trip he made, going out one day, sleeping out and returning the second day, he saw the sun flash off a faraway plastic dome at midafternoon.

Shaan pushed his face through the leaves and stared across a hundred-foot cleared space at the dome. The canal sage was very efficient. When the space had been cleared for the dome, the sage foliage had grown down to the ground level around the bare circle to prevent the life-giving oxygen under it from dissipating.

The transparent hemisphere glistened dully in the sunlight. It covered about an acre of ground. Near one side was the small home of a canal settler. Under the protective dome terrestrial vegetables grew and terrestrial animals lived.

Long ago Shaan had jettisoned his oxygen cylinders to save weight, but they would have done him no good had he kept them. His marshelmet, however, would hold enough air for him to cross the cleared area to the dome. He pulled it on, under the leaves.

Then he remembered something and took it off again. He smeared dirt over the brand on his forehead, hoping he was concealing it. He put the helmet back on.

Getting to his feet, he ran across the clearing and through the open outer door of the airlock. He shut it behind him and, waiting a few minutes, took off the helmet. There was air in the airlock.

He had done this without fear or reflection. On a planet like Mars, only a thin line of oxygen stood between life and death. The outer door to every airlock on every dome stood open unless the inner door was opened, and oxygen automatically filled the airlock when the outer door was closed. It was a custom which could save lives.

The inner airlock door was a different proposition. No one liked to be caught unawares by visitors. It was locked.

Shaan knew the closing of the outer airlock door had set off an alarm inside the dome. He waited. He could see the house and the gardens, a little distorted, through the transparent plastic of the inner door.

After a few moments, a figure emerged from the house and approached the airlock. When the figure got closer, it became a young woman in the shorts and blouse customarily worn inside the domes. She held a heat-gun in her hand.

"Who is it?" she asked through the communicator.

"I'm Robbo Shaan," he answered. "I'm a government mail pilot. My plane went down on the desert."

"Why didn't you wait for rescue?"

"Radio went out before I crashed. Helmet radio, too. I'll have to call for help from here."

"You can wait in the airlock. I'll radio Mars City."

"I'm hungry," he said, "and thirsty."

That was an appeal that could not be ignored.

"I'll let you in," she said after a moment's hesitation. "But I have a gun."

"I don't," he answered, spreading his hands and turning so she could see all around his belt.

The inner airlock door opened, and Shaan entered the dome. The smell of the air brought memories of his boyhood on Earth.

The girl stood away from him, holding the heat-gun on him steadily. She had brown eyes and red-gold hair that tumbled to her shoulders. Shaan judged her to be about seventeen years old.

Shaan smiled at her through his blond beard, and she lowered the muzzle of the gun. He could move now, but they probably were being watched from the house. And any minute she might discover the brand on his dirty face.

"Where's your father?" he asked. "Or your husband?"

"Where are your oxygen tanks?" she countered, the gun coming up again.

"Ran out of oxygen," he replied. "They're in the sage just outside the dome. I got here just in time. The straps broke on them and I'd been carrying them in my arms for six hours."

Apparently the answer satisfied her.

"I'm Lori MkDowl," she said. "My father hasn't come in from the mine yet. Come on up to the house."

Now? No. They probably were still being watched from the house. He walked across the lawn of Earth grass with her.

It was a small plastic-brick house like any Martian house. As they entered the parlor, a long-legged girl of about fifteen left an open front window, a heat-gun dangling in her hand.

"Is he harmless, Lori?" she asked.

"I think so," said Lori. "Mr. Shaan, this is my sister, Vali."

Vali MkDowl laid her heat-gun on a table and held out a hand to Shaan in frank welcome. Her hair was black and her deep blue eyes held more curiosity and less reserve than those of her sister.

Lori had laid her gun aside, too. His task would be made easier, Shaan thought, by the fact that these teen-aged sisters probably didn't see a young man oftener than once a year and were lonesome.

"I'd like to talk to your mother, girls," said Shaan, more to confirm a suspicion than anything else.

"Mother's dead," said Vali. "We live here alone with father."

"But we can take care of ourselves, Mr. Shaan," warned Lori, her hand near her gun.

"I'm sure you can. Do you mind if I clean up a little?"

"Bathroom's across the hall," said Lori. "I'll fix supper."

The marsuits were hanging in the hall: Lori's, Vali's and an extra one that looked like it was big enough for Shaan. He stripped off his own worn and dirty one, emerging in brown coveralls, and went into the bathroom.

While he washed, his nebulous plan of action crystalized. First he must gain possession of the heat-guns in the house and cripple the dome radio. It would be dangerous, maintaining constant watch over three hostile people, but he could live here indefinitely while evolving a permanent plan of existence.

He found gauze and adhesive tape in the bathroom cabinet and put a bandage over the flaming brand on his forehead. He walked out into the parlor.

"I called Mars City and told them to send a rescue 'copter," said Vali, gesturing toward the radio in the corner. "Say, what happened to your head?"

"Banged it on the corner of the cabinet," said Shaan. "What did Mars City say?"

"Haven't got a reply yet. Should hear from them in a minute."

He hadn't expected the radio message to be sent until the girls' father arrived. This changed his plans. Now he'd have to appropriate a marsuit and supplies and flee in the dome's groundcar. What then, he didn't know. There could be no refuge for condemned democrats anywhere on Mars.

Vali's gun was strapped to her side now. Lori evidently had taken her own weapon into the kitchen with her. Lori was taking no chances, and not letting her sister take any.

"I left my watch in the bathroom," said Shaan and went back into the hall. Quickly, he appropriated the hypodermics of suspensene from the pockets of two of the marsuits, and stepped back into the parlor.

"Here comes Mars City now," said Vali, donning the earphones.

He stepped up behind her as she turned to fiddle with the dials. His left hand clasped over her mouth, while with his right he plunged the needle into the fleshy part of her upper arm. Dropping the empty hypodermic vial, he caught her wrist as she reached for her gun.

In a moment, Vali went limp. She would remain in suspended animation for approximately twenty-four hours.

The other hypodermic syringe in his hand, Shaan moved through the dining room toward the kitchen.

"Has father come in yet, Vali?" called Lori.

"She's still talking to Mars City," said Shaan, entering the kitchen.

Lori was standing at the stove, her back to him. He reached her in a single floating stride. Her shorts-clad rump presented the best target, and he jabbed the needle into it.

She straightened with a yelp, and he snatched the heat-gun from her holster at the same time. Whirling on him, she grappled with him, but he held the gun above his head, out of her reach, until she collapsed in his arms.

He laid the heat-guns together on the radio table and carried the girls into a bedroom across the hall. He stretched the still figures side by side on a bed and pulled a sheet up to their chins.

He would have to ambush their father and get the groundcar. He stepped back into the hall, closing the door behind him.

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