



Flamedown
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Charlie Holmes lost touch with reality amid rending and shattering sounds that lingered dimly. Blackness engulfed him in a wave of agony.

He was not sure exactly when the possibility of opening his eyes occurred to him. Vaguely, he could sense—"remember" was too definite—much tugging and hauling upon his supine body. It doubtless seemed justifiable, but he flinched from recalling more clearly that which must have been so extremely unpleasant.

Gently, now, he tried rolling his head a few inches right, then left. When it hurt only one-tenth as much as he feared, he let his eyes open.

"Hel-lo!" rasped the bulbous creature squatting beside his pallet.

Charlie shut his eyes quickly, and very tightly.

Something with a dampish, spongy tip, probably one of the grape-red tentacles he had glimpsed, prodded his shoulder.

"Hel-lo!" insisted the scratchy voice.

Charlie peeped warily, was trapped at it, and opened his eyes resignedly.

"Where'n'ell am I?" he inquired.

It sounded very trite, even in his confused condition. Sections of the dark red skin before him, especially on the barrel-shaped belly, quivered as he spoke.

"Surely," grated the remarkable voice, "you remember something?"

"The crash!" gasped Charlie, sitting up abruptly.

He held his breath, awaiting the knifing pain it seemed natural to expect. When he felt none, he cautiously fingered his ribs, and then a horrid thought prompted him to wiggle his bare toes. Everything seemed to be in place.

He lay in a small room, on a thin pallet of furs. Floor and walls of slick, ochre clay reflected the bright outside light pouring through a wide doorway.

"What's all the sand?" he demanded, squinting at the heatwaves outside.

"You do not recognize it? Look again, Earthman!"

Earthman! thought Charlie. *It must be real: I can still see him. What a whack on the head I must have got!*

"You are in pain?" asked the creature solicitously.

"Oh ... no. Just ... I can't remember. The crash ... and then—"

"Ah, yes. You have not been conscious for some time." His reddish host rippled upward to stand more or less erect upon three thick

tentacles. "Even with us, memory is slow after shock. And you may be uneasy in the lighter gravity."

Light gravity! reflected Charlie. *This can only mean—MARS! Sure! That must be it—I was piloting a rocket and cracked up somewhere on Mars.*

It felt right to him. He decided that the rest of his memory would return.

"Are you able to rise?" asked the other, extending a helpful tentacle.

The Earthman managed to haul himself stiffly to his feet.

"Say, my name is Holmes," he introduced himself dizzily.

"I am Kho Theki. In your language, learned years since from other spacemen, I might say 'Fiery Canalman.'"

"*Has to be Mars,*" muttered Charlie under his breath. "What a bump! When can you show me what's left of the ship?"

"There will be no time," answered the Martian.

Bunches of small muscles twitched here and there across the front of his round, pudgy head. Charlie was getting used to the single eye, half the size of an orange and not much duller. With imagination, the various lumps and organs surrounding it might be considered a face.

"The priestesses will lead the crowd here," predicted Kho. "They know I took an Earthman, and I fear they have finished with the others."

"Finished with—*What?*" demanded the Earthman, shaking his head in hopes of clearing it enough to figure out what was wrong.

"It has been an extremely dry season." Kho rippled his tentacles and moved lissomely to the doorway, assuming a grotesquely furtive posture as he peered out. "The people are maddened by the drought. They will be aroused to sacrifice you to the Canal Gods, like the others who survived."

"Canal gods!" croaked Charlie. "This can't be right! Aren't you civilized here? I can't be the only Earthman they've seen!"

"It is true that Earthmen are perfectly safe at most times."

"But the laws! The earth consul—"

Kho snapped the tip of a tentacle at him.

"The canals are low. You can feel the heat and dryness for yourself. The crowds are inflamed by temple prophecies. And then, your ship, flaming down from the skies—"

He snapped all this tentacle tips at once.

From somewhere outside, a threatening murmur became audible. It was an unholy blend of rasping shouts and shriller chanting, punctuated

by notes of a brassy gong. As Charlie listened, the volume rose noticeably.

Kho reached out with one tentacle and wrapped six inches about the Earthman's wrist. When he plunged through the doorway, Charlie's force went right with him.

Whipping around a corner of the hut, he had time for a quick squint at the chanters. Kho alone had looked weirdly alien. Two hundred like him—!

Led by a dozen bulgy figures in streaming robes, masked and decorated in brass, the natives were swarming over the sand toward the fugitives. They had evidently been busy. Above a distant cluster of low buildings, a column of smoke spiraled upward suggestively.

Kho led the way at a flowing gallop over a sandstone ridge and down a long slope toward what looked like the junction of two gullies.

"The canal," he wheezed. "With luck, we may find a boat."

A frenzied screech went up as the mob topped the ridge and regained sight of them. Charlie, having all he could do to breathe in the thin air, tried to shake his wrist loose. Now that they were descending the slope, he saw where the water was. They slid down a four-foot drop in a cloud of fine, choking dust, and were faced by several puntlike craft stranded on the mudflat beyond. The water was fifty feet further.

"We should have gone down-stream," said Kho, "but we can wade."

Their momentum carried them several steps into the mud before Charlie realized how wrong that was. Then, as they floundered about to regain the solid bank, it became apparent that they would never reach it in time.

"They are catching us," rasped Kho.

The howling crowd was scarcely a hundred yards away. The heat waves shimmered above the reddish desert sand until the Martians were blurred before Charlie's burning eyes. His feet churned the clinging mud, and he felt as if he were running in a dream.

"I'm sorry you're in it, too," he panted.

"It does not matter. I act as I must."

The Earthman rubbed sweat from his eyes with the back of a muddy hand.

"Everything is wrong," he mumbled. "I still can't remember cracking up the ship. Why did I always want to be a rocket pilot? Well ... I made my bed!"

The oncoming figures wavered and blurred in the heat. Kho emitted a grating sound reminiscent of an Earthly chuckle.

"As do all you mortals—who finally have to lie in them," he rasped. "I will tell you now, since I can carry this episode little farther. You have never piloted a spaceship."

Charlie gaped at him incredulously.

"You ... you ... what about the wreck?"

"It was a truck that hit you, Charles Holmes. You have no more sense than to be crossing the street with your nose in a magazine just purchased on the corner."

With some dulled, creeping, semi-detached facet of his mind, Charlie noted that the running figures still floated above the sand without actually drawing near.

"Are you—Do you mean I'm ... d-d-d—?"

"Of course you are," grated Kho amiably. "And in view of certain actions during your life, there will be quite a period of—shall we say—probation. When I was assigned to you, your reading habits suggested an amusing series of variations. You cannot know how dull it is to keep frustrating the same old dreams!"

"Amusing?" repeated Charlie, beyond caring about the whimper in his tone.

The mob was dissolving into thin smoke, and the horizon was shrinking.

Kbo himself was altering into something redder of skin but equipped with a normal number of limbs, discounting the barbed tail. The constant heat of the "desert" began, at last, to seem explicable.

"For me a great amusement," grinned Kho, displaying hideous tusks. "Next time, I'll be a Venusian. You will lose again. Then we can visit other planets, and stars ... oh, we shall see a lot of each other!"

He cheerfully polished one horn with a clawed finger.

"*You* won't enjoy it!" he promised.

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