

ASTOUNDING

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Science Fiction 25c



FOR VICTORY
BUY WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS

**OPPOSITES
REACT**
by
WILL STEWART
JANUARY • 1943

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THE CAVE

By P. Schuyler Miller

● On Mars the laws and customs of existence must be different, and when a dozen of a dozen races seek shelter in a cave—

Illustrated by Fax

The cave measured less than a hundred feet from end to end.

It opened at the base of a limestone ridge which rose like a giant, rounded fin out of the desert. Its mouth was a flat oval, a shallow alcove scoured out of the soft stone by wind and sand. Near one end a smooth-walled tunnel sloped gently back into the ridge. Twenty feet from the entrance it turned sharply to the right and in a few feet swung back to the left, paralleling its original course. Here it leveled out into a broad, flat channel not more than four feet high. This was the main chamber of the cave.

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The big room, like the rest of the cave, had been leached out of the limestone by running water, long before. The water had followed a less resistant seam in the rock, dissolving out a passage whose low ceiling rose and fell a little with irregularities in the harder stratum overhead, whose floor was flat and water-polished in spots and in others buried under a fine yellow clay. A little past the midpoint the room opened out into a kind-of inverted funnel in which a tall man could stand erect, a tapering chimney which quickly dwindled to a shaft barely big enough to admit a man's hand. Here the floor of the cave was

lower and the walls, which had drawn together until they were less than ten feet apart, were ribbed and terraced with flowstone.

Beyond the chimney the ceiling dropped suddenly to within a few inches of the floor. By lying flat on his face and squirming along between the uneven layers of rock a thin man might have entered here. After measuring his length perhaps three times he would have been able to raise himself on one elbow and twist into a sitting position, his back against the end wall of the cave and his head and shoulders wedged into a crevice which cut across the main passage at right angles. This crevice lay directly under the highest part of the ridge and vanished into darkness above and on either side. Water must at one time have flowed through it, for the harder silicious layers in the limestone stood out on the walls in low relief like fine ruled lines drawn in sooty black. Not even air stirred in it now.

Twenty feet in the winding entry—six or eight feet at the bend—another thirty to the chimney and fifteen or twenty more to the back wall; it was a small cave. It was also very old.

The limestone of which the ridge was formed was perhaps the oldest exposed rock on the surface of that small old world. It had been laid down in fairly deep water at a time when there were seas where there were only deserts now. There had been life in those seas; where wind or water had worn away the softer lime, their fossil bodies stood out from the surface of the gray stone. There were fluted shells like glistening black trumpets—swarms of tiny big-eyed things with fantastically shaped armor and many sprawling arms—long ropes of delicate, saw-edged weed whose fossil tissues were still stained a dull purple—occasionally fragments of some larger thing like an armored, blunt-headed fish. They had been alive, swarming and breeding in the shallow sea, when Earth was no more than a scabbed-over globe of slowly jelling flame.

The cave itself was very old. It had been made by running water, and it was a long time since there was much water on the dying world. Water, sour with soil acids leached from the black humus of a forest floor, had seeped down into the network of joint-planes which intersected the flat-lying limestone beds, eating away the soft stone, widening cracks into crannies and crannies into high-arched rooms, rushing along the harder strata and tunneling through the softer ones, eventually bursting out into the open again at the base of a mossy ledge and babbling away over the rocks to join a brook, a river, or the sea.

Millions of years had passed since there were rivers and seas on Mars.

Things change slowly underground. After a cave has died—after the source of moisture which

created it have shifted or dried up—it may lie without changing for centuries. A man may set his foot in the clay of its floor and go away, and another man may come a hundred or a thousand or ten thousand years afterward and see his footprint there, as fresh as though it had been made yesterday. A man may write on the ceiling with the smoke of a torch, and if there is still a little life in the cave and moisture in the rock, what he has written will gradually film over with clear stone and last forever. Rock may fall from the ceiling and bury portions of the floor, or seal off some rooms completely. Water may return and wash away what has been written or coat it with slime. But if a cave has died—if water has ceased to flow and its walls and ceiling are dry—things seldom change.

Most of the planet's surface had been desert for more millions of years than anyone has yet estimated. From the mouth of the cave its dunes and stony ridges stretched away like crimson ripples left on a beach after a wave has passed. They were dust rather than sand: red, ferric dust ground ever finer by the action of grain against grain, milling over and over through the centuries. It lay in a deep drift in the alcove and spilled down into the opening of the cave; it carpeted the first twenty-foot passage as with a strip of red velvet, and a little of it passed around the angle in the tunnel into the short cross-passage. Only the very finest powder, well-nigh impalpable, hung in the still air long enough to pass the second bend and reach the big room. Enough had passed to lay a thin, rusty mantle over every horizontal surface in the cave. Even in the black silt at the very back of the cave, where the air never stirred, there was a soft red bloom on the yellow flowstone.

The cave was old. Animals had sheltered in it. There were trails trodden into the dry clay, close to the walls, made before the clay had dried. There was no dust on these places—animals still followed them when they needed to. There was a mass of draggled, shredded stalks and leaves from some desert plant, packed into the cranny behind a fallen rock and used as a nest. There were little piles of excreta, mostly the chitinous shells of insectlike creatures and the indigestible cellulose of certain plants. Under the chimney the ceiling was blackened by smoke, and there were shards of charcoal and burned bone mixed with the dust of the floor. There were places where the clay had been chipped and dug away to give more headroom, or to make a flat place where a bowl could be set down. There were other signs as well.

The *grak* reached the cave a little after dawn. He had been running all night, and as the sun rose he had seen the shadow of the ridge drawn in a long black line across the crimson dunes, and

turned toward it. He ran with the tireless lope of the desert people, his splayed feet sinking only a little way into the soft dust where a man of his weight would have floundered ankle deep.

He was a young male, taller than most of his kind, better muscled and fatter. His fur was sleek and thick, jet black with a pattern of rich brown. The colors in his cheek patches were fresh and bright, and his round black eyes shone like disks of polished coal.

He had been a hunter for less than one season. His tribe was one of the marauding bands which summered in the northern oases, raiding down into the lowlands in winter when the dry plateau became too cold and bare even for their hardy breed. It had fared better than most, for it had had little contact with man. The *grak* carried a knife which he had made for himself out of an eight-inch bar of beryllium copper, taken in his first raid. It was the only human thing he owned. Its hilt was of bone, intricately carved with the clan symbols of his father-line; its burnished blade was honed to a wicked double edge. It was the finest knife any of the desert folk had ever seen, and he had had to fight for it more than once. The desert tribes retained the old skills of metal working which the softer-living pastoral greenlanders had forgotten, and his tribe, the *Begar*, were among the best of the dryland smiths.

He wore the knife tucked into the short kilt of plaited leather which was his only garment. The Old One of his father-line had given it to him on the day he became a hunter and could no longer run naked like a cub. It was soft and pliable with long wear and oiled to a mahogany brown almost as dark and rich as his own chest patterns. There were black stains on it which he knew were blood, for the Old One had been one of the fiercest slayers of his line and the kilt had come down to him from an even greater warrior in his own youth. The very pattern in which the thin strips of *zek* hide were woven had lost its meaning, though it undoubtedly had been and still was of great virtue.

It was cold in the shadow of the ridge, and the *grak's* long fur fluffed out automatically to provide extra insulation. He looked like a big black owl as he stood scanning the western sky, sniffing the wind with his beaklike nose. There was a tawny band low on the horizon, brightening as the sun rose. He had smelled a storm early in the night, for he had all the uncanny weather-wiseness of his race and was sensitive to every subtle change in the quality of the atmosphere. He had started for the nearest arm of the greenlands, intending to claim the hospitality of the first village he could find, but the storm front was moving faster than he could run. He had seen the ridge only just in time.

He had recognized the place as he approached, though he had never seen it and none of his tribe

had visited this part of the desert for many seasons. Such landmarks were part of the education of every dryland cub, and until they had become thoroughly ingrained in his wrinkled young brain he could not hope to pass the hunter's tests and win a hunter's rights. The cave was where he had known it would be, and he clucked softly with satisfaction as he saw the weathered symbol carved in the stone over the opening. The desert people had long ago discarded the art of writing, having no use for it, but the meaning of certain signs had been passed down as a very practical part of their lore. This was a cave which the *grak's* own forefathers had used and marked.

He studied the signs in the dust around the entrance of the cave. He was not the first to seek shelter there. The feathery membranes of his nose unfolded from their horny sheath, recording the faint scents which still hung in the thin air. They confirmed what his eyes had told him. The cave was occupied.

The wind was rising fast. Red dust devils whirled ahead of the advancing wall of cloud. Red plumes were streaming from the summit of every dune. Making the sign of peace-coming, the *grak* stooped and entered the cave. Beyond the second bend in the passage was darkness which not even his owl's eyes, accustomed to the desert nights, could penetrate. However, he did not need to see. The sensitive organs of touch which were buried in the gaudy skin of his cheek patches picked up infinitesimal vibrations in the still air and told him accurately where there were obstacles. His ears were pricked for the slightest sound. His nose picked up a mixture of odors—his own characteristic scent, the dry and slightly musty smell of the cave itself, and the scents of the other creatures with which he would have to share it.

He identified them, one by one. There were four or five small desert creatures which had more to fear from him than he from them. There was one reptilian thing which under other circumstances might be dangerous, and which still might be if the peace were broken. And there was a *zek*.

The carnivore was as big and nearly as intelligent as the tribesman himself. Its kind waged perpetual war on the flocks of the greenland people, and rarely visited the oases, but when one did wander into the desert it was the most dreaded enemy of the dryland tribes. It stole their cubs from beside their very campfires and attacked full-grown hunters with impunity. Its mottled pelt was the choicest prize a hunter could bring back as proof of his prowess. To some of the more barbaric tribes of the north it was more than just a beast—it was His emissary.

A sudden gust from the passage at his back told the *grak* that the storm was breaking. In a matter

of minutes the air would be unbreathable outside. Softly, so as not to arouse the savage beast's suspicions, he began to murmur the ritual of the peace. His fingers were on the hilt of his knife as he began, but as the purring syllables went out into the hollow darkness, his nostrils told him that the fear-odor was diminishing. Somewhere in the dark a horny paw scuffed on the dry clay and there was an instant reek of terror from some of the smaller things, but the *zek* made no sign. It was satisfied to keep the peace. Moving cautiously, the *grak* found a hollow in the wall near the entry and sat down to wait, squatting with his knees tucked up close under his furry belly, the hard rock at his back. The knife he laid on the floor beside his hand where it would be ready if he needed it. For a time his senses remained keyed to fever pitch, but gradually his tenseness eased. They were all *grekka* here—all living things, united in the common battle for existence against a cruel and malignant Nature. They knew the law and the brotherhood, and they would keep the truce as long as the storm lasted. Gradually the nictitating lids slipped across his open eyes and he sank into a half-sleep.

Harrigan blundered into the cave by pure luck. He knew nothing about Mars or its deserts except what the Company put in its handbook, and that was damn little. He was a big man and a strong man, born in the mountains with a more than ordinary tolerance for altitude, and he had had to spend less than a week in the dome before they shifted him to the new post in the eastern Sabaeus. He did what he was told and no more than he was told, laid away his pay every week in anticipation of one almighty spree when they brought him in at the next opposition, and had nothing but contempt for the native Martians. *Grekkas* they were called, and that was all he knew or cared about them. To him they looked like animals and they were animals, in spite of the fact that they could talk and build houses and kept herds of peg-legged monstrosities which seemed to serve as cattle. Hell—parrots could talk and ants kept cattle!

Harrigan had been a miner on Earth. He was that here, but he couldn't get used to the idea that plants could be more valuable than all the copper and tungsten and carnotite in the world. The desert and its barren red hills nagged at him, and whenever he could get time off he explored them. The fact that he found only rocks and sand did nothing to extinguish his sullen conviction that there was treasure incalculable here somewhere if only the damned natives would talk or the Company would listen to a man who knew minerals better than the big shots knew the swing of their secretaries hips.

The fact was, of course, as the Company knew very well, that Martian mineral deposits had been

exhausted by a native Martian civilization pursuing its inevitable way to an inevitable end at a time when Adam and Eve probably had tails. That the descendants of that civilization were still alive, even on a basis of complete savagery, spoke volumes for the stamina of the native race. Such arguments, however, would have meant less than nothing to a man of Harrigan's type. There were mines on Earth. There were mines on the Moon. Hell—there were mines on Mars!

This time he had overstayed his luck. To him the low yellow wall of cloud on the western horizon was only a distant range of hills which he might some day visit and where he might find wealth enough to set him up in liquor for the rest of his life. He had spent the night in the cab of his sand car, and it was not until the clouds were a sullen precipice towering halfway up the sky that he understood what he was heading into. He swung around and headed back, but by then it was too late.

When the storm hit it was like night. The air was a semisolid mass through which the sand car wallowed blindly with only its instrument board to show where it was going. Dust swiftly clogged the air intake and he had to take out the filters, put on his mask, and hope for the best. It didn't come. In seconds the air inside the cab was a reddish mist and dust was settling like fine red pepper on every exposed surface. The wind seized the squat machine and rocked it like a skiff in a typhoon, but Harrigan could only hang on, peer red-eyed through dust-coated goggles at his dust-covered instruments, and wonder where he was.

The floundering car climbed painfully to the top of a monster dune, pushed its blunt snout out over the steep leading edge, slewed violently around and started down. Harrigan yanked despairingly at the steering levers; they were packed tight with dust and refused to move. He did not see the ridge until the car smashed head on into it. There was a despairing gurgle from the engine, a last clatter of broken bearings, and the car stopped. At once sand began to pile up behind and around it, and Harrigan, picking himself up off the floor of the cab, saw that if he didn't get out fast he would be buried where he sat.

He struggled out on the lee side of the car into a gale that bit into him like an icy knife. He could not see the car when he had taken one step away from it. The dust drove through every seam and patch of his clothes and filtered in around the edges of his mask. It was sucked into his mouth and nose and gritted under his swollen eyelids. It was everywhere, and in no time it would smother him.

The car was lost, though he was probably less than ten feet from it. The wind screamed past

him in unholy glee, tearing at every loose flap on his coat, chilling him to the bone. He took half a dozen blundering steps, knee-deep in the soft dust, stumbled, and came down on his knees at the foot of the cliff. His outthrust hands met solid rock. He struggled forward on his knees and peered at it through crusted goggles. It was limestone, and where there was limestone there might be a cave. Foot by foot he felt his way along the uneven surface of the ridge until suddenly it dropped away in front of him, he staggered forward, and fell on his hands and knees in the entrance of the cave.

His head had clipped the low overhang as he fell and it was a minute or two before he realized where he was. Almost automatically, then, he crawled ahead until his skull rammed hard into another wall. He sat gingerly back on his heels and clawed at his mask. It was completely plugged with dust and utterly useless. He lifted it off his face and took a slow breath. There was dust in the air—plenty of it—but he could breathe.

He groped about him in the pitch dark, found an opening in the right-hand wall, and crawled in. Almost immediately there was another sharp turn and the passage suddenly opened out on either side and left him crouching at the entrance of what he knew must be a good-sized room.

Harrigan knew caves too well to take chances with them. What lay ahead might be a room or it might be a pit dropping to some lower level. He had a feeling that it was big. He found the corner where the left-hand wall swung back, moved up against it, moistened his lips with a thick, dry tongue, and shouted:

"Hoy!"

The echo rattled back at him like gunfire. The place was big, but not too big. What he needed now was water and a light.

He had both. Dust had worked in around the stopper of his canteen until he could barely start the threads, but one last savage twist of his powerful fingers did the trick. There wasn't much left. He let a few drops trickle over his tongue and down his throat, wiped the caked dust off the threads with a finger, and screwed the cap back on. These storms lasted for days sometimes, and it was all the water in the world as far as he was concerned.

Light came next. Harrigan had spent too much time underground to be afraid of the dark, but it was plain common sense to want to see what you were getting into. Harrigan hated mysteries. If he knew what he was facing he could fight his way through anything, but he hated blind fumbling and he hated the dark.

Enough water had evaporated from the open canteen in the minute or two he had had the cap off to appreciably raise the moisture content of the cave—at least for the Martians. To their acute

senses it was the equivalent of a heavy fog. A few feet away in the blackness the *grak* awoke with a start. Farther back in the cave one of the small animals stirred eagerly. And the *zek* sneezed.

Harrigan's blundering approach had roused the occupants of the cave, and every eye, ear and nose had been trained on him when he appeared. One rodentlike creature made a panicky rush as it got his scent, only to freeze in terror as it nearly bumped into the *zek*. The peace, for the moment, was suspended—a new factor had entered the situation and a new equilibrium must be reached. They quietly awaited developments.

Harrigan had missed all this preliminary activity in his efforts to find out where he was, rub the dust out of his eyes, and get a few drops of water down his parched gullet. But when the *zek* sneezed, the sudden sound was like an explosion in his ears. In the dead silence which followed he could clearly hear the sound of quiet breathing. It was close to him, and it came from more than one place. He had to have a light!

There should have been a torch in the pocket of his coverall. There wasn't. He had lost it or left it in the car. He had a lighter, though. He ripped feverishly at the zipper of his coverall. It slid open a few inches with a sound like the crackle of lightning and jammed. Sweat dripping from his forehead he sat back on his heels and fumbled for his gun, but there was no movement from the things in the dark. Slowly and softly he slipped two fingers into his pocket and found the lighter. Leveling the gun at the blank blackness in front of him he lifted the lighter above his head and flipped off the cap.

The burst of yellow flame was dazzling. Then he saw their eyes—dozens of little sparks of green and red fire staring out of the dark. As his own eyes adjusted he saw the *grak*, huddled like a woolly black gargoyle in his corner. The Martian's huge round eyes were watching him blankly, his grinning mouth was slightly open over a saw-edged line of teeth, and his pointed ears were spread wide to catch every sound. His beaklike, shining nose and bright red cheek patches gave him the look of a partly plucked owl. He had a wicked-looking knife in his spidery fingers.

Harrigan's gaze flickered around the circle of watching beasts. He knew nothing of Martian animals, except for the few domesticated creatures the greenlanders kept, and they made a weird assortment. They were mostly small, ratty things with big eyes and feathery antennae in place of noses. Some of them were furred and some had horny or scaly armor. All of them were variously decorated with fantastic collections of colored splotches, crinkled horns, and faceted spines

which presumably were attractive to themselves or their mates. At the far end of the cave, curled up in a bed of dry grass, was a lean spotted thing almost as big as the little native which stared at him with malevolent red eyes set close together over a grinning, crocodilian snout. As he eyed it, it yawned hideously and dropped its head on its crossed forepaws—paws like naked, taloned hands. It narrowed its eyes to crimson slits and studied him insolently from under the pallid lids. It looked nasty, and his fingers closed purposefully over the butt of his gun.

The *grak's* cackle of protest stopped him. The only word he could make out was *bella*—peace. He knew that because he had a woman named Bella back in New York, or he had had before he signed on with the Company. Besides, it was part of the spiel you were supposed to rattle off every time you talked to one of the damned little rats. It was all the Martian he knew, so he spat it out, keeping one eye on the other beast.

This was the first man the *grak* had ever seen. It was a monstrous-looking thing, wrapped in layer after layer of finely plaited fabric which must have taken his mates many years to weave, even if their clumsy fingers were as deft as those of the greenlanders, who occasionally did such things. A thrilling philosophical problem was teasing the *grak's* young brain. Was or was not this man of the *grekka*?

To a native Martian the term *grekka* means literally "living things." Any creature native to the planet is a *grak*; all of them, separately or collectively, are *grekka*. The first men to come in contact with the native race heard the word used to designate the Martians themselves and assumed that it was the Martian equivalent of "men." Graziani, of course, as an anthropologist of note, immediately realized the truth of the matter—the situation is duplicated again and again among human aborigines—but the label stuck. Nor did that matter too much, for *grekka* did include the natives and made perfectly good sense when it was used as men proceeded to use it. What did matter was that the word was also the key to the whole elaborate structure of Martian psychology.

Millions of years of unceasing struggle with the forces of an inclement environment on a swiftly maturing and rapidly dying planet have ingrained in the native Martian race, greenlanders and drylanders alike, the fundamental concept that Nature is their undying enemy. Life for them is a bitter fight against overwhelming odds, with an invisible foe who will use every possible means to grind out the little spark of ego in each round, furry Martian skull. You find it in the oldest legends: always the wily native hero is outwitting—there is no other word for it—the evil purposes

of the personified, malignant Universe.

Grekka is the ultimate expression of this grim philosophy. In the battle for life all living things—all *grekka*—are brothers. No Martian would ever dispute the theory of evolution—it is the very core of his existence that all beasts are brothers. That is a somewhat oversimplified statement of the fact, for from there on *grekka* becomes entangled in the most elaborate maze of qualifications and exceptions which a once highly civilized race has been able to devise over a period of millions of years. Your native Martian, drylander or greenlander, will help his brother beast whenever the latter is clearly losing out in a battle with Nature, but there are certain things which the individual is supposed to be able to do for himself if he is not to give unholy satisfaction to Him—the Great Evil One—the personification of the universal doom which pours unending misfortune on all *grekka* alike.

The distinction is one of those things which no logician will ever be able to work out. It is one thing for the desert tribes and something else for the lowlanders. The *Begar* will draw the line at something which is a sacred duty of every *Gorub*, in spite of the fact that the two tribes have lived side by side on a more or less friendly basis for generations. One clan—even one father-line—may and must act in ways which no other clan on Mars may duplicate without eternally losing a varying number of points in its game with Him and His aids.

What puzzled the young *grak* of the cave was whether man—specifically Harrigan—was *grekka*. If he was, he was an innate member of the brotherhood of living things and subject to its laws. If he wasn't, then he could only be a personification or extension of the inimical First Principle Himself, and hence an inherent enemy. Since the time of Graziani and the Felmming expedition every Martian native, individual by individual and tribe by tribe, has had to make this decision for himself, and by it govern his further relations with humanity. The *Begar* had had too little contact with mankind to have needed to make such a decision as a tribe. Now the young *grak* decided to reserve judgment, keep his eyes open, and let the man prove himself by his further actions.

Harrigan, of course, knew absolutely nothing of all this. It would probably not have mattered if he had. What some damned animal thought about the Universe was nothing to him.

For a moment there had been death in the air. Now the tension was vanishing. The smaller animals were settling down again, the little *grak* grinning and nodding as he squatted down in the corner. Only the *zek's* slitted eyes were still studying him with cold indifference. The damned

nightmare was curled up in the one place in the cave where a man could stand up! Harrigan gave it eye for eye, and all the little furry and scaly creatures lifted their heads and watched them while the *grak* blinked worriedly. They could all smell the hostility between the two. The *zek* yawned again, showing an evil double line of knife-edged fangs and a leprous white gullet, and flexed the mighty muscles which lay like slabs of molded steel across its massive shoulders. Harrigan sat glumly down where he was, his back against the cold stone, his gun on the floor beside him, the lighter wedged into a crack in the rock between his feet.

Outside the storm was at its height. The far-off screaming of the wind echoed and re-echoed in the big room. Puffs of red dust drifted in out of the darkness, and the flame of the lighter wavered and danced. In the occasional lulls, the only sound in the cave was their steady breathing. Every eye, Harrigan knew, was on him. He was the intruder here, and they were wary of him. Let 'em be! A man was something to be afraid of on this damned little dried-up world!

He glowered back at them, making up malicious fantasies about their probable habits. There were plenty of fancy stories going the rounds about how these Martians went at things. He grinned sardonically at the little *grak* as he recalled one particularly outrageous libel. The *grak* smiled reassuringly back at him. This man was a hideous travesty of a thing, but he was keeping the peace.

Harrigan sized up the cave. It wasn't a bad hole as caves went. It was dry, the angle in the passage kept the dust out, and it was big enough so a man could stretch. With a fire and water he could last as long as the storm would.

There had been a fire, he noticed, under the chimney at the far end of the cave. There was soot on the ceiling, and the rock had the crumbled look of burned limestone. It was too close to the big beast for comfort, though. That was a wicked-looking brute if there ever was one. Better leave him be—but if he tried to start anything, James Aloysius Harrigan would show him who was tough!

A gust stronger than any that had come before bent the thin flame of the lighter far over, drawing it out into a feeble yellow thread. Harrigan bent quickly and sheltered it with his cupped palms. It seemed smaller and duller than when he had first lit it. He picked up the lighter and shook it close to his ear. It was almost dry! He snapped down the cap.

The darkness which fell was stifling. The invisible walls of the cave seemed to be closing in on him, compressing the thin air, making it hard to breathe. The dust got into his nose and throat. It had a dry metallic taste. Iron in it. It shriveled the membranes of his throat like alum. He cleared



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his throat noisily and ran his tongue over his thick lips. What he needed was a drink. Just a couple of drops. He unscrewed the canteen and lifted it to his lips.

Somewhere in the blackness something moved. It made only the very smallest sound—the tick of a claw on the rock—but he heard it. Instantly he was on the alert. So that was their game! Well, let 'em come! They were as blind as he was in this hole, and he had yet to see the day when any animal could outsmart him!

He set the canteen carefully down behind a block of stone. It would be safer there if there was a scrap, and it might hit against something and give him away if he carried it. Shifting his gun to his left hand, he began cautiously to work his way along the wall, stopping every few inches to listen. He could hear nothing but the rhythmic, ghostly whisper on the creatures' breathing. Whatever it was that had moved, it was quiet now.

His fingers found the first of the slabs of fallen limestone which lay half buried in the clay along the right-hand wall. They reached almost to the chimney, but about fifteen feet from where he had been sitting there was a break in the line, and the wall dropped back into a shallow alcove no more than two feet high. In there he would have solid rock on all sides of him, and he would be directly opposite the pile of dried weeds in which the *zek* was lying. He would have a clear shot at the ugly brute between two of the fallen blocks.

His groping hand came down on something cold and scaly that wriggled hastily away under the rocks. There was an answering squeal of terror and a patter of scampering feet as panic-stricken little creatures scattered in front of him. Something as heavy as a cat landed on his back and clung there, chattering madly. He batted at it and knocked it to the floor. Then, only a few feet ahead in the darkness, he heard the stealthy click of claw on stone again. The *zek*!

He had to have light! It was suicide to face that monster in pitch blackness! He had slipped the lighter back into the outside pocket of his coverall. He fumbled for it. It was gone!

The panic went out of Harrigan in a flash. He sat back on his heels and curled his fingers lovingly around the butt of his gun. The tougher things got, the better he liked them. The lighter must have dropped out of his open pocket; he could find it when he needed it by going back over the ground he had just covered. It wasn't lost. But he didn't need it. The dark was his protection, not his enemy. They couldn't see him in the dark.

He dropped back on all fours. Everything was quiet again. He'd hear them if they tried anything. He was almost at the alcove, and then they'd have to blast to get at him. He could pick

'em off one by one if they tried to get in.

The clay was hard as brick and full of little chunks of broken stone that gouged at his knees, even through the heavy suit. The roof was lower, too; he had to get down on his elbows and hitch along, almost flat on his face.

His heart was thumping like mad. He was working too hard in this thin air. He rolled over on his side, his back against one of the big blocks, and stared into the blackness. Another few feet and he could lie down and wait for them. He needed time out. He had to have a clear head. He cursed his stupidity in not bringing an oxygen flask from the car. One shot of that stuff and he'd be ready to take 'em all on at once, bare-handed!

As he started on again something tinkled on the stone beside him. He groped for it: it was the lighter. It had been in his back pocket. Damn fool—letting the darkness rattle him! Animals were all afraid of fire. He could smoke 'em out any time he wanted to. He was boss of this cave! A grin of satisfaction spread over his grimy face as he shuffled along on knees and elbows through the dust.

One big slab almost blocked the hole he was looking for. It was a tight squeeze, but he wriggled through and found plenty of room behind it. He felt for the crack between the blocks that was opposite the nest, slid his gun cautiously into position, and flashed the lighter. Now!

The nest was empty.

With a curse Harrigan rolled to the other opening. The flame of the lighter showed him the far end of the cave—the *grak* crouching wide-eyed in his niche—the black arch of the entrance—and the *zek*!

The thing had slipped past him in the dark. It stood where he had been sitting a moment ago, by the entrance. It stared back at him over its shoulder—a hideous thing like a giant reptile-snouted weasel, mottled with leprous gray. It grinned at him, its red eyes mocking, then stretched out a handlike paw and picked up his canteen!

Harrigan's first shots splattered against the rock above the monster's head; the light blinded him. His next clipped through the coarse mane on the back of its thick neck. His last was fired point-blank into its snarling face. Then the lighter went spinning away across the floor and talons like steel clamps closed on his arm.

The rocks saved him then. The thing had him by the arm, but his body was protected. He still had the gun; he twisted around in the beast's grim grasp and emptied it into the darkness. Its grip loosened and he snatched his arm free. It was bleeding where the *zek*'s claws had bitten into the

flesh. Then, through the crack on his right, he saw a sheet of white flame go up as the lighter touched the powder-dry mass of weeds in the beast's nest.

The cave was lit up as bright as day. Harrigan saw the *zek*, blood streaming from a ragged wound in its broad chest, its face a bloody mask of fury. One shot had plowed a long furrow across the side of his head. It gathered its powerful hind legs under it, seized a corner of the great block which barred the opening with paws like human hands, and pulled. The muscles stood out in knotted ropes on its arms and shoulders as it worried at the massive stone. Then the packed clay at its base crumbled and the great block slowly tipped. The way was open. His sanctuary had become a trap.

There was one way out. Harrigan took it. Desperately he lunged forward, out of the cranny straight into the thing's arms. He clamped both hands over its narrow lower jaw and forced its slavering snout straight back with all the power of his own broad back. It rose on its haunches, hugging him to it, then toppled over, dragging him with it into the open, raking at him with its cruel hind claws. He set his jaw and felt his arms stiffen and straighten as the evil head was driven back—back. As through a red mist he saw the *grak's* owl eyes staring at him over the monster's shoulder—saw the coppery gleam of firelight on a shining knife. He felt the *zek* shudder as the keen blade was driven home in its back. It began to cough—great racking coughs that shook its whole frame. Its arms tightened convulsively about him and its claws clenched in his back as the copper knife drove home again and again. Then, slowly, they began to loosen. The beast was dead.

The burning weeds had dimmed to a dull flicker. The dust that had been stirred up in their struggle hung like a red veil in the air. Harrigan lay staring up through it at the little native, sucking the thin air painfully into his tortured lungs. The damned little rat had saved his life! He wiped the blood and dust off his face with his sleeve and got slowly to his feet. He had to stoop to clear the ceiling. That knife—that was a man's weapon. Wonder where the *grak* got it—

He took one step toward the *grak*. Before he

could take another the knife went smoothly into his belly, just under the breastbone, driving upward to the heart.

Squatting in the darkness, listening to the distant murmur of the storm, the *grak* wondered what would have happened in the cave if the man had not come there. The *zek* had been a treacherous ally: sooner or later it might have broken the peace. Once its blood-rage had been aroused it had, of course, been necessary to kill it. But if the man had not come that necessity might have been averted.

The man had been very clever. The *grak* had been almost certain that he was what he pretended to be. But as always there was one thing—one very little thing—to betray him. He did not know the law of water.

In every doubtful situation, the *grak* reflected smugly, there was some trivial matter in which the Source of Evil or His emissaries would reveal themselves. Some one thing in which the true *grak* was clearly distinguishable from the forces of Nature against which he must forever fight. One must be quick to see such discrepancies—and quick to act on them.

The matter of water lay at the very root of the law by which all *grekka*—all living things—existed. It was the thing which all must have, which none, under the law, could withhold from another. Without it there could be no life. With it every living thing was given strength to battle on against the eternal foe.

The man had brought water to the cave. Under the law all *grekka* must share in it according to their need. But when the *zek* had gone to take its share, the man had tried to kill it. By that small thing he revealed himself—no *grak*, but one of His evil things. So he had died. So, once more, was victory won for the brotherhood of living things against the Universe.

He would make a song about this thing, and sing it by the fires of his tribe. He would cut a sign in the stone over the entrance of the cave, after the storm was over, so that others who came there would know of it. And the cave itself, where his forefathers had come and lit their fires, would keep the bodies of the *zek* and the man thus, side by side, as witness forever.

THE END.

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