Of Time and the Yan

Roger Zelazny

The last Yan on Mars sat alone in a room.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he threeked.

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The Earthman looked about, squinting into the dimness.

“Hello?”

“I am here,” threeked the Yan, moving toward him.

The Earthman pressed back against the door, making little noises deep in his throat.

“You’re real!” he decided.

“I am a Yan,” replied the other, “and you are a man, late of the late green star.”

“Yes, late—very late… There were two expeditions…”

“Unfortunate,” answered the Yan. “Both ships were destroyed when they landed.”

The man covered his face.

“So was mine.”

He was silent for a long time.

“The atmosphere,” he said, finally. “It must have oxidized the fuel—somehow.”

“Of course.”

The Yan waited patiently. Finally, the man spoke again.

“Could you—would you—help me?”

“How?” asked the Yan.

“I need shovels. I need help—to dig three graves.”

There was blood on the man’s arm.

“How is it that you lived?”

“I left the ship immediately, to see if the air was breathable. I crossed a little hill. Something hit me on the shoulder. There was a bright flash…A noise…My wife and children…”

“I will get shovels,” threeked the Yan. “I will be glad to bury more Earthmen.”

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The Yan sleeched across the field, beside the dripping man. The sky was a blizzard of dancing motes; they obscured the stars, stretching like a gossamer curtain from horizon to dark horizon.

“For two months your world has stopped the sunlight and the light of the stars. Will it ever dissipate?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did you come here?”

“I knew it was going to happen,” said the man. “I was an officer at the Base. I stole the ship, took my family…”

“You deserted?”

“To save their lives.”

“I see,” answered the Yan. “Shall we dig their graves here?”

The man nodded. He did not look at the ship.

He lifted pound after painful pound of the sugar-white ocean.

The sand churned; the Yan spun his double-bladed shovel like a paddle wheel.

The sun entered the Way of Earth, like a red balloon seen through frosted glass, and the Earthman looked up from his labors.

“Yan, Yan, you are making a mistake,” he wheezed. “You are digging four graves.”

“I am not making a mistake,” answered the Yan.

The man fetched the charred bodies from the smouldering rubble. He dragged and carried them to the gravesides.

The Yan watched.

He crossed the arms over the chests and lowered them into the holes.

“Yan, please help me to cover them.”

The Yan threw dirt in their faces.

“It is done,” said the Earthman.

“No!” threeked the Yan.

The Earthman looked at him, a new darkness behind his bloodshot gaze. He fumbled at his belt.

“No, Yan. Not me. Not me!”

“Yes, Earthman, you.”

“Why? What would you gain by killing me?”

“I do not understand ‘gain’. Why not kill you? You are all that remains of Earth, but a silver net in the sky. —And I am the last. The last Yan on Mars. I will bury Earth here. The net will come undone. Yan shall be last on Mars.”

The Earthman pointed his gun at him.

“No, I’ll kill you first.”

The Yan threeked a laugh.

“Only Time can kill a Yan.”

The Earthman fired three times.

The Yan threeked in merriment.

The man fired his remaining cartridges.

“Now you will get into the hole, and I will take your life away.”

The Earthman made small noises.

“Get into your grave!”

Unwillingly, his legs moved. Involuntarily, he stepped into the hole and turned his head upwards.

“Good-bye, Earth,” threeked the Yan.

“Wait!” cried the man. “Give me a moment, please—to pray!”

“I do not know ‘pray’,” threeked the Yan. “Do it and I will watch, if it does not take you long.”

The man bowed his head. He rested his hands on the lip of the excavation.

“Are you finished?” asked the Yan.

“Yes,” answered the man, straightening, his fists clenched.

Once more, he looked up at the Yan.

Then he threw two handfuls of sand into all his violet eyes.

The Yan threeked in anger and sleeched back.

Gathering his strength, the man leaped from the hole and seized the shovel. He smashed the Yan’s head.

A dark, sticky fluid drenched the blade.

The Yan lay still.

The Earthman pushed him into the hole, then covered him over. He planted the shovel in the ground and staggered back toward the dwelling-place.

“You were right,” he muttered. “It only took time.”

The Way of Earth flamed above him.

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The last man on Mars sat alone in the gloom.

There was a knock on the door.

“There is no time,” came the threek.

Notes

Described as the world’s shortest horror story, Fredric Brown wrote, “The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door…” in the December 1948 issue of Thrilling Wonder Tales. He wasn’t the first to do so, because Thomas Bailey Aldrich wrote the following around 1870: “A woman is sitting alone in a house. She knows she is alone in the whole world; every other living thing is dead. The doorbell rings.”