

## Chapter 1

“**W**here the hell is he?,” Frank shouted. “You see him?”

“No,” Alex answered. “I lost him in the shadows. He’s gotta be around here somewhere. We should have brought a damn flashlight.”

Oracle Dodd shrank into the shadows of the alley. He couldn’t dart out now, the street lamp would expose him immediately. But if he retreated much further, old man Simmons’ dog would raise hell, and that would draw his pursuers for sure. He suppressed a whimper. It was warm, but he was shaking as if it were sub-zero.

He gasped and held his breath, flattening his tall, thin frame against Mr. Jordan’s garage. Even when his tormenters weren’t shouting, he could feel their anger – their hatred. The normal jumbled thoughts he received were completely drowned out by the intense fury.

“This way,” one of them shouted, running across the street to the trees in front of the Baker’s house.

Finally, they were leaving, chasing a false trail. No,

not all, Oracle could sense that one of them was still near. He slipped along the shed that blocked him, sliding deeper into the alley until he backed into a tree.

That's right, he remembered. There was a tree only a couple feet from Jordan's garage. He thought a moment; maybe he could climb the tree, shinny out on a branch near the roof and escape over the top of the building. He had to be quick. His senses told him that one of the boys, Frank he thought, was very near. Frank was strong, and fast, and mean. Oracle jumped to grab a branch.

"Here," Frank shouted. "I see him in the alley. This way."

Too late, Oracle thought. He let go of the branch and dropped to his feet. Twisting to run, he stumbled and fell.

"Mmmph." Oracle gasped for air, his heart pounding, his head drenched with sweat. He lay flat on his face, limbs paralyzed. He finally managed a jerky turn to see how close his tormenters were.

"What?" He was alone, lying on the floor of a small, pale green room. He could hear a pulsating whoosh of air.

Oracle sat up, rubbing his stinging beak-shaped nose. He looked around, taking in the placid look of his surroundings. There was a small, plastic desk a foot from him. Behind was a low, narrow, rumped bed. He realized he'd fallen out of it. "Nightmare," he muttered, wiping the cold sweat from his face. The pounding in his temples slowly subsided.

Oracle shakily stood, felt weak, and sat on the side of his bunk. He sank until his bony knees were higher than his waist. He closed his eyes and listened to the throbbing hum of the spacecraft air conditioning.

It was a relief to be awakened from the nightmare and back in the lumpy bunk. As small and cheaply adorned as his stateroom appeared, it was far preferable to the alley

of torment.

Now he was again aware of the permeating whiffs of mildew and acrid ozone. Other than the whooshes of air, all he could hear was an occasional unsettling groan from the spacecraft itself, and periodic crackling voices over the intercom. There was neither a video viewer nor a radio for entertainment. There was nothing even to read that Oracle hadn't brought with him.

It was heaven.

Oracle leaned forward and clasped his bony hands around his long legs. The shaking had finally ebbed. He was determined to relax and enjoy the serenity this solitary room provided; determined to quell the traumatic past that dogged him and tortured him in his dreams.

As far back as he could remember, this simple room on the Mars-bound craft offered the most peace he had ever felt. Only fifty souls were on the trans-planetary flight, and all but a half-dozen were in suspended sleep. His head didn't ache, which was a precious enough benefit. But in addition he didn't have to struggle to concentrate, or fight to extinguish invading thoughts or surges of others' emotions. His only discomfort was the sore, battered nose and the waning terror of the nightmare.

In this solitary, modest accommodation he could relax with his thoughts, enjoy precious serenity, and meditate. The only thing he could not comfortably do was sleep. That would inevitably bring the nightmares that presented twisted views of his past, perhaps more horrible than the actual events that drove them. They had cluttered his ability to rest, and even recall the past accurately.

Was his childhood really as bad as the dreams? He honestly could no longer be sure, but maybe it had even been worse. Anyway, he decided he'd sleep only when totally exhausted, and hope that the extreme fatigue would

lessen the excruciating visions.

A rap on the door startled him. Someone had actually approached his room without his notice. He was both astounded and a bit pleased.

“Come in,” he said.

A young orderly opened the door, his proper appearance and crisp blue uniform in sharp contrast to the bland surroundings of the room. The orderly pursed his lips to speak.

“I’ll take the m-mashed potatoes and meat loaf,” Oracle said. Damn, he thought to himself. Even in this serenity, the stutter remained.

“Oh? Uh, sure,” said the orderly. “How’d you ...”

“I happened to glance at my wa-watch a few minutes ago. I was expecting you to ask about lunch soon. I ... was just hoping you might have meat loaf.” Oracle was lying. He could easily receive images of the meal the cook was preparing.

The orderly’s face looked perplexed. “Yes, we have it. Don’t often though, you’re pretty lucky. I’ll bring it in about thirty minutes.” He turned and disappeared down the hall.

I was pretty unconvincing, Oracle thought. He suspected that the few staff remaining awake on the journey were already becoming aware of his talents as well as his eccentricities, which even he knew were numerous. But no one was aware of the totality of his skills. Even he wasn’t sure, given that for the sum total of his existence he’d been forced to endure a constant influx of chaotic, unwanted thoughts. The bulk of his energy for most of his years had been spent blocking mental intrusions, too numerous and uncorrelated to comprehend.

He had hoped the stutter would go when the stress of dealing with the burden was relieved. He’d always assumed

that the abuse and confusion he'd endured was responsible for the speech impediment. He was beginning to wonder if it was just another coincident peculiarity he must endure.

He yawned. He'd have to give in to the tiredness eventually. The journey was going to take nearly six months. Oracle had fought hard to become the only passenger ever allowed to avoid induced stasis. To win the concession had taken weeks of effort, documentation from several physicians, and appeals from most of the senior staff at the Federal ESP research center.

He could easily sense that some of the staff were bitter about the arrangement. For him it was the opportunity of his lifetime. The first chance to see how much ability he had, and even he was surprised at the result. And he knew that while extraordinarily important to him, the reason for the arrangement was far too arcane for him to even remotely hope to adequately explain.

"They're fools," he muttered. A bit older, more disciplined, and not as violent as the youth who had tormented him. But just like those of his past, these people were afraid of him. Just because he was a bit different, more complete, more capable. As a child, he'd been made to feel as if he was a freak. As he matured, he realized he was the next step in humanity. In truth, they were the ones deficient. They were the ones blind and deaf to the thoughts around them. Rather than fear and hate him, they should admire him.

They were drowning in their own ignorance, and there is no way they could understand his driving need for this brief interval of profound calm. It was tempting to exercise his talents in this placid environment, if for no other reason than to find his limits. But since there was no retreat on this captive vessel for him to take refuge, he had to exercise restraint at least to the point of keeping his

discoveries to himself, lest the fearful taunting could begin again.

Soon, he thought, I'll be free.

On Mars, he'd be joining with an entire team of ESP experts. While surely not as gifted as he, they would be more comfortable with him. They should even be happy to see his talents. And Mars, with only 10,000 souls spread across its vast expanse, should let him exercise his unique skills to their maximum capacity. Oracle smiled and slumped back onto the bunk.

## Chapter 2

George Filmon slumped lazily in a creaking chair, short legs extending to rest precariously upon a shabby, well-worn desk. His left arm hung limply, his right hand resting in his lap, loosely wrapped around the video-viewer control. His head nodded, eyes drooping ever lower, at times remaining closed for several seconds. His right thumb, in a vain effort to awake the body to which it was attached, twitched every few seconds to bring a new image to the video monitor.

The futile efforts of the thumb barely perturbed George's fatigued brain. After months of staring at high-resolution images of Martian terrain, he was jaded. It was a difficult thing for him to admit, but Mars was no longer the adventure of his life. It was a boring, inconvenient place, with little human comfort and many hazards.

He snorted briefly awake at another thumb twitch. He absent-mindedly scratched his bald head with his left hand, silently cursing the arid Martian climate that so

callously dried his scalp to the point of incessant itching.

He was less and less impressed with the Mars-orbiter photographs, which showed the same things he'd stared at for over two years. Flicking on the screen were endless shifting dunes, recklessly arranged cracks, innumerable craters and fissures, and an occasional, very occasional, glimpse of ground fog.

It was the ground fog that George was assigned to study, his part in the great quest to find life on the curiously dead planet. For as long as George could remember, it had been the planetary mission of greatest importance, though it seemed to drag on with no definitive results.

It had been his greatest interest also. In fact he'd invested five years of dogged effort to fill each required square, to butter up every required official, to do everything required to be accepted into the Mars exploration program. But to say he was still interested in his portion of the work would be an over-statement.

George was supposed to determine exactly what conditions caused the occasional ground fog, when it was most likely to appear, and where it occurred in greatest abundance. The fervent hope was that if Martian life similar to Earth life forms existed, it would be found where surface moisture frequented.

Personally, George was losing hope and beginning to think the entire investigation was a cosmic waste of time. Like the sand blasted surface rocks, his enthusiasm had finally been ground away. The combined effects of the poorly motivated bureaucracy, the economic drought, the worsening working conditions, and the seasonal raging Martian winds had taken their toll. What little findings George had made were disappointing. Ground fog seldom accumulated in any significant concentrations. And even when it did, it would only affect a thin layer of the rugged

Martian surface.

To make problems worse, the first few centimeters of Martian crust seemed eminently designed to devour organic material rather than host it. Every year at least a half-dozen explorers were either injured or killed by accidentally exposing their lungs to the vile material, a fate George seemed to dwell on lately.

If he had any enthusiasm for exploration left, it was for an underground mission. He was convinced of it now, underground was where the researchers should be looking. He'd said as much, but his boss Ken Stuart didn't seem to have the time to consider the suggestion.

That created for George a bewildering point of great agitation. The government hired him as an atmospheric expert, shipped him all the way to Mars at great expense, then wouldn't listen to anything he said.

Unfortunately, in his usual agitated style, he'd said as much to Ken. Ken had overlooked George's temper outbursts on previous occasions, but that time was costly. Ken made it eminently clear that he could be removed from the project, and sent Earth side.

That outburst had certainly been a tactical mistake, George knew it now. Yet it wasn't leaving the failing project that bothered him, but rather how a premature termination would look on his record.

Ken's lecture didn't alter his conviction that there had to be underground water, probably in massive quantities ... somewhere. If Mars had ever developed life, and now even he thought that was doubtful, it had to be underground where the only protection for fledgling organisms existed. Mars' glorious Earth-like period had simply not lasted long enough. And the orbit was too elliptical to provide the more uniform temperatures required. No doubt about it; looking on the surface was a waste of time.

Yet George's credentials classified him as a meteorologist, and thus his contribution to the grand exploration was to determine what weather patterns lead to formation of ground fog on Mars, no matter how tenuous the mist, how minuscule the findings, or how profound his boredom.

George cringed at the noisy rattle of Martian dust whipping against the outer layer of the hovel that was his lab. The three-inch foam insulation couldn't completely block the sounds of the volatile Martian weather.

Even after all his time at being a member of the Martian exploration, he'd never gotten used to the threatening rattle that ensued during the storm season. The small clatter he'd just heard was a grim reminder that the storm season was only months, perhaps weeks, away.

In any event, George was thankful that he wouldn't be doing this monotonous investigation much longer. Rumor had it that the Mining Affiliate was pushing hard to have Mars officially declared a dead planet. With all the test results available from all the scientists of other disciplines, the government had no real argument to block the Affiliate pressure.

The declaration was surely going to occur, and when it did it would open things for the Affiliate's mining efforts, already well in preparation. And it would just as surely bring the end of the government sponsored life searches, which had long been dangling by a thin economic thread.

George dropped his feet to the floor and leaned to grab his cup of coffee. It was a powdered synthetic blend that poorly mimicked the real thing. He stared at the muddy liquid, wondering just what the black market price was for a cup of actual brew. He took a sip of the bitter concoction, wrinkling his face as the taste manifest itself.

His thirst quenched at some insult to his sense of taste, George stretched his legs and placed his feet back

on the corner of the desk, whose dog eared scars perfectly matched his shoe heels. His thumb, the only part of his body actively involved in the investigation, resumed the task of twitching high-resolution images on the screen.

The next image caused a spark of interest to flicker in George's idling brain. He recognized the scene as the rugged slope of Mars' greatest geological feature, Olympus Mons. It was the largest known volcano in the entire solar system.

Even in his jaded state of mind, George was still stirred by the scars of Mars' violent past. Olympus Mons was one of his favorites, with a footprint as big as his beloved New Mexico, and a height dwarfing any Earthly contenders. From a biological search, the giant seemed to offer nothing. But from a meteorological point of view, George found the ancient eruption fascinating.

Tectonic movements prevented such behemoths from occurring on Earth. But Mars had no tectonic movements. Since whatever time in Mars' remote past Olympus Mons was created, it had stood firm and spewed the entrails of the planet. Only now, a seemingly fateful disappointment, was the giant volcano silent, now that man was available to observe.

George dropped his feet to the floor and scooted closer to the monitor. Apparently the orbiter was going to make a rare pass right over the top of the great monument, giving a glimpse of its vast sixty-mile wide caldera at unprecedented resolution.

His thumb flipped rapidly through the next few screens, skipping glances of the rugged slopes that connected the volcano's lofty cone with its massive base. Finally, the orbiter's cameras were looking directly down on the caldera plane. Even in these images, George could see hazy spots which were surely wispy clouds caused when the dry Martian air was forced to rise above the high slopes,

and cough up even the microscopic amount of moisture it contained.

The images he now studied were so detailed and magnified that none of the macroscopic traits he'd seen before were visible. This time, incredible details were displayed. Small hardened streams, turning into even smaller rivulets, appeared frozen in time. Even scattered boulders and rocks were apparent.

Suddenly, George's thumb froze. The images stopped flashing. His jaw went slack. He stood up and leaned toward the screen in disbelief, blinking at the most bizarre Martian formations he'd ever seen.

### Chapter 3

Oracle Dodd watched with forced reticence as Sam Jenkins carried on another tirade. He could take the chewing out. Scorn of one kind or another had been hurled at him for much of his life. This time he knew he even deserved some of it. But to get lectured in such a demeaning manner was difficult. The worst of it was that he considered himself an expert on the use of the neuro-communications Transmitter Augmenter, called the TA for short. But he also knew he'd failed to properly adjust it for Sam's last communications effort.

Having just arrived at the Mars ESP center, Oracle had hoped for more time to get acclimated. But budgets being what they were, he understood why he was expected to become a contributing member quickly. Somehow the desperate economic conditions of the research projects had not been revealed to him prior to his arrival.

Adding to the struggle was the unexpected difficulties of working for Sam. Oracle had studied Sam's background

before coming to Mars, but realized he'd concentrated too much on Sam's ESP education and capabilities. The unfortunate fact that Sam was a very demanding personality had remained unnoticed. Until now.

Even with his remarkable mental control, Oracle found it difficult to get the TA unit matched to his own brain pattern. And Sam wasn't as skillful in maintaining a stable transmission matrix. Sam's less developed skills combined with his arrogance and exacting expectations was creating an impossible situation.

Sam shot out another barbed criticism, and Oracle waited angrily for a chance to explain. Sam glared at him, firmly clasped one end of a rolled up strip-chart recording with his left hand, and brusquely rolled the remainder down the long data-examination table. The unraveling chart raced to the end of the table, dropped over the edge, and continued to unroll across the floor.

Sam traced his right index finger across the squiggles on the chart, then abruptly yanked the recording to deposit a new section before him. He repeated this procedure a number of times. Oracle rocked nervously on his feet, forcibly remaining silent as Sam sought the convicting proof of the error Oracle had already admitted making. The entire episode could easily be done by a review of the computer log. But Sam didn't trust computer logs, and he seemed to enjoy the drama an actual recording provided.

Sam eventually found what he sought. He looked up from the recording with a sneer. "Here it is. I told you I'd find it. Look at this."

Oracle awkwardly moved closer, peering over Sam's left shoulder. Sam held a pen like it was a dagger, and with an exaggerated flare used it to circle a section of strip-chart wriggles.

"Look at that," Sam said sharply. "I was just about

to achieve a perfect match with the TA when you changed the phase modulation.”

Oracle leaned further over, tracing the signals with his own finger. Determined to be just as exaggerated as Sam, he slowly glanced from one signal to another, measuring each against the timing marks. He looked back at Sam’s face, now a crimson red, the tint Oracle was seeking.

“C-could I show you another section?” Oracle flinched at his own fettered speech. The stutter served him poorly at times like this. He felt Sam perceived it as an indication of mental dullness.

Sam’s fingers drummed on the table. “Go ahead, I’m watching.”

Oracle slowly pulled sections of the chart before him. He traced his finger back toward the beginning, clumsily stepping to his left as his gangly body followed the guiding finger.

“Here’s the first spot,” he finally announced.

Sam slowly turned his burning stare from Oracle to the recording. “You admit you did it more than once?”

“Th-that’s not my point. This spot show’s w-what I was seeing.” Oracle’s eyes rolled to the ceiling as he struggled to speak resolutely. “Each time you started to settle out on stable pattern, you d-drifted. See?”

Sam rudely nudged Oracle aside. “But you didn’t change the phase modulation here.”

“N-no. I was just beginning to see your t-trend. You slipped out of the p-pattern right after you landed on it. On the next try I was trying to anticipate your drifting.”

Sam squinted at Oracle, then turned back to the strip-chart. “Let me see that ... yes, I guess I did slide off there.” He jerked on the strip-chart to relocate the marked region. “But I wasn’t drifting here, where I showed you.”

“I guess not. Your trend ... must’ve changed. I

was just trying to match the equipment t-to your mental pattern.”

Sam angrily shoved the remainder of the recording to the end of the table, where it slithered to the floor.

“From now on just do your job as you’re told, dammit. I can match up to the equipment, but not if you keep screwing around.”

Oracle stood rubbing his long nose. “I, uh, yes sir.”

“Don’t try so damn hard. I’ve heard you’re good. Great. But I’m good too. Just set up the equipment like I tell you.” Sam glanced at his wristwatch. “We have another test at fourteen hundred, less than two hours. I’m going to try to establish contact with the group at Hellas One. They’re going to transmit some class D images. Do your job right, okay? Now roll up that chart and meet me at the lab at thirteen fifty.”

Oracle stood seething, yet nodding, as Sam left the room.

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Oracle squirmed uncomfortably on his chair next to the portable rack of electronics. Four technicians swarmed to wire Sam for his next attempt at making history. Oracle kept bent forward to avoid direct eye contact, glancing disapprovingly at the busy scene with averted vision. He had learned two unsavory things about Sam since arriving on Mars: Sam had little use for him, and Sam enjoyed, even relished, attention. He strongly suspected a third, that Sam couldn’t compete with his talent.

As to the first, Oracle believed that Sam felt threatened by his presence. The effort to categorize him as a dullard was Sam’s instinctive self esteem protection. Oracle knew his gaunt physique and large nose didn’t help the situation. Combined with his stuttering, his looks had

rarely been an asset. But it was only his mouth that worked sluggishly, not his brain. And though he wasn't a long term member of any established research team, his reputation for unusual mental power had preceded him.

He was used to the kind of abuse Sam leveled his way. It was Sam's desire for attention that bothered Oracle more. While still back on Earth, Oracle had often donned the neuro-communications equipment, but never with such unnecessary ceremony. That clearly would not satisfy Sam's ego.

Nonetheless, this time Sam would get exactly what he'd requested. Oracle was going to set the equipment precisely as ordered, and from that time on only monitor results. If Sam was unable to sync up, so be it.

Oracle blinked to adjust his eyes as the lights were dimmed. In this dimness, with the acoustic tiles that covered the walls and ceiling absorbing sound as well, the sense of isolation was disconcerting.

Sam laid back on the recliner, waving a hand to command the technicians out. Another hand-wave in Oracle's direction signaled that he was ready. Oracle's jaw tightened at the casual way Sam treated the technicians, and him.

"Ch-check," Oracle sputtered. He monitored Sam's brain wave patterns and the auto-tracking gain of the RA Receiver Augmentation unit. This time he would only observe, and adjust tuning factors only when so ordered. He watched Sam's brain waves continually slip and slide, preventing the RA from latching to a stable pattern. Oracle chuckled to himself. This test would fail as miserably as the last, but he would be blameless.

He fervently wished he could put the animosity with Sam behind him. As he had anticipated, he could actually concentrate on Mars, without practicing all the tricks he'd had to develop as a child. The few human beings

that shared the research colonies with him generated so little neuro-interference it was hardly noticeable. He was beginning to believe he belonged here. Somehow, on this dismal, inhospitable planet that seemed to erode other's strength and enthusiasm, he was going to fulfill his destiny.

He was jarred from his daydreaming by the sound of a gurgling grunt. Oracle jolted upright in his chair, straining to see Sam in the dimmed light. He jumped to his feet, Sam was convulsing.

Oracle looked at the monitoring equipment. Sam's brain waves were oscillating wildly, with a strangely rhythmic pattern. He flipped on the radio and shouted into the microphone, "Hellas One ... Hellas One ... come in."

"This is Hellas One. New Chryse?"

"Yes, O-Oracle ... Oliver Dodd. Are you transmitting?"

"Negative. We're still setting up. No transmission here. Is something wrong?"

Oracle flipped off the RA and grabbed the intercom mike. "Medic alert," he shouted. "Medic alert. G-get someone to laboratory three."

## Chapter 4

“**D**r. Carson? Dr. Carson, can you hear me?”

Charles Carson barely noticed the distant voice. He tried to turn away, but the voice was a distraction. He just wanted to sleep, but the persistent monologue continued. His groggy mind struggled to shut out the agitation. More distraction, his toes and fingers began to tingle.

“Dr. Carson, ... do ... feel?”

Charles vainly tried to swipe at the voice, wanting only that it go away and let him sleep. The feeling in his fingers got worse. Suddenly he felt it urgent that he get up and see what was causing it. He struggled to raise a hand to rub the gritty feeling from his eyelids, but his arm wouldn't respond. It was tired – too tired. If the sensations and the voice would just go away. Rest ... that's all he needed.

“C'mon Char..., shake ... off. That's it ... that's it.”

Charles strained, and finally, with enormous effort, managed a single blink. “Ohhh, it's so bright.” Another blink. His eyes teared, blocking some of the searing bril-

liance, washing the gritty feeling away. Charles wrinkled his face in a squint and struggled to keep his eyes open to the blinding light. Tired eyes refused to focus on a blurry face leaning over him. It startled him at first, and he clumsily jerked away. He was gently pulled back. When he strained to look again, he saw that the face seemed concerned rather than ominous, and vaguely familiar. A very young face. Why would this young man want to bother him?

“Easy, Charles. Don’t get up too fast. You’ve been asleep for five months, you know. Got to ease into it.”

Charles couldn’t associate a person with the voice, and had difficulty understanding what it said. But if it was telling him to take it easy, it seemed good advice. His senses were sluggishly coming alive, and his mind began to center on a single, overwhelming thought; his brow was throbbing with a tormenting headache. One unlike any that he, or probably any human being had ever endured. He groaned and raised a hand to his brow.

“Ohhh, the pain,” he managed to ooze from a gummy mouth.

“That always happens,” the disarming voice said. “Seems that months of sensations collect in your head all at once. I know it can be quite uncomfortable, but it’s not damaging, and fortunately ... temporary.”

Charles lay still, convinced that the word “temporary” meant something quite different to the speaker than it did to him. Every second seemed an eternity of unbearable misery. Yet after a few agonizing minutes, the gorged feeling began to ebb, as he’d been told. It almost felt as if his skull was expanding to relieve the pressure. The expansive feeling was so compelling that Charles slowly raised his hands to his ears to be sure it was only a sensation. The voice ... it was familiar. Five months? Did it say “asleep five months?”

Charles’ mind began to clear. It was like bursting to

the water's surface for air. Mars. I'm on my way to Mars.

As Charles' mind focused, so did his eyes. He finally recognized the young face as Dr. Warner, the flight physician. Yes, Warner was young, at least 15 years Charles' junior. Charles remembered that Warner was one of the few on the trans-planetary mission that had not been put into the energy saving suspension. He blurted with a thick tongued slur, "M-Mars? Are ... we ... there?"

Dr. Warner smiled. "No no, not quite. Normally we wake passengers about a week before arrival, but we're still a month out. We received a request to wake you and Dr. Perry early. Relax for now. I'll fill you in later."

Charles felt a stinging sensation in his left arm, enough to cause him to wince and pull away.

"Ah, you felt that," Dr. Warner said. "A good sign. It's just a bit of stimulant to help you recover more quickly."

Charles rubbed the sting and looked around with growing awareness. The dispensary's placid looks did little to further stimulate his senses. He fancied that the room bore a purposeful blandness, to ease his transition to consciousness, but he thought it more likely to be budgetary. It seemed like every government medical clinic he had ever been in; the walls were white and unadorned, a small medical cabinet stood in a corner, a combination musty and antiseptic smell permeated the air, and no creature comforts were discernible.

Charles shook his head, as if the cobwebs would be thrown off into space by the effort. The result was a poignant reminder that only moments ago his head had been throbbing. What was it Doc had said about being awakened early? He turned as the soothing voice spoke once again.

"Katherine? Katherine, can you hear me? C'mon Kate, it's wake up time."

Charles glanced at the nearby bed he'd failed to

notice before, and gasped at the pale, motionless figure, nearly as pallid as the white skin-tight sleeping garment that enveloped it. The only apparent color was a head full of flowing, fiery-red hair. The contrast between the colorful hair and ashen face was striking to the point of being unnerving. He hardly recognized the body as his partner on this critical mission, Katherine Perry.

“Doc ... is she ... alive?”

Dr. Warner momentarily glanced up from the instrument in his hand. “Feeling better, eh? I suggest you lie back down. Most of your newly acquired strength is synthetic, you know. And don’t worry, Kate’s perfectly healthy. If you could look in a mirror you’d see that you don’t look any better than she does.”

Charles held his hands out in front of him. For the first time, he realized how pale his own arms looked. Glancing down, he saw he too was clad only in an unflattering, skin-tight garment. He was sure that if he felt more like a human than a lab project, he’d be embarrassed. By the time he returned his gaze to Kate, she was blinking her eyes, moaning, and smacking her lips ... much as he had done.

Charles felt relief at her awakening. Any moment now she’d endure the headache of a lifetime, but he knew that would pass. With her determination and youthfulness, she’d no doubt be on her feet before he was. Charles only hoped he’d be able to harness her volatile energy enough to apply it to the difficult mission that had led them to this lengthy, strenuous journey. And surely, he surmised, they weren’t awakened early to receive good news.

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“I can’t get rid of the shivers,” Kate complained. She huddled over a cup of coffee, as if protecting it from an envious mob.

Charles sat across from her at a small, circular, white plastic table, an identical copy of the dozen others that spotted the passenger lounge. The entire room seemed to have been poured into place. He stared out a foot-round portal at the dusty, red orb of Mars drifting through. Each time it passed the portal of the slowly turning craft, it captured his attention.

As ridiculous as Kate looked hovering over her cup of coffee, Charles knew exactly how she felt. He too felt as if he had the metabolism of a fish, but at least some of his strength had returned. He was able to hold his own against the one-third gee the rotating craft supplied, but shuddered at the thought of dealing with Earth's gravity on a return mission. He had barely four weeks left to become stronger before he and Kate were shuttled to the Martian surface. And with what he now knew, they'd have to hit the ground ready for action.

"Kate, we've got to talk. The mission we're to accomplish has ... gotten complicated. Among other things, I've received bad news about the extension request."

Kate sipped stingily from the cup, savoring every swallow, her intense grip unable to keep the cup from shaking. "Gotten complicated," she said with part laugh and part shiver. "You're about to tell me we didn't get the extension. I know. As it was we were expected to review all the existing data, add our own investigation, and make final determination if any unknown form of life is alive on Mars, all in a ridiculous schedule even with the extension. For that matter, likely nothing we find will prevent Mars from being declared a dead planet and opened up for commercial exploitation. It would be less of a joke if they'd at least grant the extension we asked for."

Charles kept his own cup held firmly in both hands. He had yet to take a drink, the cold fingers refused to share

the warmth. Kate had a sarcastic and sometimes brutal way of stating things. It had kept her from landing a few important assignments before. Charles was quite aware of all those facts, but knew Kate mostly for her creativity and enthusiasm. Blunt truths stated succinctly didn't bother him.

"That's just the point," he said. "Mars is scheduled to be declared a dead planet." Charles slid a folder across the table to Kate. "There's a couple of other developments since we've been in flight. I told my associates to have us awakened if anything of significance was discovered or anything unexpected came up. With the extension declined, they knew we'd need all the time we can get to re-plan."

Kate set her cup down so abruptly that some of the precious fluid spilled over the rim. Charles flinched at the thought of the wasted warmth.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "there's nothing stupendous in the additional findings, but it gives us a bit more to go on. It is significant enough to upset the Mining Affiliate. You know how much they've invested in preparing their Martian mining program. I'm sure you also know that patience is not one of their virtues. The animosity between the Affiliate and the government is even worse now, if you can imagine. In fact, some resources the Affiliate was going to make available have mysteriously disappeared. I suspect their spirit of cooperation before was only political anyway. They certainly don't want us to actually find anything. It looks like we can count little on their cooperation."

"The damned Affiliate," Kate fired back. "They could wait a few more months to ravage the planet. What possible difference would a few months make? Once they get started, who knows what valuable data they'll destroy, not to mention the biological contamination. As to their cooperation, believe me I was not counting on it."

“I don’t appreciate the destruction anymore than you do,” Charles said, “but as it stands, the government will finalize the declaration on schedule. That doesn’t leave us much time. We can only win more time if we find something striking. Something that could clearly indicate the declaration is premature.”

Kate looked at Charles for several seconds before replying, her eyes seemingly focused on something far away.

“We’re supposed to do all that in weeks, after all other efforts have failed for decades. Crazy,” she said. She shook her head, “Damned crazy. Does the Mining Affiliate have that much power? Can they actually push the government around like that?”

Charles’ lips curled into a crooked smile, a reaction to irony rather than humor. He forced stiff fingers to relinquish control of the coffee and allow him a gulp. He relished the ecstasy seeping down his throat.

Finally he answered, “The government has little money left for this kind of thing, and even less resolve. It appears that the Affiliate has plenty of both. Yes ... the Affiliate has power. I doubt we can fathom how much power.”

\* \* \*

Charles squinted at the jerky video played back for the ninety-ninth time, straining even yet to see something new. Sporadic sleep for the two weeks he’d been on Mars had diluted his concentration.

“This is the best we can do?” he asked while rubbing a watering right eye.

“You’ve asked that about 10 times,” Kate said with more than a hint of frustration. “It’s the best I can do without fudging the images to show what we want. The rover that took these videos was using a balloon-tethered

camera. It's a cheap way to get an aerial view, but very susceptible to air currents. The wind was already kicking up a bit, and that sure didn't help the clarity of the images."

Charles nodded, realizing he'd touched a nerve. He never doubted Kate was doing her best; she always did. He just thought computers could do more magic with blurred images.

"Unfortunate," he said. "Then again, as I understand it, the rover couldn't safely get to the actual site. Without the balloon-born camera, I guess we wouldn't even have known of the area."

"That's what I've been told," Kate said. Her face looked tired, but still intensely focused. "I realize that the videos show promise," she continued. "A few frames are pretty clear, and give images that I admit look amazingly like sedimentary rock containing fossils. It's the best indicator anyone has of any previous life on Mars, if it stands up. But stunning as it might be that we finally find that Mars at one time had some complex life forms, how will that impact the dead planet announcement?"

Charles shrugged. "If it's all we find, maybe not at all. It depends upon authenticity and the age of the fossils. And given that they appear encrusted in lava, where were they ejected from? Maybe if we find where there was some complex life, we may find where some form of life still exists."

"If, if, if. That's a hell of a chain of if's."

Charles closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "I know, I know. If we get an expedition together to investigate that field, it will be one of damn few investigations we'll be able to do. A big gamble. And if we are even going to consider it, it'll have to come first. Once the seasonal winds begin, our time slot for that opportunity is over. But what the hell else do we have?"

Kate scowled, more vividly revealing her fatigue. “In the ludicrous time we have available? We have just about nothing. What we need is time. Short of that, incredible luck.”

Charles slowly stood and wagged his head a few times to shake off fatigue. The top of his scalp was beginning to ache. He dreaded the thought that the migraine he had on ship might return. He began pacing around the small room, which served as his barely adequate quarters on Mars. It had all the comforts of home, but in a single room, except for the closet-sized bathroom. He scooped up the spread of folders covering his sofa-bed, dropped them on the floor, and plopped on the spot they’d previously occupied.

“Whatever steps we take, we need to carefully consider our resources,” he said. “I have enough money in my budget for perhaps two lengthy excursions, or four small investigations. As to staff, I can pull some technicians, probably some engineers from on-going government projects up here. Be easy, in fact, if we aren’t picky. Most project managers are on shoestring budgets, and would likely relish having me pay a few salaries for them.”

Kate furled her eyebrows. “So ... staffing sounds easy. But you look like you still have a problem. What’s the problem?”

“That’s a rock field out there. Assuming the best possible outcome, that we find fossil evidence, we’ll need a geologist to help determine all we can about those rocks. Their age, composition, and especially their place of origin.”

“I’m listening.”

“We have our obstacles. We face the oncoming Martian weather. A bureaucratic, stagnant, barely competent government that’s about out of money, as well as disinterested. And a clever and manipulative Mining Affiliate. The Mining Affiliate has most of the geologists up here. Even if

they did loan us one, we couldn't believe what he might tell us."

"Naturally," Kate said, rolling her eyes. "But you did say you could get government engineers or technicians that are already up here, didn't you? If you're willing, I know of a good government engineer named Tony Ferris that's here. We ... spent some time together a few years ago. I think he's a computer engineer, by trade. But he started in geology, even did graduate work in it before changing direction. He's kinda quirky, but damned bright. Personally, I'd just as soon stay away from him, but if you want I'll try to contact him."

Charles stood, walked slowly to the table and turned his attention back to the video. He rewound the short segment of tape so he could review it for the hundredth time.

"I'm not sure we have a choice," he said. "I don't know how experienced this Ferris is, but at least he should be able to give us an unbiased opinion. If he can, without pressure, give us solid reason to pursue this, then it may be as good a reason as any to pick a direction."

"Don't worry about that," Kate said. "He'll definitely give you his opinion, and he won't give a damn what you want to hear. I'll call. I think that in spite of my presence, he'll come."

\* \* \*

Tony Ferris sat slumped in one of the two chairs in Charles' modest accommodation, one cowboy boot propped heavily upon the wobbly table that served as poorly for conferences as for meals. He casually brushed his tassel of brown hair aside with a delicate, but unmanicured hand. He appeared much younger than expected, yet Charles knew he couldn't be that young. He was a five-year veteran of

the Martian colonies, something Charles couldn't imagine. His demeanor seemed on the brink between confidence and arrogance. He apparently cared little how he appeared to others, except for an apparent penchant for dressing Western style.

Tony glanced up at Charles with a scowl that on such a boyish face looked like a pout. "Are these photos the best you have?" he asked.

Charles sat across the table from Tony, glancing at Kate sitting on his sofa bed. She shrugged, but did not comment. The table was littered with hard-copy reproductions from Kate's best image enhancement efforts. Charles knew the pointed question likely pricked Kate's ego after all the work she'd done. He tried to shunt any altercation it might start.

"It's the best I could do," he said. "Just after the rover pilot released the balloon camera, the wind kicked up. That caused a lot of violent camera motion, and shortly after terminated the entire rover mission."

Tony ran long fingers through his untamed hair, tossed back his head, and stared at the ceiling. "Not one damned physical sample, I suppose?"

"None," Charles responded. "Wish we did. But that raises the question, is it worth the risk to send a manned expedition out there to see what the hell the rover was photographing? Keep in mind we've little time to produce whatever we can manage. What does your experience tell you? Is this nothing more than geophysical oddity, or ..."

Tony abruptly looked from the ceiling to Charles. "Or what? You know the seasonal storms are coming?"

Charles walked stiffly to the small window on the east wall of the cramped room. The window glass was a quarter-inch thick, and in some places caused noticeable distortion, a tip-off that it had been manufactured during the last five

years when frugality had overtaken quality control. He looked out at the bleak landscape and tried to imagine being hundreds of miles into the malevolent desert when the winds came.

“Time ... we do not have,” Charles said. “I may be green, but I’m quite aware of the potential of the storms. The trouble is, I’ve been given only three months to bring the life search program to a conclusion, Martian storms notwithstanding. Is what you see interesting enough to risk a significant amount of those three months?”

Tony spread out the pictures, studied them again, and hand-combed his hair. “If the damned picture quality was better. Pretty crappy data for making any important decision. Do you actually think that some form of primitive life was living in an area eventually overtaken by lava?”

Kate darted from her seat and grabbed a handful of the photographs. “Dammit, quit griping about the data. It’s all we have, all we’re gonna get unless we go there ourselves. We just want to know if those images are of something geological or not?”

Tony started at her agitation. “Whoa, you sure haven’t changed. Hell ... I don’t know. Probably, yes. I mean, what are the odds? I’m not aware of geological processes that might make that, but we don’t have much experience on materials from beneath Mars’ surface, like those lava rocks. Does it look like random geological activity to me?” Tony stared at the pictures for a full ten seconds. “No, dammit, it doesn’t.”

Charles returned to the table from his morose stance at the window. “Then you’re saying those images aren’t just from some normal geological process, like a form of melting and re-crystallization?”

Tony scooted his chair back and stood. “I can’t be sure. I’m just not familiar with a process that could account

for what you see. Maybe on a microscopic level, but not this large.”

Charles poked a finger down hard against one of the photos. “Is it worth following up? Should we mount an expedition? I’ve got to either follow this up with everything I have, or drop it and get on with something else.”

“Hey man, I’m not the one on the spot,” Tony said with a snarl. “You are.” He snatched a photo and examined it again. “Aside from the fossil looking material, it’s interesting to find volcanic rock so far from any volcanos. I don’t have a good explanation for that. And what’s embedded in the lava isn’t volcanic in origin, or native to the area, that’s interesting also. We know almost nothing about Mars’ interior, any chance to study it is valuable. Sure it’s worth following up, for a number of reasons. But ... an expedition now? I can’t advise you to risk that.”

“I told you, we don’t have any time. Besides, these rocks could be completely covered by the dust storms. If we don’t get to this area before the storm season, these photos may be all we’ll ever see of this.”

Charles resumed his seat and looked at Kate, who was still tightly grasping some of the photos. Her fiery stare switched to Charles.

“Tony can’t tell you what’s in these images,” she said. “That’s worth something, and puts the ball in our court. And I see that he can’t tell you to launch an expedition now, but I’m game. Let’s do it.”

## Chapter 5

Charles shifted position to ease the ache in his rear end when suddenly the crawler lurched to the right, banging his head on the bulkhead. He rubbed the stinging injury and cursed. The papers he'd been reviewing were all crumpled from his involuntary clench as he tried to catch himself. When he noticed that, he cursed again. He looked up to see Kate grinning at his struggle. Though she sat but a few feet away across the crawler cabin, the sways and jerks of the craft seemed to have much less impact on her.

"Not quite like a ride through the park, is it," she said with a laugh.

"Hardly," he muttered. It was daunting, the number of rocks of all manner and size that seemed to copiously populate virtually every corner of the planet. "Maybe, in a hundred years or so, there'll be some damned roads in this god-forsaken place."

"Maybe sooner," Kate said. "One thing about the Mining Affiliate, they'll probably put in some roads when

they start raping the planet.”

“Guess that would be the one good thing they’ll do.”

Charles looked at his watch, trying to estimate about how far they were from their destination, a desolate, relatively flat place on the rim of Valles Marineris. It would be their demarcation point for the journey to the rock formation. He cursed again. It was impossible to know their location. Being at the back of the crawler, he could only get poor glimpses through the dusty windows at the front. He had no idea where they were, but could tell that for much of the time they seemed to be hardly moving, forward at any rate.

“Charles, why don’t you try to relax? You can’t read in here anyway.”

“I know, I know. But it’s damned hard to just sit here banging my head on the wall.”

“You can’t get your sea legs until you relax. Tony,” Kate shouted, startling Charles. “What’s the deal? Where the hell are we?”

Tony glanced back from his privileged seat by the pilot of the vehicle. “What’s the matter with you greenhorns? Road a bit bumpy for you?”

Charles grimaced. He wasn’t in the mood for Tony’s countrified humor. “We can’t see the bumps coming is all.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Kate shouted. “Where the hell are we? How long until we get out of this noisy can?”

Tony’s broad smile diminished a bit. “You’ll wish you were in this can after a few hours trudging around out there.” He pointed emphatically at the window. “We’re where we should be, exactly on schedule. I’d say, maybe another four hours and we’ll be in position.”

Charles moaned, rocking again just short of another head banging.

“Buck up Charles,” Kate said, reaching to pat him on

the knee.

“It’s not just the ride,” Charles said, putting his hand on Kate’s. “We’re taking too damned much time.”

“The storms?”

“Yes,” Charles nodded. “The storms.”

\* \* \*

“Everybody out,” Tony’s voice blasted over the loudspeaker.

Charles responded by stiffly hopping down from the cab of the eight wheel transport vehicle. He was glad to be out of the lumbering beast and finally on with the exploratory part of the mission. Poor way to start a trek, stiff and already sore, he thought.

He took a measured kick at the reddish dirt to test its resilience. It was disturbing to find that the soil here, near the rim of the Valles Marineris was much less cohesive than at New Chryse. It would take less wind to create problems. A gust of wind kicked dirt upon his boot as he pondered gloomy possibilities.

He started to take in the area, but turned as he heard Kate’s final “thud” to the ground. Her face peered with apprehension from behind the slightly gold-tinted helmet visor. It was the first time Charles had seen a loss of confidence in her face.

“I know the feeling,” he said. “This is my first extensive Martian EVA too. All my previous experience was on Lunar excursions. But I tell you, that was even worse. These suits are so much lighter, it hardly feels like you’re wearing one. And these catalytic oxygen pumps aren’t nearly as awkward as the pressurized tanks I had to wear on the Moon.” Charles looked for some expression of relief on her face, but it didn’t come.

Kate stared at the suit-monitoring readouts on her left wrist, in defiance of his consoling. “Maybe they’re too light,” she said. “At least if the suits were bulky I’d feel like I was being protected by something.”

Tony appeared from the front of the transport, completing his walk-around inspection of the vehicle. “I heard your conversation. Believe me, these suits are far better protection than the older ones, despite their light weight. And here on Mars we have acoustic as well as radio mics. Useless on the Moon, but very useful here.”

“You’re right,” Charles said. “I even heard Kate’s feet hit the ground. On my last Lunar expedition I saw a crawler get crushed by a rock slide. Didn’t hear a thing.”

Tony moved toward the rim of the canyon a quarter-mile away, carefully scanning the terrain. “No sign of the rover,” he said.

Charles followed after Tony, glancing back to see how Kate was dealing with her discomfort. Other than still grumbling she appeared to be coping. He took in the area with a complete circular scan. “I’m sure this is the right spot,” he said. “The rover went into the chasm, slope shouldn’t be too bad here. It wasn’t until the rover went into the canyon that the pilot deviated from a carefully choreographed plan. From then on our position estimates grow steadily worse. Not long after the rock formation was photographed, communication with the rover was lost.”

Tony knelt to inspect a spot of interest. “I can’t see any evidence of a rover passing through here.”

“I’m not surprised,” Charles said. “The wind gusts were already starting when we planned this effort. The tracks of the rover probably were gone by the next day. Trouble is, our rocks may be just as well hidden by now.”

Tony stood, slowly pouring a handful of red dust back to the Martian surface, his blue EAS suit in stark

contrast to the monotonous red and orange dust at his feet. “I realize that. I’m just saying that if we can’t find any trace where we know the rover was, how the hell are we going to find traces when we’re not sure?”

Charles’ didn’t respond to the comment. His attention was seized by the boundless chasm further ahead. He stood with his heart pounding at the sight of the canyon, dwarfing all other geological features he’d ever seen. Kate came up beside him and hooked her arm around his. He felt it tremble, or was it he who was trembling?

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Tony surveyed the expansive canyon with little apparent interest. “We should start building the shelter,” he said.

“Huh?” Charles turned from the chasm’s grandeur and forced his attention back to the business at hand. He could still feel his heart pounding.

“Yes, let’s get started,” he said. “We’ll establish a ground base here, and a protection for the stockpile of supplies we leave behind. Once we return we’ll have a refuge waiting for us, in case the winds delay our departure.”

Tony walked briskly toward the transports and began shouting orders. It seemed unnatural somehow for such a boyish looking man to foster such fierce authority. Some workmen obediently began removing supplies from the two transports, while others inflated three Martian igloos, or “migloos” as they were called. Once inflated, the migloo walls hardened to a rigid plastic, providing protection against even the violent Martian version of Mother Nature.

Charles briefly watched the flurry of disciplined activity, a poignant lesson in order and precision. He then turned to see Kate still captivated by the canyon, and once again joined her in witnessing another construction, an ancient one, born of massive disorder and chaos.

Charles marched single file in tethered constraint with the rest of the expedition. Uncomfortable as the ride was, he realized the thirty-foot long transport vehicles were priceless for their ability to get the expedition, with ample supplies, to the rim of Valles Marineris. But like clumsy elephants, they were far too large to follow the rover's path. The only feasible way for the expedition to find the rock field was on foot. Charles estimated it would only take a day, no more than two. He hoped that estimate was based on something more tangible than his dread of any alternative.

Tony lead the way, being the most experienced at Martian EVA. Along this treacherous portion, a steeply descending ledge with a deep drop off to the left, it seemed a discomforting choice. Charles wanted to trust Tony's experience with the mission overall, but his puerile looks and casual attitude to the mission left Charles unsettled. Just in case, he periodically checked the terrain ahead against video recordings obtained from the rover pilot's excursion log, using a hand-held video scanner.

The wind definitely changed the look of things. Even simple variations, like shadow configurations caused by seeing the scenes at a different time of day, made confirmation of the rover's path difficult.

Charles monotonously plodded along, at times fully aware of his surroundings, and at other times engaged with scanner images. He was frequently being tugged forward or backward by the linking tether. With his attention momentarily fixed on the scanner he stepped obliquely on a fist sized rock; his ankle buckled.

Charles let out a muffled grunt of pain, and reached instinctively for the person marching in front of him. Grab-

bing empty air he fell sprawling over the rim. He started to blurt out a yell but slammed hard into the ledge before uttering a sound. He gasped in pain, tried to suck air past bruised ribs, and tumbled out of control.

He gasped frantically. A voice screamed "Man down." A vicious jerk whipped him upright as the safety rope ran out of slack. Still reeling from the violent jerk of the line, he caromed solidly against the canyon wall.

"Hang on Charles," someone yelled. "We've got you. Just hang on."

Who was that? Tony? Charles swung uncontrollably on the safety line, gasping for air so abruptly taken away. Can't breathe. My God, maybe the oxygen plant is damaged.

Panic swept over him. Maybe he didn't just have the wind knocked out of him. If the catalytic apparatus was damaged, the heavy concentration of Martian CO2 would choke him in seconds. Charles struggled to regain control, grasping blindly for the rope that seemed impossibly out of reach. He heard others shouting on the ledge above.

"Hurry up. You, pull in that line. David, get an oxygen tank up here."

Charles dangled helplessly, too much in pain to keep thrashing. He was terrified. A glance down revealed rugged rocks dozens of feet below. If the safety rope broke ... he shuddered at the thought.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on just one thing: filling his lungs. He gradually felt the tension, the panic, subsiding. With labored effort he could get air again ... the chest tightness was easing, the sharp pains with each breath were not.

He felt tugging on the life line that suspended him from certain death. He tried to look up. The helmet didn't allow him to see the frantic rescuers above. He couldn't tell

how far from the ledge he dangled. Each tug of the rope sent shooting pain through his ribs.

Something pinched him. Charles jerked at the discomfort, then he realized it was a strong pair of hands sliding under his arms. He was quickly yanked up to lie again on solid soil. Tony's face, anxious looking for the first time, pressed close to his visor.

"You okay?" Tony shouted. "David, check his suit for damage."

Charles nodded affirmative, but was still unable to speak. He felt several hands rolling him over, checking for suit tears. He fought off another swell of panic. He hadn't thought of what happened if the caustic dust entered his suit, and his lungs ...

"Looks okay to me," a voice announced. "I think he just got a good kidney punch."

Tony's face appeared again. "Hear that?" he said. "Your suit's not damaged. Lucky for you, else you'd owe the government a hell of a lot of money." Tony's usual grin returned.

\* \* \*

Charles sat alone on a knee-high, egged-shaped rock, rubbing bruised ribs. Though he'd been on Mars for a few days before this mission was undertaken, this was the first Martian sunset he'd had an opportunity to watch. He wished he could enjoy it, few other humans would ever even see such a sight. But all it meant was that an entire day was gone. A very hard day. And they weren't at the rock site yet.

His foam-insulated tent had been assembled by the workmen, but right now he needed to think, and he could do that better in the dark, in the open, alone. A few yards away most of the others gathered around a neo-lite. One

of the technicians had modified the device to randomly flicker in brightness. The result gave the visual illusion of a campfire. Charles decided the effect was even better from a distance. He was enjoying the serenity of sitting in the cool Martian night near a fluttering campfire, even if it was only visually effective.

Eventually he'd have to retreat into his insulated tent, as would all the others. The frigid Martian nights taxed the EAS suit's heating circuits too heavily. A suit failure out here would mean sure death.

A strong gust of wind brought murmuring from the huddled group. Charles stood and faced their direction. Another gust swirled. Charles could feel the blustery wind, could hear the dust particles pepper his helmet. He shuddered, but not from the cold. They must find the rock field soon or the winds would be upon them. If that happened ... Charles felt shivers again.

\* \* \*

The brisk Martian wind briefly kicked up to gale force. Charles wavered in its strength, his visibility reduced to only a few tens of feet. Between powerful gusts, the tenuous atmosphere would settle to a near calm, leaving plumes of orange dust to find their way back to the surface. The radios worked poorly over long distance because of the iron content of the suspended limonite dust.

Charles indignantly kicked aside an angular rock as he trudged along the ever-changing path. The expedition was fully a day behind his intended schedule. The weather was one reason, the difficult terrain another. He hoped the increasingly occurring gusts of wind would not soon turn into a full-scale Martian storm.

"I think I see the boulder field," a voice shouted from ahead. Charles crowded toward the front of the tiring crew.

He looked in the direction of Tony's extended arm which pointed down a treacherous slope to an even rougher terrain several hundred feet below.

Charles scanned the possible paths to the boulder field. To the left a gentle slope moved obliquely down the side of the canyon. To the right, the path narrowed to a precarious cliff. He motioned toward the left. "The rover must've gone this way," he said.

Tony peered at the indicated path with a shading hand placed to his visor. "You're right. I bet the pilot followed it down, and circled back toward the boulder field."

Charles nodded. "Guess we should get started." He motioned and headed toward the likely route.

"Wait," Tony said. "That's what the rover probably did all right, but with our equipment I think we could take a more direct route."

"You mean climb directly down the slope?"

"Yes, we have what's necessary. We could save several hours."

Charles wavered in another strong gust. He knew what Tony was thinking. But to climb down these jagged bluffs in the unpredictable wind ... .

"No. We take the safer path." He waved to the others and headed again down the slope.

Charles was halted by a powerful grip on his right arm, a sharp pain rippling through his sore ribs.

"We'll lose a lot of valuable time," Tony said.

"You've never experienced the Martian wind storms. I have. We should get down there as quickly as possible. As rough as this descent has been, the climb back will take even longer."

Charles pulled Tony's hand from his arm. "I know. But we must do it safely. I got in a hurry on a lunar expedition. It nearly cost a life. I won't be responsible for doing

that here.”

Tony’s eyes glared from behind his tinted visor. “It’s your call,” he said. “I hope the hell you’re right. This isn’t reducing risk, it’s just exchanging one risk for another.” He brushed past Charles and started down the trail blazed by the rover.

## Chapter 6

“Ouch, damn.” Charles awkwardly gripped his side with thickly gloved fingers. He could hardly remember that when the rapidly deteriorating journey began, he could actually inhale without intense pain.

The latest jab slowly subsided. He took a few more careful breaths, then retrieved the video player from the large pocket on his left hip, an awkward task to accomplish without bending and causing additional pangs of anguish. The protective gloves added to the difficulty, but he managed to drag the viewer free of his pocket and scan through the rover log tapes. He rubbed at his visor in an instinctive effort to get a clearer view of the display. The efforts to clear his visor just added more scratches to those already accumulated by the blowing sand and dirt.

The identification task was hopeless, the winds had altered the look of the place so much Charles simply couldn't find the precise location of the rover photos. The flailing Martian storm repeatedly exposed new areas of rock

at the expense of others.

“Where do we go from here?” Tony shouted above the howling wind. “We can’t just wander around forever.”

Tony was identifiable only by his helmet rank insignia. Charles tried to adjust his acoustic microphone for better reception, but at its best setting the apparatus whistled and crackled incessantly at the storm’s assault.

He was frustrated with the noisy equipment, but knew the radio mode fared even poorer from the ferric content of the swirling dust. The desire to rip off his helmet to better hear was almost as bad as the desire to scratch the sweat-irritated itch he’d developed in the small of his back.

He turned off the video player and returned it to his hip pocket. He made a slow, circular inspection of his surroundings, swaying in Mars’ pulsating fury. At length, Charles turned to again face Tony, and shrugged.

“Damned if I know,” he said. A wholly inadequate answer, he fully realized. He could imagine the angry grimace that surely lurked behind Tony’s faceless visor.

Tony emphatically pointed into the air. “This is really getting bad, quicker than I expected. We’ve got three poor options. Find what we came for damn fast, abandon the search and head back pronto, or find shelter. I don’t see any shelter.”

“I know, I know. The damned winds have changed things. The rover logs are worthless now.”

Charles jerked at an unexpected touch from behind. His ribs reminded him that sudden movements were a bad choice. He turned to see Kate standing beside him.

With her helmet close to his, she yelled, “Maybe we should fan out and each look in a different area.” Her thin voice barely carried the two feet between them.

“What?” Tony cupped his hands to the side of his helmet, a useless reflex gesture.

“Kate says we should fan out.” Charles shouted.

“See what we can find. I know we have little time, but maybe a search around here. We could get lucky. If we fail here, we’ll have to give it up.”

Tony responded with an emphasized nod. “A long shot. But we might be able to spare a couple hours.” He turned and yelled to the surrounding crewmen, “Fan out. Look for rocks that resemble the artifact photos. Notify of any discovery. Break up into pairs. I’ll set up an emergency-signal transmitter. Use it as a beacon to return here in ...” he glanced at his chronometer, “two hours. Got that? Two hours.”

Charles watched as the dozen crewmen wandered off in pairs. He grabbed Kate’s hand and headed randomly into a section of the rock field.

\* \* \*

Charles wandered in exhaustion and dejected confusion, clutching his ribs. He kneeled occasionally, partly to rest and partly to inspect a rock of marginal interest. “Oh hell.” he said, as he saw a footprint inches away from the rock he was examining. His footprint. “I must be going in circles, I’ve been here before. We’re sunk,” he said to himself.

He could barely see Kate though she was only about fifty feet away. She seemed interested in the soil at her feet, repeatedly kicking at it. The loosened charges of dirt were quickly scattered by the swirling wind. Charles knew it was a sign that shortly the expedition must begin to head for the migloos on the rim. The thought that plagued him nearly as much as the pain in his side was that his entire Mars mission might hinge on some success here.

“Kate. You’re moving too far away.”

She briefly turned to his direction. He waved assertively for her to come closer to him. She turned back toward the area she had been scraping with her foot, ignoring his hand signals.

“Kate, you’re too far. We might lose contact.” He tried again to motion her back.

Instead, Kate motioned just as emphatically for Charles to come to her. “You sh ... this,” she yelled.

“What?”

Kate looked up from the ground, a flurry almost obscuring her completely. “I said, you should see this.”

Charles looked around him, reluctant to leave his area. At least the place he was investigating was littered with exposed rocks. From what he could see, there weren’t any where Kate was standing.

“What is it?” he shouted back.

She motioned pointedly again. “Just come here.”

For a moment he had a sense of hope that Kate had found something important. Then he wondered how many times a Mars researcher had been disappointed by such a thought. A bit afraid he’d also soon be disappointed, he started toward her.

“What?”

She waited until Charles was but a few feet away.

“That.” she said, pointing.

Charles glanced briefly at her feet. Nothing notable was apparent. He looked at her with open hands. “I don’t see anything.”

Kate leaned down and pointed with more authority, her finger only inches from her target. “That. Can’t you see? This may be even better than the rover rocks.”

Charles kneeled, flinching at a stab of pain. He saw only a relatively flat rock with an oval shaped area near one end. The palm-sized oval had a few concentric ridges near

its edge, as near as he could make out through his clouded visor. He gave another hand shrug.

“Are you going blind?” Kate kneeled beside him. She brushed the accumulating dust from the oval pattern. “Look. Doesn’t it remind you of something?”

Charles hunched down to within inches of the stone. It appeared to be a chunk of sandstone partially enveloped in a coating of lava. The oval rested in the stone portion. Suddenly he understood what had drawn Kate’s interest. The markings were subtle, but distinct under closer examination. He realized his damaged visor had hidden the important details Kate had seen. Then he wondered how many other important candidates he’d overlooked for the same reason.

“My god,” he finally said. “It looks like a section of a rib cage, with ... a limb, flipper maybe.”

\* \* \*

Charles’ right hand clutched the invaluable fossil rock to his chest, his left hand tightly grasping the lifeline rope strung out before him. He plodded along behind the person in front, tugged to obedience by the connecting tether. He trusted no one else with the fossil. In truth, he felt most responsible for it. He also found it helped to hold something stiff against his rib cage.

He scanned the dusty sky for signs of the sun, at best a third smaller and forty percent dimmer than when viewed from Earth. From the filtered brightness Charles estimated that a couple of hours of sunlight still remained. How are we going to put up the thermal tents tonight? he wondered, thinking it curious that the alarming problem hadn’t entered his mind before. He had felt so much relief at finding the fossil and salvaging the mission that the level of threat to their survival had slipped from his awareness.

The pace Tony set was difficult to manage. Charles gasped again at a stab of pain. He felt a tug from behind and turned to see Kate's helmet close to his. "How are you doing? As bad as you look?"

He had to take a few shallow breaths before he could answer. "I'm doing well enough, just a little tired." He tried not to wince at another sharp jolt. Concern was evident in her voice. He feared his level of pain was obvious.

"You need to rest. Let me tell Tony."

"No. We've got to keep moving. We don't know how long this mess will last, or how bad it'll get. This doesn't look like a good place to stop."

"Maybe not, but I can see how long you'll last, and it isn't long."

"I'll make it," he insisted. "Maybe get someone else to carry the fossil."

"I tried to tell you that some time ago."

Charles nodded. "I know. There's David, get him to carry it. You can give me a hand, help me keep walking."

"What the hell is ...ing back there?" Tony's garbled voice shouted from ahead. "We're coming up on the narrowest section of the trail. We can't stop here."

"Just a damn minute." Kate shouted back. "We've got to make an adjustment." She unbuckled the lifeline from her belt, pulled the fossil rock from Charles' guarded grasp, and moved forward along the stalled excursion. Charles watched her disappear into the dusty fog, and used the time to rebuild his strength through less painful, shallow breaths.

Soon the relentless pull of the lifeline rudely forced Charles to begin moving again. He stumbled, but managed to keep upright. He leaned shamelessly on Kate's small but surprisingly strong frame, his right arm draped over her shoulder.

Suddenly the rope's firm tug changed to a violent

jerk, yanking him to his knees. His tumbling weight pulled Kate to the ground with him, landing them in a heap with him on top. In the jumble Kate's elbow poked him squarely in his throbbing ribs.

He let out a yelp, which was virtually drowned out by Kate's own cry of pain. Charles struggled to get off Kate. He managed to roll onto his back, freeing her. He attempted to get to his feet, but instead found himself being pulled over the rock-strewn surface by the rigid lifeline.

"Man down. Man down." He heard from somewhere ahead. He felt Kate grab onto his leg in spite of her own injuries, trying to stop him from being pulled further.

Finally the dragging stopped. Charles gasped as he lay on his back; Kate hunched over him. "Charles. Charles, are you okay?" she shouted.

Charles nodded. Kate held her left arm tightly. "Can you answer? Are you okay?" she shouted again.

"Yes. Yes," he said, realizing she couldn't see his face through his sand-blasted visor. "What about you?"

Kate stood and slowly extended her left arm. "My arms hurts, but I don't think it's broken. You lay still, I'm going to see what's happened." Charles let his helmet drop against the alien soil, gasping as throbs of pain kept time with his pulsating heart.

He finally felt the tightness of the lifeline go limp. Without it pinning him down, he was able to roll over and get to his feet. He moved stiffly forward, approaching some huddled expedition members. Between a couple of suited figures he could see others pulling a limp body back onto the cliff edge.

"Who is it?" he shouted to the nearest technician.

"David," was the reply.

Charles stood frozen for a moment, then crowded up to the technician. "Was he ... was he holding anything?"

The technician didn't turn from the tragedy ahead.  
"Not when they drug him up."

"No." Charles blurted. The only physical evidence they had obtained after this risky venture ... gone. "Is David all right?" Charles grimaced at the unfeeling order of his own questions.

The technician hesitated, then turned away. "I think he's dead."

"Dead? But he was on the lifeline."

The technician continued talking, without turning to face Charles. "A wind flurry obscured the path and pushed him over the edge. When he fell, his suit was torn. He lost his oxygen, took in dust. I tell you, he's dead."

\* \* \*

Charles stiffly sat, trying to pull his legs toward him so he could sit Indian style. It was a struggle he abandoned. He'd never been flexible enough to do that easily. With the bulky suit, the task was impossible. He saw that the others were all similarly huddled in the inadequate crevice poorly protecting them from Mars' frenzy. Had they been able to erect the insulated tents, their shelter would have been much more effective. But the malevolent flurries wouldn't relent enough for the crew to assemble the tents. The crevice they huddled in was perhaps twenty feet wide at its widest, and tapered to nothing in twisted turns that meandered about forty feet into the valley's wall. Charles couldn't see how high the crevice extended.

Two marker flares blazed away, feeble efforts at providing measurable heat. The flares would last for about three hours, dwindling rapidly during the last half-hour. Tony said there were enough flares to burn two at a time throughout the night, and possibly one more night. If

something didn't happen by then, their chances of survival "sucked," was how he put it.

Tony leaned back against the rock wall to Charles' right, and slowly slid to a sitting position. He leaned close and spoke quietly, radio off. "Charles, we're in crisis mode here. We've got to do something."

He spoke so lowly that Charles found it difficult to hear. Before Tony could continue, Kate crouched to Charles' left. "What's up?" she asked.

"I was talking to Charles," Tony continued. "Charles, at the rate we're moving to the rim we'll freeze to death."

"I know. I'm holding us back."

"It's not just you. We can't move fast with all these people and equipment. Besides, as we found out with David, being so strung out in this storm is dangerous, even with lifelines. We can't see well, we can barely even communicate in this mess, sound only carries ten's of feet."

"Tell me something that isn't obvious," Kate said.

The disgust in her voice at being ignored by Tony was easy to detect. For all her gentleness, Charles had also seen her short temper.

"Someone needs to move ahead to the migloos," Charles said. "Bring back supplies, and more flares. We've got to prepare to weather the worst of the storm here."

"I agree," Tony said. "Two people. That number can move swiftly, be there by noon tomorrow. Could be back by tomorrow evening, no later than the next morning. One would be risky, too many times you need a bit of help to get over or through something. More than that just puts more people at risk."

"Sounds reasonable, but who goes?" Kate asked. "Do we draw straws, or what?"

Tony traced a squiggle in the sand with a gloved finger. "I've got to go. With the most EVA experience,

it's my responsibility. I'll pick one of the technicians to accompany me."

"Wait just a damned minute," Kate said. "What about me? I'm a senior member also. I'm just as responsible as either of you. In fact, the biological search is mostly my mission."

Tony waved a hand at Kate to quiet her. "What of it?"

"Me. I'll go with you. Charles can stay here and be in charge of the remaining crew. They have to all stay here, they're just as immobile as he is under the circumstances. But I can go."

"You? I need someone able to help me pull a sled of supplies. Someone experienced. Someone ... stronger."

Charles could imagine the sparks ignited by that remark.

"You arrogant ass!" she exclaimed. "You need help, right? Use your head, dammit. Charles can't go. You can't just draft one of the technicians. I'm telling you, I'm ready to go, and I'm able."

Tony's head was perceptibly shaking "no."

"You're not a captain in the army anymore," Kate said. "I'm an equal member of this scientific expedition, not one of your troops."

"Always equality with you, isn't it," Tony snapped.

"Wait. Wait." Charles said. "Kate's right, you know, she has every right to go with you, if that's what she wants."

"Has the right? I don't care about rights. Does she have the strength?"

"She's stronger than you imagine. Who do you think I was leaning on for the last couple hours? She has the right. I think she has the strength. You need someone to go who's determined, not reluctant. I don't know anyone more

determined than she is.”

“And who here has the right to ask another to go?”

Kate asked.

\* \* \*

“Here,” Tony’s voice yelled over the howling wind.

“Up here. Look up.” Kate strained to look, nearly losing her balance.

“Take ... hand,” his garbled voice said.

“I can’t see you,” Kate yelled back. “Can’t look straight up.”

“Just stretch. I think I can reach you.”

Kate stretched as high as she could. She stood tiptoed, her flailing hand touching nothing but empty air.

“That’s it,” Tony yelled. “Hold still. Quit moving your arm.”

Kate touched the canyon wall with her left hand to steady herself. Something brushed her right hand. She stretched harder and Tony grabbed her firmly by the wrist.

“Ready?” he yelled.

“Ready.” she called back.

She was suddenly suspended inches from the narrow shelf just beneath her. She let out a yelp at the helpless sensation, then fought to regain her composure. Tony was pulling her to a shelf further up. She kicked out with her feet, trying to get a foothold in the rocky wall.

“Put your leg over the edge,” he commanded, his voice much nearer than before.

Kate groped with her free hand and felt the ledge Tony was lying on. She reached over, using her arm for leverage. Finally she managed to kick her left knee over. Once she supported some of her own weight, Tony’s strong grip pulled her quickly to safety. She rolled over on her back and wheezed, her right arm aching.

“How ... much further,” she managed to pant.

“Can’t say,” Tony answered, breathing hard himself.

“We’re not on the same route we took down, so I’m not sure just where we are. But this route is more direct, and faster. I don’t think I could’ve found the old route in this weather, anyway. Just looking would have cost too much time.”

Kate sat up, determined to push ahead. She and Tony had been fighting the storm since two hours before daybreak, and hadn’t even paused to take nourishment. They gambled that they would reach the migloos by noon. The pace was taking a toll. Her strength was waning.

“We’d better get going,” Tony said. “To the left this ledge slopes upward. Let’s follow it a ways. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Kate tried to look up the canyon wall hoping to see the summit, but the wall ascended into the haze beyond her vision. She shook the ache from her right arm and wriggled the numb fingers, then started up the path.

\* \* \*

Kate’s left foot sunk awkwardly into a hole concealed by the swirling dust. She tumbled to the ground, landing hard on her left elbow. “Owww.” she squealed.

Before the sharp pain in her ankle could subside, Tony was lifting her back to her feet.

“Damn. I didn’t need that.” Kate glanced at her wrist monitor. It was no longer blinking. She shook her wrist, nothing changed.

“Tony, I’m not getting the migloo beacon.”

“I’m still getting it,” he said. “Your fall must’ve broken your monitor. Just stick with me.”

Tony moved ahead quickly, briefly looking back to see that she was following. They’d finally made it over the rim of the canyon, but Kate was disappointed to find

that they weren't close enough to the migloos to see them. She had to nearly run to keep up with Tony, sore ankle notwithstanding.

"I see it," he shouted.

"The migloos?"

"Yes, I see at least one of them." Tony pointed with his arm extended. "See? Right over there. Maybe ... a quarter-mile away."

Kate strained to see a nebulous white object contrasting the orange fog. "Yes, I see it," she shouted. Tony broke into a run. Kate stepped her pace to a hobbling jog, seeing Tony outdistance her.

"They're okay." Tony shouted. "The migloos are okay."

Kate slowed to a limping trot as she neared the closest shelter. Tony had just managed to open the four-foot high door and enter the shelter airlock. Kate dropped to her knees as she approached the hatch and collapsed into the chamber. She lay in the opening, her feet still protruding into the storm. She felt strong hands drag her into the protection of the chamber, and heard Tony shut the outer door.

She relaxed what seemed a brief few minutes. Her next recollection was Tony already sifting through the supplies. She started to get up, then collapsed again onto the floor. It was so pleasant, no more sand particles pelleting her helmet, no more whistling in her earphones, no more being buffeted by the wind.

She swooned from exhaustion, hunger, and relief from the relentless cyclone. The sound of Tony's scavenging drifted into a muffled background.

"... te, Kate." Kate shook her head. 'What?'

"Kate, get up. I've fixed some food. You need some ... get up now."

Kate sat up. She was surprised she could see so clearly. She wasn't on a prairie. She wasn't in the old west. The dream that troubled her quickly evaporated. The wind that plagued her was from somewhere else, somewhere even more desolate.

A few blinks later she recognized Tony. She also heard a low, vibrating sound. It slowly dawned on her that Tony didn't have his helmet on.

"Oxygen pumps," he said, seeming to understand her confusion. "We don't need the helmets in here now that the pressure is up. I ... took the liberty of removing your helmet a while ago."

Kate jerked her hands to feel ... not the oversized head gear, but her own disheveled hair. It alarmed her at first, then a deep breath of musty air removed the fear. She rustled her hair and laughed.

\* \* \*

The six-foot long, three-foot wide sled was piled with provisions, including nutrient and water canisters, medical supplies, and flares. Kate had been careful to keep the material evenly spread over the sled's surface. It would be difficult handling the sled through some of the rough terrain; a lopsided load would make it impossible.

She worked quickly as Tony rested. The embarrassment of her earlier swoon was manifest in her dogged pace now. She'd volunteered – insisted – on being part of this effort, yet was near collapse while Tony was still pushing himself. She would make up for it. She was making up for it now, as he slept.

She continued working until she was breathing hard, and the sled was dangerously full. She'd packed what she could, now it was time to bring relief to the others.

“Tony,” Kate said, shaking him by the shoulder.

“Tony, we’re ready.”

She smiled as he twitched his shoulder without waking. Maybe his endurance wasn’t so much more than hers.

“Tony. We’ve gotta go,” she said more firmly. He slowly stirred, briefly rubbed his eyes, then jumped up. He gave a sheepish grin, the first grin Kate had seen on his face. She slapped his shoulder and got back to work.

“What time is it?” He examined the sled. “Gees, you’ve already got it packed. Thanks Kate. You’re more than I gave you credit for.”

Kate attached her helmet and saw Tony do the same. He turned off the oxygen pump, opened the air lock, crawled through the low hatches, and pulled on the rope connected to the sled. With some trepidation Kate helped pull the load into the air lock. It would be hours, likely even days before she would again know the serenity offered by the humble confines of the migloo.

\* \* \*

“Kate. Kate, wake up.” Charles shook Kate gently.

Kate rolled and pushed Charles’ hand away.

“Kate. Tony made radio contact. Did you hear? Radio contact.”

“Huh? Radio?” Kate abruptly sat up from her makeshift bed, a canvas sheet laid over the rocky Martian ground.

“Contact, yes.” Charles kneeled beside Kate and put his arm around her shoulders. “Thanks to you and Tony, we might just get back in one piece.”

“Good. I’m ready to get out of this place. How long have I been out?”

“About four hours. Hours during which some of us would have frozen, if you and Tony hadn’t arrived when you did. But you made it.”

Charles stepped briskly over to Tony, who was on his knees, hunkered down intently over the communications equipment.

“What’s the latest,” Charles asked.

“Shuttle’s on the way. Maybe half a day,” Tony said. “The storm’s weakening some, moving north of us. New Chryse thinks a shuttle will have a window of opportunity if the trend continues for a few more hours.”

“Great. Maybe we’ll survive this misadventure.”

“We may be even luckier than that.” Tony said, turning off the radio and standing up. “I got the strangest report about the mapping agency’s activities, might turn out to be useful.”

“Strange? In what way?”

“Something on Olympus Mons. Something ... extraordinary.”

## Chapter 7

Oracle paced nervously from wall to wall. He sniffed at the sterile smells in the dispensary room. With his gangly legs, each journey took only four steps. He frequently looked at Sam lying unconscious on the bed, the headrest slightly elevated. In the three days since the incident, Oracle had been at Sam's side whenever possible.

Oracle abruptly stopped pacing when the doctor entered the room. He impatiently watched the physician peer into Sam's eyes with a small light.

The man was middle-aged, slightly balding, wearing rather rumped clothes. He seemed rather casual about his examination. Oracle hoped this meant there was little to worry about. "Is he gonna b-be okay?" Oracle asked.

"Yes, yes ... I think so." The physician continued with the examination without looking at Oracle.

"Did he ever come around?"

The doctor finally turned, his brow wrinkled in thought. "Yes he did, a few hours ago, you were gone at

the time. All physical and neurological signs appeared fine, but he didn't seem coherent to me. I sedated him. We'll see what happens when he gets more rest."

"What'd he say ... w-when he woke up?"

"Just ... babbling. Couldn't make any sense of it."

The doctor returned to his examination.

Oracle rubbed his nose in agitation. "I need to know what he said. Exactly."

The doctor piled his instruments on a stand next to the bed, turned, and glowered at Oracle. "I told you ... he didn't say anything that made sense. Mumbled something about a funny taste in his mouth. A foul taste, I think it was."

"Foul taste? Anything else?"

"He talked about strange sensations. I don't know what could have been causing the strange sensations."

"M-maybe he wasn't talking about sensations he felt when he woke up. Maybe he meant when he was connected to the RA."

The doctor picked up Sam's chart and flipped a couple of pages. "You could be right. In any event, he'll be asleep for quite awhile. Six hours probably. Do you want me to call you when he wakes up?"

"Yes. I've got to know what was happening to him. Only he can t-tell me that." Oracle looked at Sam once more, and solemnly left the room.

\* \* \*

The hallway could have been crowded, or empty, it made no difference. Oracle, gliding briskly on long legs, was unseeing of everything and everyone he encountered. He headed back toward the neuro-communications lab, mentally reviewing the last few days' events.

The doctor had suggested that Sam received a severe electrical shock from faulty equipment. Not likely, Oracle thought. Sam was always quite meticulous about such matters, and the RA had worked normally. Power monitors indicated that no unusual surges of electricity had entered the equipment. Hellas One verified their system had not yet been activated at the time of the accident, so there could have been no out of tolerance neuro-waves generated from their end.

Oracle entered the lab, headed directly for the isolation room, and slid into the recliner where Sam had experienced his accident. He stared blankly at the wall, his mind replaying the calamitous events.

Sam had experienced a severe overload. Oracle was monitoring the equipment at the time, and it was functioning perfectly. Hellas One had yet to go on the air.

The shock couldn't have been electrical; the equipment perfectly passed careful examination before and after the incident. Yet ... Sam received a severe overload. It had to be a neuro-wave event, even though Hellas One was off the air.

Oracle leaned back and closed his eyes. A neuro-wave overload. From what source? Did someone else on Mars have a TA unit? Probably not. Oracle had never met anyone outside his abstruse research field who even knew what a TA was.

Oracle sat up and shook his head. It couldn't be sabotage, there were only three neuro-communication units on Mars, two at New Chryse, and one at Hellas One. Few people had any access to any of them, and all were long time researchers. And only one of the New Chryse units was currently functional, the other having not yet been assembled.

Even if there was another operational unit, how could

such a powerful neuro-wave signal be generated? The TA units didn't have a great deal of power. One would be hard pressed to send a dangerously high signal with the current equipment, especially from any distance more than a few miles.

He leaned back once again. He closed his eyes and re-visualized the traces he saw on the RA during the accident. Those waves were unlike any he'd ever seen. Even if someone else had a TA at their disposal, how could they create such uniform patterns? As far as Oracle knew, neuro-waves had never been synthesized. No one was exactly sure how the brain even generated them. And human patterns just didn't look like that.

Oracle jolted upright in his chair. *Human* patterns didn't look like that.

\* \* \*

George Filmon fidgeted, pointlessly examining his fingernails, nervously scratching his hairless scalp. Ken Stuart, the government's supervisor of all Mars mapping efforts, looked with mild interest at George's report. Ken was seated behind one of the largest desks on Mars, by George's account. As George stood, patiently waiting for Ken's attention, he pondered how Ken might have acquired such a desk in this peculiar human existence.

He glanced around him. The room itself was exceptionally large, and the desk wasn't the only unusual piece of furniture. A painting of a Martian sunset hung from one wall, and the room contained three chairs far more ornate than available in any other government office George had seen.

He brought his attention back to Ken. He felt uneasy in Ken's presence. It was George's nature, indeed his curse, that he was not a tactful man. Hotheaded is the way others

described it. George didn't deny the appraisal; he just felt it wasn't associated with his professional performance. He wasn't sure Ken agreed.

Perhaps the problem wasn't so much that George was feisty, but that Ken seemed totally the opposite. The man seemed entirely devoid of emotion. One could tell he was upset by the content of what he said, but seldom by how he said it. George decided the problem wasn't really his own personality in an absolute sense, but relative to Ken's, which surely was as far off center as his own.

Ken peered at George over a pair of twentieth-century style spectacles. "I see fragmented ideas from what you describe in your report," he finally stated in his usual measured style, "and I fail to understand your point. You do have a point?"

George's right hand stopped scratching and froze to the top of his head. "Point? There's no point. I'm just reporting the unusual formations on Olympus Mons and South Spot. It isn't a novel."

"I mean," Ken continued, "that you seem to be implying some ... relationship between Olympus Mons and Arsia Mons, or if you prefer, South Spot."

George's eyes rolled toward the ceiling, a chink in his own self-control that would likely draw further comment. "I'm not implying anything. I'm just reporting what I found ... similar features on the caldera of both volcanos. I've looked very closely at survey photos of the other volcanos on the Tharsis ridge, as well as other Martian volcanos, and I didn't find any other similar formations."

"As I said, you're implying some sort of relationship between Olympus Mons and," he looked up, "South Spot."

George's right hand, which had been resting albeit stiffly on top of his head, began to again scratch at some illusionary pestilence. "Dammit ... uh, just look at the

photos. Can't you see the designs? A circle, almost a perfect circle, with a nearly equilateral triangle inside. Must be a thousand yards in diameter. Same thing on Arsia Mons, same dimensions."

Ken carefully placed the spectacles on the desk, his face showing no agitation, but equally little interest. "I see a possible circular formation. The north side of the Olympus Mons pattern is badly eroded. Perhaps it isn't a circle at all. And as for Arsia Mons, there seems to be some imagination required to see a complete circle."

"Complete ...? What the hell do you want? Mars has erosion ya know. Besides, what about the triangles?"

"Yes, that is puzzling. Volcano eruption pools tend to be circular or elliptical, certainly not triangular." Ken slowly placed the spectacles back on his nose and reexamined the report. "There are often collapsed lava tubes that leave linear depressions, however."

"But these aren't depressions, just the opposite. And what about the identical dimensions?"

Ken's penetrating eyes glanced over the spectacle rims. "Identical?"

"Well, nearly identical. Too close to be caused by just chance."

"I remind you that the volcanos of the Tharsis ridge are old, maybe two billion years old. Coincidences can occur over a span of two billion years."

George's right hand dropped to his thigh. "I know the volcanos are old. But the caldera as we see them sure aren't two billion years old. Maybe a few million. And the formations; I can't explain them."

"I'm not surprised," Ken said. "You're not a geologist."

George rolled his eyes, then did the only thing that could stop his next outburst; he clamped his mouth shut.

Ken's expression seemed to acknowledge that the last remark was excessive. "I'll turn your report over to the geologists," he replied, motioning with his hand for George to leave.

"Not the Mining Affiliate," George objected.

"No, I'll see who the government has up here. I believe there is someone, something Ferris I believe. Yes ... Tony Ferris."

\* \* \*

Charles stiffly stood from behind his desk as Harlan Schmidt entered his modest office, followed meekly by another Mining Affiliate member. Charles hadn't met Harlan before, but had heard much about him, mostly bad. His reputation as head of the Mining Affiliate on Mars was one of a slash and burn power seeker. He appeared less sinister than his reputation. A short, stocky man with a thick neck. His face was pudgy but pleasant, and his head was covered with a generous amount of dark hair. The man following him was quite the opposite. A bit taller, slight of build, seemingly older, thinning gray hair, but little wrinkled.

Charles motioned toward two empty chairs across from his cluttered desk. Two other chairs were already occupied by Tony Ferris and Kathrine Perry, neither of whom rose to acknowledge the arrival of the Affiliate members.

Charles' office, barely twelve feet square, was hardly adequate for a meeting of this many people. He'd been informed upon landing that he was lucky to even have office privileges. The inadequate living and office quarters afforded him, in spite of his responsible position, exasperated Charles, but he wanted this meeting on his own turf. Even if he didn't have much turf.

He motioned toward the still seated Kate and Tony, “These are my associates, Katherine Perry and Tony Ferris.”

“I know of them,” Harlan said, nodding slightly. He gestured toward his own staff member, “This is my chief geologist, Ben Phillips.” Ben nodded to Charles, then waited for Harlan to sit before being seated himself.

Charles watched as Harlan’s eyes measured the worn office, a hint of a smile curling his lips. “Maybe we can make this meeting as short as possible, given the accommodations.”

Charles’ jaw tightened. “Fine, I’ll not waste time then. We’ve just returned from an expedition to Valles Marineris.”

“Yes, I also know of the expedition. I was certainly surprised at your timing. I understand you lost a man in the storm ... tragic, but not altogether unexpected.”

Charles was beginning to see that what’d he’d heard of Harlan was accurate. “Unfortunately, that’s true. But a previous rover mission caught a glimpse of something, possibly critical to our investigation. We didn’t have the luxury of waiting until after the storm season before following up.”

“Around here,” Harlan said, “we’ve learned to have great respect for Martian dust storms.”

“As you should.” Charles tried to suppress his irritation at Harlan’s needling. “The time pressure being exerted by the Mining Affiliate forced us to take such a drastic action.”

Harlan raised an eyebrow. “Maybe if you’d have consulted with us, we could have helped in some way.”

“The determination of indigenous life existence is a government responsibility,” Charles said. “By your own schedule, we don’t have the time to sit and discuss every single action.”

“Oh? Then perhaps we can get to the gist of this

meeting?”

“Yes, let’s. We’re proposing a significant and expensive deviation from previous exploration tactics.”

Harlan’s fleshy brow wrinkled. “Expensive?”

“Yes, quite. The government can’t, or won’t, fund the entire effort.”

“Another major effort?” Harlan suddenly looked focused. “Are you asking the Mining Affiliate to fund an expedition?”

Charles held up a hand. “Partially fund.”

“What’s the nature of the mission?” Ben Phillips asked.

“We want to explore Olympus Mons,” Tony erupted, as if Ben’s entry turned the meeting into an open discussion.

Harlan’s look of total confidence wavered, if just briefly. Charles figured the Mining Affiliate knew about most of his efforts. But apparently, they didn’t know about the findings on Olympus Mons.

“Yes,” Charles said, “we have to explore the interior of Olympus Mons, if we can find a way in.”

“The interior?” Harlan looked at Ben for an explanation; Ben responded with a meek shrug. Harlan looked back at Charles, the confident smile again on display. “You can’t be serious.”

Charles opened the center drawer of his desk and withdrew a handful of photographs. He slid them toward Harlan.

Harlan stood and approached the desk, spread the assortment of photos, and briefly examined them.

“Interesting.”

Charles nodded.

Harlan shook his head and looked again at the photos. “You’re asking me to help fund a knee-jerk expedition based on only these photos? There’s no indication from

these that there is an entrance to Olympus Mons.”

Charles nodded, stiffening.

Harlan shoved the scattered photos back across the desk. “I thought you were out of your mind when you launched an expedition just before the storm season. These seem to support that appraisal.” He returned to his seat, muttering something to Ben Phillips that Charles couldn’t hear.

Tony lurched from his chair, grabbed the photos, and waved them in front of Harlan.

“Didn’t you look at these? Strange fossil-like impressions embedded in volcanic rock, found miles from any volcanoes. Can you explain what they are? These diagrams on the top of Olympus Mons; quite unnatural looking. The same bizarre features on Arsia Mons. Do you have an explanation?”

Harlan moved Tony’s hand away and stood up. “No, I don’t need one. You have nothing substantial, you’re just trying to stall the termination of the life search program so you can publish a few more paltry papers.”

Charles rushed around his desk and stood between the men, placing a palm flat against Tony’s chest and giving a nudge.

“Nonsense,” Charles said. “We didn’t make the dangerous journey to Mars just for our publishing rights.” He glared at Tony. “We have questions that may relate to the entire biological history of Mars. And everything we see says the answers are involved with the volcanos.”

Harlan slowly sat down, keeping his eyes intently on Tony. “Perhaps you do have a mystery. But I fail to see how it pertains to your search for indigenous life. A remote possibility of ancient primitive life perhaps ... but nothing more.”

Kate stood as Tony testily resumed his chair.

“Frankly,” she said, “We’ve never found any solid evidence of existing, or even extinct life on Mars. It’s been a puzzle. Mars has had all the elements: water, proper atmosphere, warm temperature. But maybe it didn’t have the elements long enough. Or maybe some important ingredient, like cosmic ray influx, didn’t arrive while conditions were right. Anyway, nothing has ever been found.”

“Exactly,” Harlan shrugged, “Which is why we want to get on with our mining.”

“You know as well as I the importance of studying any existing Martian life forms,” Kate said. “The government can’t declare Mars a dead planet until they’re sure. Granted, searches up to now have failed. But the fact remains that at one time all the conditions for Martian life seem to have been met. With such a similar beginning to Earth, why didn’t Mars develop life? We’ve felt we were overlooking something. Now we’ve found these unexplainable phenomenon, all apparently having something to do with the volcanos. For the first time, evidence of something on Mars that could profoundly affect our views of life in general.”

“The things you’ve shown me probably have quite natural explanations. And they are unlikely to be related.”

“That may or may not be so,” Kate said. “But with all of our searches, these phenomenon are all that we’ve discovered. Our best shot is to determine what they are if we can. If it comes to nothing, then ... we’ll abandon the life searches. That’s what you want, isn’t it? To get this over with as soon as possible?”

Harlan rose to his feet. “Are you saying you’ll make the investigation of Olympus Mons your final expedition?”

Kate looked back to Charles. Charles nodded. “It’ll be our last search,” he said. “If we can’t answer our questions after this mission, we’ll make our report, which will

release the Mining Affiliate.”

Harlan sat and folded his hands under his chin for a few seconds. Charles could almost hear the wheels grind.

“If only you had one of the actual physical specimens,” Harlan said. “Without something tangible, I really can’t agree to pour good money into an endeavor with such low probability of success.”

Charles suddenly felt weak. He was sure that offering Harlan the promise of a deterministic end to investigation would force his cooperation.

“Unless ... ,” Harlan continued, “the Mining Affiliate gets something concrete from the mission.”

Charles’ heart thumped life back into his sagging expectations.

“Concrete?” he asked.

“Yes,” Harlan said. “If we not only helped fund the expedition, but participated in it. Perhaps an investigation of the volcano’s interior would be fruitful later ... for mining interests. I would consider *that* a concrete result. I’ll agree, if Ben Phillips can go along as my representative.”

Charles was too shocked to speak. He looked at Ben Phillips and saw an expression of shock greater than his own.

\* \* \*

Things aren’t working out right, Charles thought. He sat with his back to his desk, staring at the wall barely three feet away. He rubbed his eyes in thought. He didn’t want a Mining Affiliate member in the midst of his expedition. It certainly wasn’t in their interest for him to find anything. But it was the only way Harlan Schmidt would commit the needed resources and allow the additional time. And at that, it was almost as if the Affiliate knew just how much he could get from the government, and then offer just less

than he'd really need to complete the funding. It would be tight, very tight.

If only the fossil rock hadn't been lost. Perhaps the entire expedition was unnecessary. Carbon dating of the rock and verification that the imprint was actually a fossil may have caused enough uncertainty to hold up mining efforts. Or if the lava enclosing the rock could be found to come from either Olympus Mons or Arsia Mons. At least it would have bought valuable time.

Charles rubbed his eyes once more, but the pain induced by the previous days' tension wouldn't be so easily dismissed. He rotated his chair back to face his desk and read the memo again. Someone named Oliver Dodd wished to see him. He didn't know an Oliver Dodd. The government roster indicated that Dodd was assigned to the neuro-communications experiment. With what little Charles knew of neuro-communications, he was quite dubious about it. And he had no idea why the neuro-communications people would want to see him.

The intercom on Charles' desk let out a stifled bleep. Charles punched the talk button. "What is it?"

A scratchy voice replied, "Oliver Dodd is here to see you."

"Let him in," Charles answered, wondering if his voice was as inappropriately reproduced on the secretary's end. He looked up to see an awkward caricature of a man enter his office. Charles first thought was a sense of confirmation that neuro-communications was as flaky as he imagined.

"Doctor C-Carson?" the voice stuttered.

"Yes, I'm Charles Carson. And you're Oliver Dodd?"

"Y-yes. M-most people call me Oracle. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Charles tried not to smile at the awkwardness of the

man. He fought off the impulse to ask about the nickname. "It's no trouble. Please have a seat ... Oracle. Why do you wish to see me?"

Oracle timidly took a seat near the entrance of the office. "I heard that you're g-going to lead an expedition into Olympus Mons."

Charles slumped down into his chair. Is there any semblance of secrecy on Mars? he wondered.

"That's true," Charles said. "How would that concern you?"

"I want to go with you."

Charles stared blankly for a moment. "What?"

"I want to go with you. I think I can be of help."

"I don't understand. You're involved in the neuro-communications experiments, yes?"

"That's right."

"You realize this expedition is primarily to search for evidence of indigenous life forms?"

"Y-yes."

Charles rubbed his brow, the tension headache throbbing again. "Exactly how ... do you think you can help me?"

Oracle swallowed hard. "I d-don't know what you know of our project. But we use equipment to condition neuro-waves produced by the brain, which helps transmit them over distance. We would like to try our t-technique from within Olympus Mons, if you find a way in. I m-might be able to help with your communications to the surface."

"Oh, that's your angle. I think we're covered there, the old fashion way. We intend to leave a series of transceivers along our exploration route. Each transceiver will relay communications to the next one in the link. That'll keep us in contact with a transmitter on top of Olympus Mons, and thus with the colony at New Chryse."

Oracle nodded as Charles explained. “And if one of the transceivers fails?”

“They’re very rugged units. We shouldn’t have any trouble.”

“B-but if one does fail?”

Charles shrugged. “Then ... we’ll lose contact, at least until we fix the problem. It’s a low probability.”

“Neuro-communications works on quite d-different principles. I think I can use it from within the volcano, without relay stations.”

Charles wrinkled his brow. “From what I hear, it’s far from a proven technique.”

“Only because I’m not the one who’s been doing it.”

Charles almost laughed. The man may look like a bumbling fool, but he didn’t lack confidence.

“Perhaps,” Charles said. “But I don’t think we can accommodate you. We have specific objectives, and the cost ...”

“We have objectives too,” Oracle interrupted. “D-don’t you realize how important neuro-communications could be? Especially if it could be done from within the volcano, without relay stations. A successful experiment could bring recognition to our field, and revolutionize human communication.”

Charles stood and pointed at his wrist chronometer, “No doubt you have objectives, Mr. Dodd. But I’m rather short of time.”

“Y-you don’t understand. Neuro-communications has to be done where there is a low population density. At least until the techniques are developed. B-but as soon as the mining affiliate gets the go-ahead, the population of Mars will take a big jump. Then, just like what happened on the moon, we’ll be pushed to an even more remote location. Yet our techniques could be helping now.”

Charles saw the same look of frustration in the man's eyes he'd been experiencing himself. He wasn't sure he could match Oracle's confidence in the neuro-communications experiments. But then again, perhaps Oracle didn't believe in the chances of indigenous life either. They were, after all, both government scientists stifled for the same reasons.

"M-my unit will be willing to help f-fund the expedition," Oracle said.

That, Charles thought, is quite a trump card. What a strange expedition it would be. Underfunded, short of time, dragging along a geologist almost surely hoping the entire effort would fail. Or, fully funded and now additionally dragging along a fruit cake wanting to do his own mystical experiment. But ... the additional funding just might make it possible.

"Alright." Charles said, rubbing his suffering forehead. "You can go along."

## Chapter 8

Charles jerked and grabbed frantically for the seat armrests as the shuttle craft he reluctantly occupied abruptly rolled left.

“Relax Charles,” Tony said. “You flew all the way to Mars, surely a little trip to the top of Olympus Mons can’t put you off.”

“I slept nearly all the way to Mars,” Charles said sheepishly. “But I’m painfully awake now, and quite aware of every creak and groan this shuttle makes. And it makes a lot.” He relaxed his white-knuckle grip the smallest amount, slowly letting out a deep breath.

“I’ll let you know when to worry. Ahh, we’re braking. Touch-down any minute.”

Charles’ grip grew tighter again as the shuttle jostled and groaned several times as it slowed, then thumped to a hard landing. His grip had not yet loosened even as the side door was opened and Tony hopped out.

Tony peered back into the open hatch. “Are you

coming? George Filmon has been waiting patiently for nearly three hours you know.”

“Coming ... Coming,” Charles mumbled. He willed himself up and over to the door. Although all he could see was solid ground beneath, the knowledge that the caldera of Olympus Mons was some seventeen miles above the Martian surface made it seem that the entire volcano was swaying.

“This way Dr. Carson.” Charles peered out to see a figure standing next to Tony. He assumed it was George Filmon. George was waving. “The formations are just a few hundred yards from here.”

Charles carefully stepped down to the caldera surface, as if the ground was slippery. He saw George’s shuttle parked some hundred yards away. He soon realized that George and Tony were already well on their way to the formations. He jogged to catch up.

When he approached the place where they finally stopped, George greeted him with a smile of satisfaction. Charles looked around the area. “I don’t see anything.”

“It’s all around.”

Charles glanced down and saw only the dark, rocky surface, reminiscent of an asphalt parking lot with a thin veneer of orange dust. To him, the entire area looked rather the same. “Where?”

“We’re all standing on it.” George pointed down. “Remember, the photos were taken by high resolution cameras from a hundred miles up. The patterns are formed of lines several yards wide. From the satellite vantage point the contrast was pretty easy to see. I admit it’s more difficult when your right on top of the caldera.”

Charles walked around in a rough circle, soberly scanning the surface. Finally he noticed that the area where he stood had fewer of the larger rocks that splattered the area, and a slightly lighter color. It was as if something in

the past had cleared the region and scraped off a layer of older surface.

“We can follow the pattern if you like,” George said. “It traces a nearly perfect circle of about a thousand yards in diameter. The northernmost region is destroyed by a small meteor crater.”

Charles placed a hand to his visor to shield the sun’s glare. The path moved off in opposite directions. He took a dozen steps along the barely discernible trail, then stopped.

“I’m not sure I want to take a two mile hike,” he said. “Besides, I think I’d go blind trying to discern the trail from the normal surroundings. Did you examine the triangular figure also?”

“Absolutely. Same result, a near perfect equilateral triangle centered in the circle. It’s also a bit broken by shallow craters in a couple of areas, but recognizable. I’m certain the craters are more recent than the figures. That’s why they’ve damaged the markings. To be completely honest with you, my boss isn’t so sure, but is interested enough to allow me to show you what I’ve found.”

“I take it you mean he doesn’t believe the formations are as well defined as you interpret?”

“He’s puzzled by the markings, but doesn’t so much think that there were precise formations that were damaged, but that there were possibly some random patterns that approximate what I think I see, and I’m sort of interpolating over the damaged areas. Sort of back to the Martian canals thing, you know.”

“Did you comb the entire enclosed area?”

“Absolutely. I performed a very detailed examination. I looked at the surrounding area also up to a mile beyond the periphery.”

Charles noted a slight irritation in George’s voice at being so thoroughly questioned. “Did you find any crevices,

caves, or openings of any kind?"

George looked puzzled by the question. "No, no openings. But the center of the formation is interesting. It's over this way a few hundred yards. I was going to survey it and mark it, but it's already marked ... sort of."

Charles followed along, his mind preoccupied in thought. Within a few minutes George stopped at the edge of a sunken area. The region was about ten yards wide, looking like a shallow collapse fault.

"Here it is," George said. "This sunken area lies right at the center of both the circular and triangular formations. Curious, don't you think?"

Charles turned to Tony, who was down on one knee examining the rough surface. "Tony, what do you make of it?"

"Not sure," Tony said. "From the surface this whole area is pretty unimpressive. The satellite photos were more startling from their vantage point. I don't think this small depression even showed up on the photos. Still ... you can certainly get the impression that something moved material to create geometric patterns. And it is either quite curious or very coincidental that this depression lies in the center of the formation. The depression, for its rather precise location, is poorly formed. If the patterns were a construct of some sort, I'd guess that this depression is not."

"You mean the depression doesn't appear to be purposeful?"

"Exactly. I mean the formations, at least on the large scale, seem very precise. But this depression is not circular, or triangular, or any regular shape. It seems to just be there by natural means."

"Can you think of any process associated with volcanic evolution that could account for the patterns?"

Tony stood and tossed a pebble. "No. Certainly not

the triangular one. Unless George's boss is right, and we're erroneously filling in over the cratered areas when in fact there was never a complete formation."

"There's been manned exploration of Mars for several decades," Charles said. "Could this be some kind of experiment by a previous expedition? Or, a hoax? Could the Affiliate be trying to pull something?"

Tony stood and stared at every detail of the depression before answering. "Maybe. But it looks old, certainly more than decades. Hard to say how old, but if you scrape off this top layer you see a lighter soil ... see?" Tony scraped his foot repeatedly over the dark dirt, slowly revealing a lighter tint beneath. "There, notice the difference in color? But that lighter soil takes a long time to turn uniformly dark, more than a few years, or even decades I suspect. And the craters are old. Yet they do appear to have happened after the formations. Of course, if a hoax is involved, that could be on purpose."

Charles was beginning to feel very uneasy. "A ... spaceship from somewhere else? I don't think I'm ready to believe that. Certainly not from native surface inhabitants, there aren't any, and by all appearances never have been. Some subterranean inhabitants? That's not possible, is it?"

"I don't believe in flying saucers either," Tony said. "In order of likelihood, I'd say that we're imagining a non-phenomenon like the Martian canals and our mind is filling in details that never really existed, or its a very clever hoax done in some way that I can't quite imagine. Much less likely I'd think ... something is going on, or was going on eons ago inside this volcano. As a skeptic, I rather doubt that."

Charles tapped a button on his wrist to activate his radio. "Bring the seismographic equipment from the shuttle."

The wooden crate didn't make much of a table. But the shuttle wasn't equipped with an office and a few packing crates were all that was available. The crate that drew the focus of interest was covered with graphs produced by seismographic instruments. It had taken three small explosions to produce the vibrations necessary to examine the area of volcano beneath the formations. Charles was both exhilarated and shaken by the findings.

"I'm not sure what to think of this," Tony said, "but the area underneath the depression is hollow. That still doesn't rule out a hoax, but I can't imagine that whoever might have done this was aware of what's underground. Our seismographic explosions left quite a visible disturbance. There wasn't any such disturbance before we did that. Without that knowledge, what's the likelihood someone would choose that particular depression for the centerpiece of a bogus design?"

Charles agreed, unable to stretch his significant mentality around what was being revealed to them. "How thick is the lava at the narrowest point?"

George punched a few buttons on a hand computer. "Five feet. Maybe ten. I can only approximate. If there was ever an opening into the hollow below the surface, it must've been some time ago."

"At least that figures," Tony said. "I'm convinced that these formations are old. At least thousands of years. Probably more."

"I wonder if there are other formations, covered by lava flows?" Charles asked.

"No one can say," Tony answered, "but George says there's a similar formation on South Spot." He shoved one of the seismographic maps toward Charles and poked a

finger at it. "The thinnest point is right there."

Charles shivered as he noticed the point indicated by Tony. As nearly as Charles could estimate, the point was in the direct center of the depression, precisely at the center of the formations as near as they could measure.

\* \* \*

"Ready?" Charles asked through his helmet microphone.

"Negative," Tony answered. "The charges are wired, but we haven't brought the shuttle down yet."

Charles peered over the rim of the makeshift protection of piled rocks. A half mile away an explosive charge was set to blow a hole into the cavity below. He was shaking in anticipation. But Tony was right, they had to wait until the shuttle was repositioned to a safe distance.

"Ready," Tony's voice rang in Charles' earphones. "We're down about five miles from your site. Should be safe here. Be careful."

"We'll let you know," Charles said. He glanced to his left and right, counting spacesuits. The four technicians that helped set the explosives were all accounted for. Charles picked up the control module and carefully punched in the four-key sequence.

There was an instant of anticipation, then a sickening rumble. For a brief moment Charles was afraid the area beneath him would collapse. Then chunks of charred rock splattered the area, a few pieces bouncing off their makeshift barricade. He realized immediately that he'd underestimated the greater distance material would travel in Mars' weaker gravity.

Charles took a quick count and found each technician unharmed. He carefully stood from behind the barricade. There was a rock pile where the explosives had been set.

He gave a brief look back at the waiting technicians, then moved anxiously toward the rubble. In moments he covered the distance, the technicians just behind him.

“Looks like a lava-tube cave under there,” one of the technicians said. “Slopes down pretty fast, but appears clear as far as I can see.”

Charles stood next to the technician, trying to peer into the chasm they’d uncovered. “Tony, we’ve got a tunnel here. Call Kate and tell her to begin preparations. We’re going to spend our last nickel finding out what’s down there.”

\* \* \*

“How far ...” Kate said panting, “have we gone?”

Even with some caving experience, Charles realized, this effort was different enough to be a problem. The biggest fatiguing factor on the earth climbs had been the thin, high altitude atmosphere. On this expedition, the catalytic oxy-pumps simply worked harder, not one’s lungs. The problem descending into these dark caverns was knowing where to go, and seeing where not to step. Not to mention the fact that the tube walls were often very rough and jagged, and could tear a careless person’s suit.

The head lamps mounted to each helmet were very bright, but even their brilliance fell off rapidly into the gloom. What made it even more difficult was the cave’s dark structure. One could hardly tell another cavern from a blank wall, as poorly as they reflected light. Tony had to use a sonic probe to chart a course through the maze of caves. Most of the time the choices were very limited. But they had passed a few intersections, and conceivably had missed a better route.

It would take years to explore this properly, Charles mused.

“Well?” Kate demanded. “How far?”

“Just a second,” Charles said between breaths. He retrieved the inertial mapping unit strapped to his waist, one of two brought on the expedition. The tightly packaged computer, constantly receiving information from its precision photon gyros and accelerometers, carried in its memory an accurate map of every twist and turn already traversed. Charles flipped open the panel protecting the display and scrolled through their map of progress.

“Looks like we’ve covered about three miles,” he announced.

“I mean how far down?”

“Just a minute ... looks like we’ve descended about eight-hundred feet.”

Kate looked at an instrument held tightly in her left hand. “Um ... looks like the temperature is rising at a nominal rate of one degree Fahrenheit for each two-hundred feet.”

“Big deal,” Ben Phillips grumbled. He slid to a sitting position with his back against a smooth wall section. “That just means it’s still mighty cold.”

“It means that if this rate holds up, seven or eight miles down liquid water could exist. That could provide a necessary element for Martian life.”

“Seven or eight, we’ll never get that deep into this place,” Ben said.

Charles flipped the mapping display cover closed.

“He’s right, Kate. There’s no way we can go that deep.”

“Damn shame,” Kate said.

“Might not have to go that deep,” Tony said, barely breathing hard. “The vapor pressure might well increase inside this place.”

Kate slapped her helmet. “You’re right. And it likely will. So we might be able to descend far enough to actually

find water.”

Charles turned his torso slowly in all directions, trying to play his head lamp around for a comprehensive view of the area. Though he couldn't really see to confirm it, his subjective sense told him that the channel they'd been following was much larger here.

“Tony? What does your sonic probe say about this place?”

“Just a sec ... this is a pretty big room. Roughly sixty feet wide, and over thirty feet high. Not quite the limit of this probe, but well on the way.”

“These caves are depressing,” George complained. “I've been in Earth caves before. They're usually colorful, and often have ornamented stalactites and stalagmites. These caves just have this monotonous, coarse black rock.”

“These are lava caves,” Ben said. “Lava caves on Earth have the same appearance. Probably aren't any this big, though. What you saw were called live caves, with water still helping form the features. There's no water here, probably never has been.”

Tony walked ahead for a few yards and swept the sonic probe slowly back and forth. Presently he walked back to Charles. “I told Filmon to place another transceiver here,” Tony said. “The sonic probe indicates that the largest path out of here makes a sharp turn to the left. We'll put the transceiver at the turn.”

“Check,” Charles said. He noticed Oracle at his elbow. He was afraid he knew why Oracle had approached.

“Are w-we going to rest here awhile?”

Charles looked around at the other members. Kate and Ben were now both sitting down, arguing about the merits of descending deeper into the volcano. Tony and George Filmon were heading off to place the transceiver. Jeff and Dean, the two technicians on the expedition, were

resting a dozen feet from Kate, sipping on the nutrient straws that entered the base of their helmets.

Charles looked back at Oracle. "I guess so. Everyone looks a bit bushed, and it'll take a few minutes for Tony and George to place the transceiver."

"If there's time, I want to set up my equipment and try a contact with New Chryse."

"I don't know .... how long will it take?"

"Thirty minutes. Maybe twenty."

"How about fifteen?"

Oracle fidgeted. "If I hurry, I g-guess."

Charles picked a smooth spot and sat with his back against it. "All right, go ahead ... fifteen minutes. Do you need any help?"

"Just radio confirmation of my contact." Oracle kneeled and unstrapped his sizable backpack. He deftly placed a lunch box-sized piece of electronics equipment on the ground and began connecting wires from it to special contacts on the sides of his helmet. He then began twiddling with a dozen or so knobs that sprouted from the front of the instrument.

Charles remained seated and tapped a button on his wrist to activate the surface-contact radio. "Carson expedition calling New Chryse. Come in."

"This is New Chryse, go ahead."

"Dodd wants to try a neuro-link. Are you ready?"

"Hang on ... okay, tell Dodd to proceed."

After ten minutes of adjusting knobs, Oracle announced, "I'm ready."

Charles switched off his transmitter and waved to Oracle. He watched initially with indifference, then his interest grew as he saw the ritual Oracle performed. Oracle sat cross-legged, as if preparing to meditate. Then he placed the control box on his lap and gave it a couple more

adjustments. Finally, he sat straight up, placed his hands on his folded legs, and rolled his eyes to the top of his head.

“What’s he doing?” Charles asked.

“Shh,” Kate whispered. “He told me it takes considerable concentration. No harm in giving him the benefit of the doubt.”

Charles moved quietly on his hands and knees to a point behind and to the left of Oracle. From there he could see the indicators on the instrument in Oracle’s lap. One display was about two inches wide and six inches long, and presented a number of squiggly lines in strip chart fashion.

For a full five minutes, nothing happened. Then Charles perked up as the random looking signals dribbling across the display began to rapidly increase in amplitude. In just a few seconds, the radio alert beeper blurted in his earphone.

Charles activated his radio. “Carson here.”

“This is New Chryse, we’re getting something. Our unit is dumping out a hard-copy image. It shows your crew scattered around a fairly large cavern. Looks like most of them are sitting down. You’re sitting about a dozen feet in front of Oracle.”

‘In front?’ Charles thought. He was about to denounce the whole thing when he realized that when Oracle entered his trance, he had been in front. He crawled behind Oracle after the communications began.

“Oracle isn’t saying anything,” Charles said quietly into his microphone. “How can you be getting any message?”

“The communication isn’t verbal,” the helmet speakers crackled. “Neuro-communications is sort of a visual form. At least, our equipment is designed to interpret the complex information that way. Oracle is trying to transmit an impression of his surroundings. This is one of the best

efforts we've ever seen."

Suddenly Oracle mumbled something and flipped a switch on his control unit. He then turned abruptly and stared, giving Charles a start.

"I d-didn't know you had moved," he said.

"Sorry. I ... wanted to see what you were doing."

"N-no harm done. Tell them to try transmitting, I'll see if I get any impressions."

Charles sat dumbfounded for a moment. New Chryse had actually received an image of their surroundings. The radio transmit link had been turned off most of the time, so the neuro-communications equipment had performed without help from the transceiver stations. Maybe Oracle could be useful after all.

Charles tapped the link control and responded to Oracle's request. "New Chryse, this is Charles Carson."

"Go ahead."

"Oracle is ready to receive. Are you ready to transmit?"

"Switching to transmit mode ... ready."

Oracle again straightened up and placed his hands on his lap. Charles once more fixed his eyes on Oracle's equipment. Soon, the small squiggles grew in amplitude, tracing out random patterns.

"I'm getting something," Oracle announced. "I see the communications room. I see Sam assisting ... he must be feeling better. I see ... ack." Oracle's hands grabbed at the wires connected to his helmet, yanking them loose. He continued to make sputtering sounds.

Charles jumped to his feet. "Oracle, what is it?" He tried to help Oracle to his feet.

"Ack. Terrible taste."

"What happened?" Kate shouted, running to Oracle's aid.

Oracle awkwardly reached his feet, nearly knocking Charles over with his convulsive floundering. “Dunno. I was getting a pretty clear image of the communications room, then th-things went ... sort of ... black. Then this awful taste. Almost threw up.”

Charles kneeled and started examining the equipment. “I hope this didn’t get broken.”

Oracle dropped to his knees and yanked the equipment away from Charles. “L-let me see. I couldn’t help it. I just wanted to get it off.”

Charles backed away. “Did it malfunction?”

Oracle turned the equipment over in his hands, giving it a careful examination. “No, I don’t think so. Maybe I had the g-gain too high. This contraption is m-made for ... ordinary people.”

Charles was taken aback by the statement.

Suddenly Oracle set the equipment on the ground and looked at Charles. “Sam complained of a foul taste when he had his accident. Maybe ...”

“Maybe the instruments don’t work as well as you think,” Charles interrupted. A vision of Oracle lying in a coma passed through his mind. He got to his feet and waved to the others. “We’ve got to get moving. Tony, did you get that transceiver positioned?”

“Yep. It’s set up and checked out.”

“Are you able to travel, Oracle?” Charles asked.

“Y-yeah, I guess. Next time, I’ll be prepared.”

\* \* \*

“Let’s take a breather,” Charles said, wheezing. His tired thighs ached, and the rib cage he’d thought was healed hurt as well. His chronometer revealed it had been three hours since their last rest. Like the others he found the caves monotonous so far, and pushed himself, hoping to find

something more interesting. Now his legs were telling him it was time to slow down.

“C-can I try the neuro-net again?” Oracle asked.

“What are your readings?” Charles said to Tony, ignoring Oracle’s request.

Tony swept the sonic probe around, allowing it to build up an image of the cavern from reflected sound waves. “The cavern here is running about twenty feet wide, and fifteen feet high. Readings look different, though.”

Charles approached Tony to see the readings himself. “What do you mean, different?”

“Not as crisp, and a weaker signal. Up to now, the boundaries of the cavern have been indicated by a thin line, as long as I pointed at something within range. Now they’re marked by broader lines of varying thickness.”

Charles took the probe from Tony and studied the design. It consisted of a head-sized box with handles on 2 opposing sides, with a funnel shaped snout protruding from the front. On the top was a six-inch square display that presented a graph and a half dozen digital readouts. He handed the device back to Tony.

“Are you sure it’s properly adjusted?” he asked.

Tony scowled at the suggestion. “I’ve already checked that. I think I’m getting a reflection ambiguity.”

“Reflection ambiguity?”

“Yes. The reflected signals aren’t bouncing back with consistent time delays, and some of the signal is being scattered. The surface is probably more porous, causing ghost reflections.”

Charles directed his light at the cave wall. He could see no visual difference.

“Ben,” he called. “You’re the mineral expert. What’s different about the cave?”

Ben slowly approached the nearest wall. He peered

at it, then ran his gloved hand over the surface. He pulled a pick-like instrument from his belt and knocked off a piece.

“It’s a lot older than the material near the surface. This rock is crumbling, the decayed condition probably creates a softer reflecting surface.”

“Dr. Carson, can I try my experiment again?” Oracle asked.

Charles was startled that Oracle was just behind him. Damn, he’s staying right at my elbow, Charles thought. He began to answer, then twisted around to project his lamp in another direction. “Where the hell is Kate? Kate?”

“I’m back here,” her muffled voice answered. “Don’t concern yourself. I’m just doing my job.”

Charles walked a few steps in the direction of her voice, seeing the beam of her lamp glimmering behind some lava formations. “Be careful back there,” he shouted. He turned and nearly bumped into Oracle, who was standing immediately behind him.

“My experiment?” Oracle asked.

“Not now,” Charles said tersely. He headed back toward Tony and Ben, who were still poking at the cave wall.

“Why?” Oracle asked, following closely.

Charles paused and stared at Oracle for a few seconds. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Th-this whole expedition is dangerous. What’s so dangerous about my experiment?”

“You about freaked out back there. You admitted that you had some of the same symptoms as Sam Jenkins. He ended up in a coma for several days. We can’t risk that down here.”

“It won’t happen to me.”

“It could happen to you. We can’t risk it now that we’re this deep. We’d have no way of taking care of you. If

you end up in a coma, we'll all be in jeopardy."

"It won't happen to me. I'm not like Sam. Besides, I've experienced it now. I'm ready."

"Fine. You'll be just as ready when we get closer to the surface."

Charles walked with big strides toward Tony. Oracle scurried along at his elbow.

"I want to k-know what's causing the interference. It's a new part to the experiment. It could be more important than the neuro-communications experiment itself. It never happened in our limited work on Earth. Not even on the Moon. Only here. Finding answers is why I came along. Why I p-paid to come along."

Charles stopped and pivoted. Oracle was right, he did contribute significant money to the effort. "Maybe. But it'll wait. It's an experiment you can do under controlled conditions, topside."

"Charles," Kate shouted, "Come look at this."

Charles gladly stepped away from Oracle and headed for Kate.

"What is it?" Charles rounded the boulder formations and spotted Kate lying on her stomach, her head and shoulders thrust into a crevice.

"This isn't old, crumbling rock," she said, clearly mocking Ben's comment. "There's something on the walls in here. I think something is or was growing."

Kate backed out of the irregular shaped crack in the wall. Charles stooped and leaned into the crevice, barely as wide as his shoulders. The close quarters harshly reflected his lamp's brilliance, forcing him to turn down its intensity. He blinked away the retinal spots caused by the lamp, and for the first time since entering the system of caves saw something that wasn't black. A dull, brown, crusty material covered a small patch of the crevice interior.

Charles reached to touch it, then decided he should let the experts perform the examination.

“Let me see,” Ben demanded. He tapped Charles on the backside. Charles backed out from the crevice and Ben immediately poked his head and shoulders into the restricted area.

“This is just corrosion,” he said.

“Can’t be,” Kate said sternly.

Ben popped out from the crevice and addressed Charles rather than Kate. “It’s just a form of rust. Simple rust. There’s obviously some iron content exposed here, and it’s oxidized. Mars is loaded with oxidized iron.”

“No,” Kate said. “It’s too dry. And not enough oxygen.” She pulled a palm-sized sensor pack from her hip pouch and took a reading. “Whoa,” she blurted.

“What?” Charles asked.

Kate slapped the edge of the sensor pack with the palm of her hand, then took another reading. “This can’t be right.”

“What? Is the sensor broken?”

“It must be,” she said. “How far down are we.”

Charles examined the map produced by the inertial unit. “About four-thousand feet.”

“I don’t believe it.” Kate slapped the sensor pack again. “My calculations showed that the temperature should be about twenty degrees warmer here than at the surface. But, its more like seventy-five degrees warmer.”

Ben crowded closer to see the reading. “What is the temperature?” he asked.

“It’s still thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit below zero, but much warmer than I’d have expected. And the atmosphere.”

“What about it?” Charles took the sensor pack from her hand.

“The oxygen content here is much higher than I’d have anticipated. On the surface, oxygen is less than one-half of one percent. Here, it’s nearly five percent.”

“Aha.” Ben grabbed the sensor pack. “I told you, oxidation.”

“No, you’re missing the point,” Kate argued. “Something is producing the extra oxygen.” She pointed at the crevice, “Some type of biological activity may be doing it.”

“That’s crazy,” Ben said. “The oxygen is a remnant of volcanism, trapped by the cave system. Volcanism produces all kinds of gases, but the surface boiled them away. Here, the atmosphere is trapped, and oxygen just reacted with minerals in the rock.”

“Alright, alright,” Charles shouted above the bickering. He pulled the sensor pack from Ben and handed it back to Kate. “Take samples, we’ll find out later. We don’t have to debate it now.”

Ben crowded close to Charles, his helmet only inches from Charles’ visor. “You’ve got to be careful how you report this,” he said.

Charles stared back. It was as if he could see Harlan Schmidt peering at him from Ben’s eyes. “We won’t report anything ... until we’re sure of our facts.”

Charles walked back to where he’d left Tony. “Get your samples,” he said. “We’ve got to move on.”

\* \* \*

“Watch the slope.” Tony shouted from ahead. “It’s getting pretty steep. With all the gravel scattered around it’s easy to slip.”

Charles heard the warning, and perhaps a corner of his mind registered it. But most of his attention was on the disputes that seemed to be frequently erupting between Kate and Ben. Each seemed knowledgeable, yet they vehemently

differed in their interpretations of the data. It fascinated and frustrated him how trained, intelligent people could view the same information and yet reach such divergent conclusions.

He sometimes envied the serenity a computer must have. It simply acquired each item of data and stored it sequentially in the next available memory slot. Humans were encumbered with the strenuous task of forcing each new data element into memory cells squeezed and pulled by childhood memories, dreams, aspirations, and stresses.

“Ungh.”

Charles was jolted from his thoughts by the sound of a solid thump followed by a grunt of pain. He spun to see what made the noise.

He saw Kate sprawled on the ground, writhing and holding her left knee. “What happened?”

“Ohh, it hurts,”

Charles quickly knelt to her aid. “Stop,” he shouted over his shoulder. “We’ve got a casualty.”

Charles had to pull Kate’s struggling hands away from her knee. “I think it’s broken,” she cried.

He gasped as he peeled loose her grip. Blood oozed from an open wound. The suit had a tear. The image of David’s contorted expression after breathing Martian dust filled his mind. He stared at the blood, then jerked to look at Kate’s face.

She was crying with pain, but breathing without trouble. He clapped his glove tightly over the gash in the suit, hoping the pressure had kept any caustic material at bay. Kate let out a whimper causing Charles to wince in sympathy, but held his hand firmly over the wound.

George was the first to reach Charles’ side. “What happened?”

“She fell. Stumbled on the damned rocks. Tore her

suit.”

“Tore her suit? Oh oh.” George kneeled beside Kate’s head. He bent over and peered into her visor. “She seems to be breathing fine.”

“Get a patch kit,” Charles snapped. “The dust down here may not be caustic like the surface, but we can’t count on it. Get the damned patch kit.”

George squirmed to get his backpack off, then fumbled through it, dropping items recklessly on the ground.

“Got it.” He quickly cut out an elliptical patch bigger than Kate’s knee, then smeared on the sticky patch cement.

“Give me that,” Charles barked, grabbing the patch and pressing it over the damaged area. He held it firmly for a couple of minutes, afraid the pressure in Kate’s suit would push it off if he let go too quickly.

Finally satisfied that the patch would hold, he turned his attention to Kate. She was still whimpering.

“How’s it feel?” he asked.

“I’m scared,” she whimpered. “I saw David ... I know what happens when ...”

“That was different,” Charles argued, trying to convince himself as well as Kate. “The surface dust is caustic. We don’t know that the same is true down here. This area has never been bombarded with UV. I don’t think you were exposed to anything harmful. The wound doesn’t look that bad. The most important thing is to repair your suit.”

Tony slapped Charles on the shoulder. “Good work Charles.” He examined the suit monitors on her wrist.

“Vital signs are fine, for a person scared half out of her wits.” He looked at Charles and winked. “Too bad for you Kate, looks like you’ll still have to keep exploring.”

Charles saw a slight smile soften Kate’s anguished look. He carefully flexed her knee. She cringed, but con-

firmed that everything felt in place, though still painful.

“Tony,” Charles said, “put in a call to New Chryse. Tell them what’s happened. See what they know about exposure to subterranean dust.” He scooted up next to Kate’s side as Tony moved away. “How does it feel? Do you think you’ll be able to walk?”

Kate rubbed the knee for a few seconds, then stood and tested its strength. Charles provided support as she limped for a few steps.

“I can walk,” she finally said. “I guess it’s not broken, but it hurt like hell. How do you think the suit patch will hold up?”

“Supposed to be as good as new,” George answered. “The patch is even thicker than the original suit material.”

Tony beckoned Charles from a dozen feet away. “Charles, come here a minute.”

Charles slapped George on the back. “Help her work the kinks out of that knee.” He watched as Kate hobbled with George’s help, then he quietly backed away. He went to Tony, sensing that Tony wanted to speak in private.

Charles lowered the volume on his acoustic radio at Tony’s signaling. “What is it?” he asked.

“I can’t raise New Chryse.”

“What?” Charles punched the button on his wrist to activate his own radio. “New Chryse ... New Chryse station ... this is the Carson expedition. Come in.” Charles listened as sweat beads formed on his forehead. He heard only static.

“You neither?” Tony asked. “Can’t be my radio then. We’ve lost a transceiver.”

“Lost a transceiver,” Ben asked. “Well, that tears it.”

Charles jerked at the remark. He hadn’t noticed that Ben was so close. “Don’t get excited,” he said. “We don’t know for sure.”

Charles doubted that Ben would be discreet with

what he'd overheard. "Let's take about a half-hour break," he said. "It'll give Kate a chance to shake the kinks out of her knee. And ... we've got a bit of a problem with the radio link ... probably nothing to get concerned about, but we need some time to run tests. Each of you try your radio, let me know what you get."

As the crew members moved around to find some place to rest, Charles found a reasonable area to sit. Tony continued to wander nearby. Over the next few minutes, each member reported failure when they tried their radio.

Charles sat on a two-foot high boulder, tossing a pebble into the blackness beyond his lamp's reach. He knew what he'd do if he was on this mission alone. But ... he wasn't. Other peoples' lives were also at risk. Conditions had changed from difficult to dangerous. It was time to clear the air. "This is a bad development," he said. "Tony, what do you say? Do we turn back?"

Tony looked up from the sonic probe. Busy every minute, he was still making detailed readings. "I'll leave it up to you, Charles. But if we quit, it's unlikely that another expedition will ever come down here. So far, we don't have much to show for the effort. If I know Kate, and I do, she won't settle for that."

Charles nodded, and tossed another pebble. "Ben? How about you?"

"No question, we should abandon the mission. We haven't found anything down here except some commonplace chemical reactions. What we're getting certainly isn't worth the risk we're taking. The next mishap may be worse, much worse."

Charles expected such a response from Ben. The Affiliate had nothing to gain by Kate finding any biological implications. But he couldn't deny the possibility of Ben's ominous prediction. Charles saw that Kate was shaking her

head. “Kate? What about you?”

“We continue. Let Oracle be our communications. He had some success once, and he’s willing to try again.”

Charles knocked black dust from his shin, and tossed another pebble. “George? Continue ... or turn back?”

George was pacing back and forth, his right hand frequently reaching to scratch his head, his helmet foiling each attempt. He stopped and looked at Charles, then Kate. “It’s up to the lady,” he said. “She had the accident. If she’s still willing to continue, I’m prepared to press on.”

Charles nodded. “Dean?”

“If you want to continue, go ahead. But I think a couple of us should backtrack and see if we can locate a bad transceiver.”

Charles stood and smoothed a patch of dirt with his boot. He felt mildly embarrassed that a technician made the only creative suggestion so far. “Jeff, you game to go on?”

Jeff lay propped up on one elbow, sipping on his nutrient straw. “Pays the same either way,” he said.

Charles turned and looked at Oracle. He hesitated a few seconds. “Oracle? Earlier you said you wanted to try communicating again. Is that still how you feel?”

“I’ve been ready. You w-want me to try now?”

“No, not yet. I think Dean is right, we should send a couple of members back, see if a bad transceiver can be located and replaced. The return path is clearly marked, backtracking should be safe enough for two members. If they can’t fix the radio link ... I’ll give you the go-ahead.”

“But I can let New Chryse know we’re OK. I can ...”

“When the time comes,” Charles interrupted. “It’s a risk; we’ll take it when necessary. We have time to look for the bad transceiver.”

“I’ll take Dean and head back,” George said, slipping his arm through his backpack strap.

Charles felt relieved. He didn't relish the thought of assigning the task to anyone. "Fine, we'll slow our pace so you can catch up later. There are five transceivers in the link so far. If you go back more than two before finding the bad one, fix it and return to the surface. Just let us know if that's what happens."

"Right," George nodded. He slipped his pack into place, looked at Dean, and motioned for him to follow.

"Okay Dean, let's get on with it." He briefly waved to Charles, and his stocky form disappeared into the gloom, followed closely by the much taller Dean.

\* \* \*

How could such a promising cavern end so abruptly? Charles wondered. They'd been following the cavern for three hours since parting with George and Dean. Now it ended in an impassable wall, not even offering a smaller side channel. Charles had carefully walked the forty-foot perimeter of the dead-end three times. The wall was extremely rough in places, with a few cracks that a man's arm could fit into. But he could see no way beyond this point.

The disappointment was agitating his emotions into a boil. The whole mission had been troublesome. At least two of the expedition members shouldn't even have come. It was painfully apparent that Ben had no interest in a positive outcome. And Oracle ... it had briefly looked like he'd be an asset, but it was becoming ever more evident that he was one strange, unpredictable fellow.

The additional irritant caused by Kate's and Ben's constant bickering was of little help. Now far from where he stood, they were at it again. He listened to the jagged conversation briefly, trying to see if either of them made sense.

“Seven percent,” Kate argued. “Oxygen now makes up seven percent of the atmosphere. We could almost breathe the stuff. Something has to be creating the increased oxygen.”

“Of course,” Ben blared over Kate’s argument. “Volcanism. Chemical reactions. And most of it probably happened long ago. We’re just sampling the primordial Martian atmosphere. It’s trapped in here. This wall characterizes the whole ridiculous expedition. It’s a dead-end.”

Charles shook his head. Nothing new had been added to the argument except the heightened emotions of the participants. He didn’t blame them for their anxiety, he too felt the pressure of the last two day’s events. Neither did he particularly disagree with either of them. There simply wasn’t enough data to determine which of their ideas, if either, was right. His only disappointment was that both of them seemed more interested in arguing the merits of their point of view than in finding hard evidence to support it.

Charles thought about injecting that thought into their conversation, but decided it would only increase the agitation. He turned and headed toward the flickering beam across the cavern. The seeking light belonged to Tony. It would be like Tony to refuse acceptance of this dead-end. As tenacious as a bulldog, Tony wouldn’t quit until relieved of the job. Charles headed toward Tony to do his own job; admit defeat, and turn the expedition back.

When Charles neared Tony, he saw only a lower torso hanging from a crack in the wall.

“Tony, what the hell?”

“Just a minute,” Tony’s muffled voice shot back. Tony kicked his feet as his body squirmed.

Charles slowly realized that Tony was trying to squeeze further into the crevice. He stepped up to Tony’s wriggling feet and grabbed them, giving Tony the leverage

he needed. Tony pushed off Charles and slid another foot into the dark. He remained motionless for a minute, then began squirming back out of the crevice.

In a few seconds Tony dropped to the floor of the cave. His suit was blackened with fine powder. Charles could barely see Tony's face through his dusty visor, but could tell that it projected excitement.

"What is it?" Charles asked. "Did you see more of the crusty formations in the crevice?"

"No. It's incredible. I was examining the wall surface, and happened to brush loose some of this fine powder. When a little of the powder fell in front of this crevice, it changed direction."

"Air flow?"

"Exactly. I didn't notice it before because it's just over my head. I crawled through as far as I could, and pushed the sonic probe further into the crack. I took a reading, then pulled the probe back so I could see the result."

"It opens up again?"

Tony waved a hand to stave off Charles' questions.

"There was nothing on the screen. Absolutely nothing."

"How can that be?"

"I doubled the range scale," Tony continued. "Again ... nothing. I increased the scale by ten. Then I got readings. There's an immense chamber in there. Bigger than anything we've seen. Much bigger."