

ARES

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1

“Before we begin our descent, commander, I have a message to play for the crew.”

Commander Kate Bauman managed a near-perfect poker face despite the unwelcome voice in her helmet. Only her clenched jaw betrayed her anger. It wasn't just the outrageously poor timing of Julian's ask that drew her ire, moments before the seven most critical minutes of their journey. His pattern of almost daily callous acts and slights had numbed her to his antics. What really riled her was his use of the main comm line instead of a private channel. Julian's lack of discretion meant they would discuss the matter in front of the entire crew.

What could the message possibly be? Had Julian not irritated the shit out of her for the past five months she might have asked. Regardless of its content there was only one answer Kate could give him but she'd take her time delivering it—she was the mission commander, not a lackey waiting on his every word. She dragged her gloved finger across her station's screen, swiping the next page of the pre-landing checklist into view, and set it scrolling with a casual flick. Guiding their craft from atmospheric insertion to touchdown was the real business of the moment. A Mars landing was a tricky affair where even the most minor misstep could mean skittering across the thin atmosphere to carom off into space, burning up in a meteoric streak of pyrotechnics, or forming the newest impact crater on the dusty red plains. They needed to devote all their attention to landfall.

The commander dispatched two checklist items with leisurely taps before addressing Julian. He stared at her from four stations away, the shine of the overhead lights repeating across his

helmet and his smooth, shaved head. Surely he understood now was not the time for distractions, that she'd have no choice but to deny his request. So why invite a public rebuff? He was up to something, she just couldn't see what. "Julian," she said, hiding her annoyance behind her taut tone, "we're a few minutes from entering the atmosphere, the point at which all the you-know-what really will hit the fan. We need to focus on one thing, which is getting to the ground safely. Let's hold off on your message until after we touch down."

Kate quickly dismissed three more items on the checklist. Commander Glenn Wiles, her second, would oversee their descent though she would closely monitor their progress. Despite the strides women had made during NASA's seventy-four year history she still felt the weight of being judged as a *woman* commander. The mission needed to be perfect, every execution flawless.

"That will be too late, I'm afraid."

This time Commander Bauman swiveled fully from her station and faced Julian, all the remnants of her poker face melted away. For any of the other astronauts under her command her answer would have been the end of the discussion, eliciting silence, a sheepish nod, or at most a meek "yes ma'am." Julian seemed to operate from a different mindset, one where her decisions were never the final word.

"I have orders to play a message for the crew before we enter the atmosphere," said Julian.

Orders that she didn't know about? Bullshit. "Orders from who?"

"Assistant Director Pearson."

Kate's cheeks flushed, sensing all eyes on her. As the number two person at NASA and the champion of their trip to Mars, Assistant Director Pearson was certainly within his rights to

communicate directly with any of Kate's astronauts. But why would the AD, himself an Air Force veteran, disregard the chain of command? She fumed, in part at the delivery of secret instructions to a subordinate, but mostly at being forced to give Julian his way. "Well let's have it," she grumbled.

"Yes ma'am," said Julian.

The capsule's main viewscreen came alive with the black glow of an empty data feed before snapping to the NASA logo suspended against a bright white background. The image switched to Assistant Director Pearson seated behind his desk, looking thin and squirrely as ever. His dark, narrow-set eyes hovered beneath his bald crown, and when he smiled the left side of his mouth rose higher than the right. "Crew of the *Ares*, I want to congratulate you on your impending achievement, the first humans to land on the surface of Mars. For the next year you will perform research and explore the Martian surface, an amazing accomplishment we should all be proud of." The assistant director slid a cigar—a Macanudo by the band—from a desktop humidor as he spoke. He clipped the end and held his torch aloft, puffing the cigar to life. He seemed ready to speak again but paused, turning the cigar sideways and studying it, apparently impressed by its flavor. "Now the other day in the Capitol a senator approached me, almost chased me down through the halls in fact. I'd sparred with him many times in the Appropriations Committee. Never considered him particularly bright. In any case he'd somehow gotten a look at the off-budget figures for your mission and asked me point blank how the hell in these fiscally-challenged times I could justify spending over 800 billion dollars on ten roundtrip tickets to Mars."

The assistant director paused for another puff of his cigar, the end glowing red behind the

nub of ash. “Now the good senator had a point. And the answer to his question begins with our first visit to Mars, the Viking landers in ’75. Twenty years went by before we would return, with two orbiters, a lander, and a rover in the ‘90s. We sent another orbiter in 2001, two more rovers in 2003, an orbiter in 2005, a lander in 2007, and sixteen more missions in the twenty-five years after that. And those figures only cover American interest in the red planet. There were also the ESA and Chinese missions. And I won’t even bother to mention the Russians—those poor devils couldn’t touch a craft down on that planet to save their life.” He puffed again. “My point is that an astute observer would guess there must have been some development on Mars to have triggered such intense interest. That brings us to your mission, ladies and gentlemen. There’s only so much you can do with rovers and landers and satellite imagery. The next phase of our interest in Mars involves boots on the ground, your boots, in search of a payout for a wager that began four decades ago. And while I’m sure a year’s worth of abrading rocks and drinking your own wastewater will prove scientifically enlightening, it’s this other interest, this *classified* interest, that is the real reason for your trip to the red planet.”

Stunned silence filled the cabin while the assistant director paused and relit his cigar.

“So everything we’ve trained for, all our preparation, that was just a front for some classified mission?” All attention shifted to Mission Specialist Casey Morgan, the expedition’s astrobiologist. Several of the other astronauts nodded in agitated agreement.

“Some of you might find this news upsetting,” continued the assistant director. “Let me assure you, as a practical matter nothing has changed. You’ll still carry out all the studies and experiments you’ve prepared for. They’re all still very important, because they serve as smokescreen for the true goal of the mission. Security Chief Julian Grimes and Mission

Specialist Joseph Cheney have been briefed on those particulars. While the rest of you go about your assignments Grimes and Cheney will handle all details and execution related to the classified task. You are to give them your full cooperation.”

Kate stole a glance at Julian. He watched the video message with a dispassionate expression, hands folded in his lap. How long had he and Cheney been preparing for this secret aspect of their mission? From the very start, if the AD was serious about it being the true reason for their trip to the red planet.

“Commander Bauman.” Kate jumped at the unexpected sound of her name. “I apologize in advance for delivering this next part in a pre-recorded video stream rather than face to face. To drive home the importance of your mission’s primary objective I am placing Grimes in charge as the acting mission commander, effective upon your landing.”

The news elicited a self-satisfied smirk from Julian. For Kate, the assistant director’s declaration knocked the wind out of her, a sucker punch straight in the gut. The years of toil, the wrecked marriage, the sacrifices she’d endured to secure the command of a lifetime all whisked aside like so much rubbish. Her heart ached, the memories of her late mother beaming in awe of her daughter’s achievement forever footnoted. The commander’s shoulders slumped forward and her chin quivered beneath her bowed head. A tear fell, then a second, splattering against the inside of her helmet.

Someone was watching.

Kate discovered Glenn looking on from across the capsule. Flustered, she reached for her damp cheeks but her hand smashed into her helmet. She quickly buried herself in her station.

“Your mission is a momentous endeavor,” said the assistant director, “one which will likely

change the course of human history, and if we're lucky, the bottom line." Kate looked up at the video, catching Pearson's final puff and his crooked smile. "Best of luck, *Ares* crew." The screen went dark. No one stirred, the flashing lights of their terminals the only animation within the capsule.

"Now that is a crock of bull ... *shit!*"

The words came from Allison Voss, shocking for the normally reserved Mars station engineer. "Hold on, Allison," said Kate.

"The mission of the century turns out to be a front for a classified operation?" asked Mars station chief Miriam Sato.

"Wait, wait," said Kate. The rising emotions risked overshadowing the important job that still remained. She needed everyone to keep it together until their capsule reached the ground.

"While the rest of you go about your assignments," said Dr. Clayton Fisk in a mocking voice, his index finger near his mouth and curled around an imaginary cigar, "Grimes and Cheney will handle the classified task which is the true reason for your mission. Please give my two toadies your full support while they search for the lost pleasure dome of Xanadu."

Julian's entire head reddened. "Disrespect towards a superior officer is a courts-martial offense," he said.

Fisk laughed. "My official designation is 'Spaceflight Participant.' Are you saying you intend to make me an officer?"

A loud whistle filled the cabin, squelching the commotion and gathering everyone's attention.

"Thank you, Glenn," said Kate. She reviewed the upset faces staring back at her around the cabin. "I'm as shocked as the rest of you about the message we just received. But right now

we're about a heartbeat away from a crash landing. We need to make sure this capsule touches down safely. So please, put everything you just saw out of your minds and—”

“Commander Bauman’s right,” said Julian. “There’s no time for grumbling. We all have a job to do.”

“I’ll thank you not to talk over me.” Kate had lost count of how many times Julian cut her off in conversations during their flight to Mars. She couldn’t tell if it was unconscious or malicious. Either way it was damn irritating. “And if you don’t mind, Julian, *I’ll* give the directives on this ship. Your reign begins the moment we touch down. Until then, *I’m* still the mission commander.”

Julian threw Kate a spiteful glance but said nothing more. He turned back to his station.

Kate chided herself for her outburst. She’d normally never have let such sharp words leave her lips but they’d taken a lot from her today. She wanted to scream at Julian, scream at the assistant director. And maybe she would, but not then. None of it would make one damn difference if they didn’t land safely on the ground.

“All stations report with pre-landing status,” said Glenn.

Kate quickly dispatched the remaining items on her checklists and swiped back to the main screen. The display filled with an image of Mars’s western hemisphere, a mottled orange disc floating against a starry backdrop. A gray dot, the *Ares* capsule, slid along a dashed white arc that traced the spaceship’s trajectory. A halo of annotations reported the craft’s speed, altitude, and other vitals.

Sweat broke out across Commander Bauman’s palms, growing to a torrent that emerged faster than her gloves could wick away. Her heart rate accelerated and she lapsed into a series of

shallow, rapid breaths. Her suit peppered her with chimes, warning that she teetered on the edge of unconsciousness.

She was panicking. But why!?

You know why.

It couldn't be that. She'd conquered the past. And in any case an atmospheric landing was nothing like a touchdown on the airless Moon.

Then why'd you ask Glenn to handle the descent?

Kate ignored the question, focusing instead on her breath. She returned to the relaxation techniques from the long ago therapy sessions. Her pulse and respiration dropped to more normal levels. She'd pulled herself back from the edge but she wasn't out of harm's way. If the mere thought of the touchdown had so easily chipped away at her hard fought recovery what would happen during the actual landing? Each descent stage carried its own unique perils. Each would become a dangerous stressor. If she didn't manage her mental state all the way to the ground she risked a full relapse into debilitation.

"Ares at nominal orientation for atmospheric entry."

Kate girded herself for their hazardous entrance into Mars's exosphere. In less than two minutes atmospheric friction would bleed off the bulk of the 12,500 miles per hour they marshaled to fling their capsule between the planets. During visits to the *Ares* vehicle assembly building she'd fixated on the craft's slim heat shield, their only protection against the 3,500 degrees Fahrenheit that easily surpassed the melting point of their stainless steel hull.

"Speed decreasing ... 10,000 ... 8,000 ... 6,000. Exterior temperature readings nominal."

Kate licked her lips. Even catastrophic descents appeared normal at first. The flames that

lapped the craft's underside probed the heat shield for weak spots in its bonded ceramic, the slightest imperfection in its metal alloy, hunting for any pathway to the delicate capsule. Kate's vital signs crept back up. She shook her head to rid herself of the morbid thoughts and focused again on her breath.

“Ten seconds to chute deployment.”

Commander Bauman breathed easier. They'd survived the brunt of atmospheric entry, though they still raced to the ground at 900 miles per hour. She gripped her restraints where they crossed in an “X” at her chest, the action ingrained after the simulator sessions on Earth.

“Three ... two ... one.”

Multiple G forces pinned Kate in her seat as the craft rocked and shimmied. She gritted her teeth against the violent movement. An exterior camera relayed footage of the chute soaring above the capsule, a great white jellyfish scooping the rarefied Martian air beneath its bell, its tentacles tugging at their hull. They slowed, but their speed bottomed out at 235 miles per hour. Mars had just enough atmosphere to burn up a craft on entry but not enough to slow it for a landing.

“Preparing to jettison heat shield.”

Kate fixated on her terminal screen, desperate for the landing target acquisition icon to appear. Once the ship discarded the heat shield and exposed the downward facing cameras the computer would have milliseconds to locate landmarks and make course adjustments. Any hiccup could result in them touching down far from the HAB. As it stood, even a perfect landing meant leading her crew on a two kilometer hike to the Mars base.

Pop!

Ten explosive bolts propelled the shield away from the capsule. Turbulence besieged the small craft with the exposure of its less aerodynamic underside, driving the commander to squeeze her restraints tighter.

Seconds ticked away, but no target acquisition lock came. Had something damaged the cameras? Or worse? Kate reached a nervous hand to query the computer when green symbols cascaded across her terminal. The *Ares* located its touchdown target and fired its thrusters in short bursts to position itself within the correct descent window. Another green icon emerged, signaling landing gear deployment. The system of struts, trusses, and shocks now extended from its stowed configuration was necessary but not sufficient for landfall—the *Ares* still fell far too fast to touch down.

A deafening whoosh filled the cabin. Kate closed her eyes as the *Ares* entered the final and riskiest landing stage. Air rushed through the now exposed intakes to the atmospheric breaking system, an experimental series of manifolds that compressed the thin Martian air before releasing it as a roiling pocket of high pressure above the capsule. The ram brake in essence thickened the air beneath the parachute enough to float the spacecraft to the ground. That was the theory at least. Despite the simulations and prototype trials on Earth Kate couldn't shake her concern that their landing would be the first test of the system on the red planet.

“Speed dropping. Ninety seconds to touchdown ... eighty ... seventy.”

Kate followed their steady deceleration on her terminal. She forced herself to relax, her fears unfounded. The ram brake worked, and in less than a minute they would touch down, becoming the first humans to set foot on an alien planet. The culmination of two decades of planning. The dream of—

“We’ve got a problem,” said Glenn. His deep, normally firm bassoon voice contained the slightest tremolo of fear.

“What is it?” asked Kate.

“We’re coming in hot.”

Indeed, Kate’s terminal still showed a steady decrease in their downward velocity but the computer projected they’d hit the ground at roughly four times the nominal landing speed. At that rate their craft, the *Ares* capsule and everything in it, would crumple on impact. “Can we get more deceleration out of the brake?”

“Negative,” said Glenn. “We’ve got maximum airflow through the intakes, we’re just not getting enough pressure out the topside.”

Two stations away spacecraft engineer Laura Engles unleashed flurries of taps on her terminal screen. “The air’s quite cold ... much colder than it should be,” she said.

“There’s a storm front building,” said Miriam. “NASA’s been tracking it for the past few days.”

Engles grunted. Schematics and reams of text flew across her screen. Her finger settled on a graph and its accompanying table of numbers. “The designs assume a higher minimum atmospheric temperature. The lower temp throws off all those calculations. The system’s scooping air but with the cold it can’t produce high enough pressure beneath the chute.”

Kate had pushed for sending a scaled down version of the *Ares* to Mars, outfitted with the experimental brake. She’d worried anything less than an actual atmospheric test on the red planet would leave their whole touchdown to chance. The mission planners cited budget constraints that made such a test impractical. They instead showcased all the data they collected from their slew

of Earthbound trials and simulations, insisting they'd accounted for every contingency.

Apparently they'd missed one.

Klaxons blared and revolving emergency lights bathed the flight deck in red chaos, the machinations of an AI co-pilot that had thrown up its hands. It could do little more than signal to its human wards their pending destruction.

“Forty-five seconds to impact,” said Glenn.

Kate scooted closer to her terminal and called up the main control screen. Her hand shook as she swiped through the displays for each of the capsule's subsystems, desperate to find any recourse that would help them survive the landing.

Shouts and commotion erupted from behind. Kate spun around to find Dr. Fisk standing free of his restraints and terror gripping his face. “Sit down and remain strapped in!” she yelled. The professor landed back in his chair with wild eyes, the ferocity of her order driving him to near hysterics.

Commander Bauman regretted snapping at Fisk—he lacked the extensive survival training that was a hallmark of the astronaut corps. She just needed them all in their seats. Whether she found a way to ease their impact or not, an unrestrained body would become a dangerous projectile inside the cabin.

“Thirty seconds.”

Kate resumed swiping. She paused and back tracked to the thruster control screen. The attitude thrusters changed the capsule's orientation using bursts of compressed gas, but even if they all pointed to the ground they wouldn't generate enough force to put a dent in their downward velocity. She scrolled instead to the controls for the third stage separation thrusters,

powerful mini-rockets designed to push the capsule away from the booster during liftoff, at the end of the third stage burn. Normally those thrusters would have completely exhausted their fuel supply but Kate had shut the system down early, holding some propellant back.

“Twenty seconds.”

Kate checked the fuel levels. The tanks contained more than she hoped, but would it be enough? She’d also have to guess when to fire them. The thrusters only burned at full force—there was no adjusting their output like a retro rocket. Starting them too soon would only delay the capsule’s fatal impact, too late and the thrusters wouldn’t have enough time to slow the craft. Either way the *Ares* would slam into the ground.

“Ten seconds. Brace for impact. Seven ... six ...”

Mouthing a prayer Kate tapped the ignition button. The third stage separation thrusters roared beneath the craft at full burn, slowing the capsule’s descent enough to calm their computer co-pilot. In a blink the AI cancelled the crash klaxon and secured them from red alert. Kate’s station showed the *Ares* hovering a meter above the ground.

The thrusters cut out. The *Ares* lingered in the thin air for a moment until gravity restarted the capsule’s downward fall.

Klaxons wailed for three quarters of a second, ceasing when the *Ares* slammed into the ground. The ship shuddered and the cockpit filled with the sounds of wrenching metal. Shocks squealed beyond their tolerances as they strained to dissipate the spacecraft’s momentum.

The impact mashed Kate into her seat. She waited for the capsule’s underside to hit the ground and impart the full force of the crash to the fragile hull. The *Ares* would burst at its seams. When they’d first announced the Mars trip Kate had imagined standing on the planet’s

surface and taking in the Martian sky. In her final moments the ruptures would at least allow her a fleeting glimpse of the ruddy canopy.

The contact with the ground never came.

Kate's terminal, a patchwork of flashing red indicators, screamed about failures in several trusses and the complete collapse of a landing strut, but showed the ship's velocity at zero. The landing gear held. She sat dazed for several seconds while reality sunk in. They had survived the touch down.

Screams of delight and relief tore through the capsule.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Glenn, beaming with sweat beaded across his brow, "welcome to Mars."

2

“Give me a live view outside,” said Julian, still strapped into his seat. He wasted no time in asserting his authority as the acting mission commander.

“Yes sir,” said Engles. With several taps on the spacecraft engineer’s terminal a thin strip of the *Ares*’s hull slid up and away, exposing sections of thick glass that followed the curve of the capsule just above their monitors. The astronauts took in the panoramic view of the Martian landscape. Dunes of smooth red dust stretched for kilometers, peppered with dark basalt rocks. Small hills rolled in the distance, and behind them a gentle mountain range ran below the Martian butterscotch sky.

The sight left Commander Bauman breathless—in a few minutes Mars would be crunching under their boots. Goosebumps broke across her skin.

“Well I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m ready to get out of this can,” said Fisk. He released his restraints, rose from his chair, and stretched his arms. “While you’re all collecting your things I’m gonna quickly use the litter box. Don’t leave without me.”

“Negative,” said Julian. “You should have attended to that business before our descent. For now rely on the facilities in your suit.”

“You mean my personal hotbox?” Fisk muttered. “How can they build a spacesuit for twenty-five million dollars but forget to include an air freshener?”

Kate undid her restraints and stood. She quickly grabbed the top of her chair, steadying herself on unsure, wobbling legs.

“Easy moving around, everyone. It’ll take some getting used to being in gravity again.”

The directive came from Dr. Nathan Palmer, the mission’s medical specialist. The planet’s pull, just a third of Earth’s, was stronger than Kate expected. The conditioning to counter the effects of their months in zero gravity hadn’t prepared her as well as she’d hoped.

The capsule came alive with excited chatter and shuffling bodies. The *Ares* astronauts formed a line to the hatch that snaked around the cabin. They leaned against the bulkhead as they angled themselves against the flight deck’s eight degree tilt, the wounded spaceship listing from the collapsed landing gear strut.

Kate scooted in front of Glenn, taking her position at the head of the line. Her heart rate rose though not to the levels fueled by her anxiety before their landing. She was about to make history as the first human to set foot on Mars.

“You’re in my spot.”

Engrossed in the moment, Kate hadn’t noticed Julian sidle up to her. Dazed and not understanding his comment she could only blink back at him.

“The mission commander is always the first to exit,” said Julian.

Kate looked on, stunned, as Julian muscled his way between her and the hatch. The other astronauts tottered in their bulky suits, making room while scrambling to avoid falling backwards. When the line settled down all the bustle and excitement that filled the capsule had bled away, leaving a leaden silence.

Julian’s white, boxy breather pack filled Kate’s entire field of view and knocked against the outward bulge of her helmet when he moved. From the days of the first moon landing the mission commander always exited the space vehicle first but Kate never imagined Julian’s last

minute promotion would upend an event NASA had spent a year preparing just for her. “The mission planners choreographed my descent down the ladder,” she sputtered, “laid out a whole speech for me to give ... for the cameras I mean ... they’re filming right now, outside the capsule.”

Julian turned and faced Commander Bauman. “They told you how to climb down a goddamn ladder?” He smirked and turned back to the hatch. The remark left Kate gobsmacked.

Julian tapped a code into the keypad embedded in the bulkhead. A thin stripe of red light pulsed around the hatch and a klaxon sounded. The wail waned with the cabin’s evacuating atmosphere. Silence returned, and with it the stripe around the hatch turned a steady red. Julian yanked the handle in the hatch’s center, freeing the latches that secured the door in place. He pushed the hatch out and open on its hinges to a flood of bright Martian daylight. Standing in the doorsill he peered out across Mars. Kate shifted left and right, angling without success for a view around his bulk.

Julian reached outside the capsule to the right along the hull. His right leg followed. In an instant he disappeared from view.

Kate stepped forward. She spotted Julian still to her right, clinging to a ladder deployed by the capsule shortly after their landing. He scrambled the eight meters down to the last rung where he turned to face the Martian landscape. He remained there, unmoving, for several seconds, apparently overcome by the moment. He was likely gathering his thoughts, struggling for the words to match a flood of emotions. “If you want—”

The instant Kate began to offer Julian the short speech NASA had prepared for her the security chief simply hopped down to the ground. He walked a few paces from the capsule

before turning back to the *Ares*. Peering up at the hatch he met Kate's gaze. "Well what are you all waiting for?"

Kate pressed into action. She swung onto the ladder and descended to the final rung where she turned and paused as Julian had. She'd debated reciting her prepared remarks despite being second out the capsule but the sight of bootprints in the soft soil razed the thought. What was the point? He'd already taken the first steps on Mars. Julian's grand indifference had defiled both the moment and the land.

"Say the words."

Kate discovered Glenn peering down at her from the hatch. "It doesn't matter if his boots landed first," he continued, guessing her thoughts, "say the words anyway. They're important."

Kate's eyes met Julian's. He glared and thumbed at her to get off the ladder.

"Armstrong would've been a footnote if Aldrin had spoken in his stead."

Glenn was right. The world would have forever quoted Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the Moon, if Neil Armstrong had skipped his historic words. Kate spotted an exterior camera filming the event, its red "recording" light active. The footage, after a fifteen minute delay, would be seen by billions around the world.

Kate surveyed anew the Martian landscape, their home for the next year. She took a deep breath. "On Earth, Ares is the Roman god of war. Though we come in a craft called *Ares* let the first steps we take on this alien world be ones of peace and goodwill, steps that leave behind our ignoble spirits—violence, strife, greed, deceit, the lot of them. Let us walk upon this new land as Adam and Eve first walked through the Garden of Eden, absent the sins of man."

Hopping from the ladder Kate floated to the ground in the slow motion Martian gravity.

Cheers and claps erupted from the astronauts in the capsule. She stepped away, creating space for the others to descend and clear the ladder.

Glenn landed next on the ground. He walked to Kate and patted her shoulder as he shook her hand. “Congratulations, commander,” he said smiling. Kate smiled back.

The rest of the *Ares* crew exited the ship, with Engles the last to set foot on the ground. She joined the others where they had assembled in a broad circle a few meters from the capsule.

“OK everyone,” said Julian, “let’s head out.”

“We have to perform the final suit checks first,” said Kate.

“I already did that,” said Julian.

“*You* may have done it, but as mission commander it’s your job to make sure that *everyone’s* checked their suits,” said Kate.

“Uh ... OK ...,” said Julian, visibly flustered and irritated, “then let’s do that.”

Kate was dumbfounded. If the assistant director had given Julian a heads up on his elevation to mission commander he hadn’t explained all the duties that came with the position. The Manual dictated suit checks after every landing, better to discover a problem while still near the vehicle than halfway to their destination. The responsibility to ensure all such checks had been performed fell to the mission commander. “Everyone please, thumbs up on green suit check,” said Kate. Thumbs rose around the circle. Her own suit indicators—containment, pressure, oxygen reserves, temperature, navigation, reclamation—all rested safely in the green, the readouts rendered in soft, sheer graphics across the inside of her helmet.

The suit checks complete, Kate returned to the *Ares* and tapped a ground-level keypad. The capsule’s door swung gently back into place, latching flush with the rest of the hull.

Julian scanned the Martian horizon. “Where’s the HAB?” he asked, a hint of concern in his voice. Was it really the first time he’d thought about where they were headed?

“It’s that way,” said Miriam pointing to the west. “We’re standing in a slight depression which is why we can’t see it from here.”

Julian started forward then froze. He turned to Kate. “If we’re all done with the babysitting tasks?”

Kate fumed. Making sure no one died on the way to the HAB was hardly babysitting.

“Then let’s head out,” said Julian.

The astronauts followed Julian’s lead across the pristine Martian landscape. They marched over soft dirt, leaving vibrant red bootprints where they stepped through the crusty, darker top layer. Their shuffling left a gentle cloud of red dust hovering just above the ground in their wake.

The *Ares* crew spread out in a line that spanned fifteen meters. Kate brought up the rear, Julian’s spot by all rights. Not once did the security chief look back to check on the others. Julian had no formal training for the top spot as far as Kate knew but when the AD announced his elevation she figured he’d rise to the occasion. Only twenty minutes in, all signs suggested he wasn’t qualified for the job.

Kate marched along, her focus alternating between the Martian landscape and Glenn directly ahead of her with his signature straight back. His perpetual perfect posture had clued her to the fact that most men walked with a slouch, especially those like him over six feet tall.

Glenn looked back—did he sense her thoughts about him? He stopped, allowing Kate to catch up, and resumed marching once she reached his side.

“May I have the honor of walking in the presence of Commander Kate Bauman, hero of the

Ares mission?” asked Glenn.

Kate wasn't sure what he meant but didn't bother asking him to elaborate.

“You know, at the time I didn't fully understand what happened with our landing,” said Glenn. “Only since we've been walking have I put it all together. *You* were the one who fired those thrusters, not the computer.”

Kate said nothing.

“The thing is, those thrusters should've exhausted their fuel supply during our lift-off from Earth. They were set to burn to completion, to give us an extra boost towards Mars.”

A boost that would have gotten them to Mars all of three minutes sooner. “It would've been an inconsequential amount of extra speed,” said Kate.

Glenn thought for a moment. “*You* shut down the thrusters, back during liftoff, before they finished their burn,” he said. “Did the computer flag a problem?”

“No,” said Kate.

“So no sign of a problem during what was, by all estimates, a perfect take-off, but you altered the pre-programmed launch sequence anyway?” Glenn shook his head. “That's a big deal, Kate. They've tossed people right out of the corps for less. If something had gone wrong that would've been the first thing they looked at. What in the world possessed you to end the burn early?”

The answer seemed obvious to Kate but Glenn's expression suggested he was genuinely perplexed. She struggled to maintain her composure.

“Oh,” said Glenn, suddenly mortified. “I ... never mind ... I see.” If Glenn could have avoided dredging up the event on the Moon he would have—of that Kate was certain. Despite his strengths as an astronaut and as a friend he had a bad habit of putting his foot in his mouth.

“Well your instincts five months ago saved the mission. Saved us all in fact. They should give you a medal.”

“I don’t want a medal. I want my command back.”

Glenn went quiet, to Kate’s relief. Maybe they could just walk in silence, not talking about the mission but taking in the first few pristine moments on Mars.

“So how much do you know about this new objective?” Glenn asked.

“Nada,” said Kate, irritated with the continued discussion and the topic. “That video was the first I heard of it. I learned about it right along with everyone else.”

“Doesn’t set a good precedent,” said Glenn, “just whisking your command away from you like that.”

“Evidently there’s some shift in priorities from up high,” grumbled Kate.

“Yeah, but why the secrecy, and the awkward transfer of command? The only thing I could think was it had to be something straight from the OPP.”

The Office of Planetary Protection. “You think they found something,” said Kate. “A sign of alien life?”

“They’d want to move quickly to contain it,” said Glenn. Kate’s eyes invited him to say more. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t know anything more about this than you do. What I said is pure speculation. It’s all I could think for such a drastic action. But whatever it is, I just can’t believe no one briefed you on it. It’s not like you’re a security risk. You have the highest clearance within NASA.” He stared, lost in thought, at a wispy white cloud above them. “Maybe they just considered it need-to-know.”

“This is my mission, Glenn.” Kate’s chin quivered and tears welled in her eyes. “*My* mission.

There's no one who has a greater need to know than me."

They walked the next several minutes in silence. The capsule had landed in a wide, shallow basin. The ground rose gradually towards the edge, climbing steeper in the final hundred meters before the rim. Kate and Glenn paused at the lip and surveyed the land to the west. In the distance a white-skinned structure of long tubes and bulbous offshoots gleamed against its dull red surroundings.

"HAB sweet HAB," said Glenn. "If there are aliens here they're gonna think we're all giant hamsters."

HAB stood for "Habitat: Ares Base" but with its maze of tube corridors and off-shooting cell compartments for living and storage the astronauts deemed it short for "habitrail." The structure's windows and solar arrays winked weak sunlight back at them.

"And there's the *Terra*," said Glenn.

Kate studied the spaceship that stood a kilometer from the HAB, the rocket that would ferry them home. "We'll need to check the propellant levels," she said, spotting the nearby fueling station. "I expect its tanks are topped off after a year."

"We haven't even made it to the HAB and you're already thinking about heading home?" asked Glenn.

"The *Terra* is our fallback if there's an emergency," said Kate. "It needs to be ready to go at a moment's notice."

"Commander Bauman."

The voice was Miriam's. "This is Bauman."

"Do you think we could take a break?"

They'd been walking for nearly thirty minutes across unfamiliar land in bulky suits designed for outer space after a half year of limited movement. "I don't see why not."

"I already asked Commander Grimes but he told me we need to keep moving. The thing is, I'm really getting winded."

Kate fumed. There was no reason for a death march. She cut over to the broadcast channel. "Hey everyone, this is Commander Bauman. Let's take a ten minute break." The line of astronauts stretching out ahead of her immediately stopped moving except for the figure at the front. Several hunched over, hands on knees.

"Belay that order," said Grimes. "We're gonna keep moving until we reach the HAB."

"I'm beat," said Fisk. "I could really use a rest."

"Me too," said Casey.

"We're not that far," said Julian. "Only another klick or so. Anyone who's tired can rest when we reach the HAB."

"I agree with Commander Bauman," said Dr. Palmer, "we should stop for a ten minute break. This is the most exertion any of us have had in the past five months."

Awkward silence filled the comm. Julian turned around and faced the rest of the *Ares* astronauts. He repeatedly clenched his fists. "Ten minutes, starting thirty seconds ago," he said. "Not a second more."

The helmet of the astronaut three spots ahead swiveled back towards Kate. The reflective golden visor hid their face but by height it was Miriam. She raised a sheepish hand. "Thank you," she said over their private line.

"No problem."

Glenn settled onto a nearby rock, barely high enough to keep him off the ground. His long legs splayed like a grasshopper's, he could almost kiss his knees. "I don't think Julian's going to like you ordering a break like that."

"Let him not like it," said Kate. "Why the hell are we plowing ahead when we've got astronauts about to expire? We take care of our own."

"That was the number one thing they drilled into us," said Glenn. "Why do I get the feeling Julian missed the first two weeks of astronaut school?"

"Commander Bauman." Julian's voice, coming in over a private comm line, gave Kate a chill. "Can I have a word with you?"

"Of course," said Kate.

"Come see me at the head of the line."

"On my way." She flipped back to her private channel with Glenn. "Speak of the devil. If I'm not back before we start moving out, can I task you with bringing up the rear?"

"Sure thing commander."

Kate trudged to the front of the line, exhausted like the others and in no hurry for her audience with Julian. She offered a limp wave, a quick lift of her hand at the wrist, to each of the *Ares* astronauts as she walked past. They all sat on rocks or the ground except for Julian. He stood facing her as she approached, his dark eyes glaring from beneath a forehead that segued to a shiny, shaved crown.

"This is how things are going to work here on Mars," said Julian, speaking to Kate still four meters away. "I give the orders, and the rest of you follow them. Is that clear?"

"We needed a break, Julian. The others were—"

“I will decide if we do or don’t need a break.”

Julian stood a meter from a knee-high boulder, black basalt like the others with a rounded top. Kate perched herself on the rock, her legs grateful for the rest. “Except Dr. Palmer’s medical authority supersedes yours,” she said.

“Palmer didn’t even have the idea of taking a break in his head until you placed it there.”

“As mission commander you’re responsible for the well-being of your crew,” said Kate. “It’s your job to find out if anyone needs a break, to make sure we don’t have astronauts passing out before we even reach our destination.”

“Miriam asked for a break,” said Julian, “as did Engles. I decided to push them rather than waste time sitting around. They can sit all they want in the HAB. The most important thing is getting there.”

“But what’s the big rush?” asked Kate. “It’s not like the HAB’s going anywhere. And neither are we. We’re here for an entire year.”

“I want us to get settled A-SAP,” said Julian. “Or have you forgotten about our primary objective.”

Memories of the AD’s video came flooding back, as did her emotions. “What’s all this B.S. about a classified op?”

“It’s not B.S.,” said Julian.

“Oh no? What about leaving me in the dark about the whole thing ... taking my command at the last minute?” She hadn’t intended to get into it with Julian out in the Martian wilderness. She’d planned to confront him after they’d settled in. His comment set her off.

“All of that came down from the AD,” said Julian. “If you want an official explanation you’ll

need to take it up with him.” He reached down and brushed the tops of his boots with his glove, clearing away smudges of red dust. “If you’re wanting my personal opinion on why you were kept in the dark, why you lost your command, I would think it has to do with your past. Frankly I’m not sure how you remained in the running to lead this mission. When they gave you the *Ares* I guessed it was all for show, a nice PR moment for NASA. I don’t know that they ever intended for you to actually lead. Sometimes events seem mysterious, like they’re the product of complicated machinations. Generally the answer is much simpler. It’s usually just what you think it is.”

Julian turned his attention to the line of seated astronauts. “OK everyone, break time’s over,” he said. “I promised ten minutes but you’ll have to live with six. The HAB’s not that far. If you’re exhausted you can rest when we get there. Gather yourselves and move out.” Without waiting for anyone to follow he marched off in the direction of the gleaming station.

The *Ares* astronauts, Cheney, Vaughn, Engles, and the rest plodded past Commander Bauman. Still perched on her rock she stared off at the angry red hills that rolled beneath a morose, ruddy sky.

An open hand appeared before her face. Kate ignored it at first but eventually looked up at its source. Glenn towered over her, his helmet framed by the red sky. He offered her his hand again.

Commander Bauman reached up and locked her glove in his. Glenn helped her to her feet and the two set off after the others, trekking across the Martian plains.

3

“How was your night?” asked Fisk, chomping into a granola bar.

“I’ve had better.” Kate had woken stiff and exhausted, her first night sleeping in gravity in half a year. “Lots of tossing and turning.”

“Me too,” said Fisk. “I just couldn’t get comfortable on that sorry excuse for a bed. Back home I have a king size with a pillow top mattress—like heaven. Some days I almost don’t want to get up.”

Kate wasn’t much for smalltalk in the morning. Her introvert brain needed to ease into a new day of human interaction. She ignored Fisk while she searched for her favorite protein bars in the galley, the HAB’s spacious meal preparation area which included a twelve burner stove, dual ovens, a restaurant fridge, dishwasher and compost station, and a wide island with a sink. NASA had stocked the galley’s cabinets with an assortment of dishes, cooking utensils, and prepackaged food. For her breakfast Kate found the corn flakes and boxed milk easily enough but her protein bars had so far eluded her.

“All things considered,” continued Fisk, his mouth full of granola, “I was grateful not to have to listen to Julian’s snoring.”

Piles of pasta and coffee greeted Kate when she opened one of the last unsearched cabinets. On a hunch she pushed the stacks aside and peered to the far back of the space. Through the tunnel of foodstuffs she spied a stack of purple wrappers with red stripes. Relieved, she withdrew a bar from the pile and clutched it to her chest with a sigh.

Fisk eyed the bar. “Say, what’s that?” he asked. He snapped off a piece of granola. “Here, I’ll trade you for a taste.”

“I’m not a big fan of granola,” said Kate.

“Sure, no problem,” said Fisk. “I was just thinking it’d be better if I tried a piece of your bar instead of grabbing a whole one for myself. I’d hate to waste the whole thing if I find out I don’t like it after a bite.”

“If you make even the slightest move for one of my raspberry bars your arm will come back without a hand,” said Kate with no hint of humor. “These are my favorite protein bars from home, which I made sure the mission planners stocked for the trip. They’re only here because of me, so don’t even think about taking one.” She closed the cabinet door and positioned herself in front of it, standing with folded arms.

“My apologies,” said Fisk. “I just like trying new things. But I understand why you wouldn’t want to share if all you’ve got is what’s in that cabinet.”

“The stash here is just what NASA stocked in the galley so I wouldn’t have to dig through a year’s worth of food on my first day. There’s plenty more in the pantry, but they’re only for me.”

“Got it, commander,” said Fisk. He tossed the piece of granola into his mouth and offered a sorry salute, his thumb flying wide from his hand and the bend in his wrist creating the appearance of a man shielding his eyes. As a civilian he had no business saluting her at all.

Kate grabbed her bowl and headed to the long communal table and its matching benches in the center of the galley. She sat at the middle of the table, facing the room’s large bay window. The remnants of night painted the panoramic view in dark tones and little color, the nearby rolling hills barely visible. The glow above the distant skyline’s modest peaks heralded the rising

sun and the start of their first full day on Mars

Fisk followed Kate to the table but remained standing. She'd risen early in hopes of eating her breakfast in peace, before the other astronauts started their day. She at least took solace in his opting not to sit. The commander hunched over her bowl and dug into her cornflakes, praying he'd take the hint that she was more interested in her breakfast than conversation.

“Say, any more info on the secret op?”

Kate had almost forgotten the previous day's events and Julian's ascension to mission commander. She shook her head, responding to his question as much as attempting to rid her mind of the unpleasant memories. Her morning was definitely not proceeding as she had envisioned.

“I think they've found some kind of alien technology,” said Fisk.

“Seems like a leap,” said Kate through a mouthful of cereal.

“That's what it's always been about,” said Fisk, “starting at Roswell, which was a genuine close encounter, by the way. The government's always been trying to learn as much as it can about the aliens' advanced technology. It means building more lethal weapons, designing faster planes and rockets to deliver those weapons, flattening enemy cities, turning tanks and ships to slag, teleporting behind enemy lines, hitting the enemy with overwhelming lethal force.”

Kate stifled a groan as Fisk lowered himself onto the bench across from her. She'd never before noticed the smattering of hairs that sprouted from his nostrils. Fisk was generally unkempt in the model of a college professor absorbed by his work. His dark hair curled in wisps where it still grew on the sides of his head, hinting gray at the temples. His eyes were bright with an excitement fueled by rocks and conspiracy theories. Kate wasn't sure which topic she found less

appealing.

“It’s all about gaining a military advantage over the enemy,” he continued. “All the governments out there know aliens are real. People think the United States doesn’t want to confirm it because they’re worried Americans will lose their minds. That’s not it at all. The issue is none of these governments knows what the others know. If we confirm an alien sighting, if we say, ‘yes, aliens can turn on a dime and accelerate at Mach twenty,’ that draws the attention of the other governments. They’d all be interested in having that kind of technology for themselves. If we say it’s real, they set their scientists on figuring out how it’s done.”

“What about the UFO encounters the United States military *did* fess up to in the early twenties?” asked Kate. “And the Canadians and the French?”

“Subterfuge,” said Fisk. “Diversions to get other governments to waste their time and resources on a wild goose chase.”

“Uh huh,” said Kate, wracking her brain for an alternate topic. Fisk had arrived at the galley in sweats and a headband. “What’s up with the exercise gear?”

Fisk chomped at his granola bar. “I wanna check out the gym before everyone gets up,” he said. “I’m looking forward to a little stationary biking to get the blood flowing.”

Kate amended her previous observation: his excitement stemmed from rocks, conspiracy theories, and mountain biking. He professed on Earth and during the whole trip to Mars that he’d be the first man to mountain bike on the red planet. She repeatedly insisted it would be too dangerous. “You still think you’re going out there?” she asked, nodding at the bay window.

“Absolutely,” said Fisk with a grin. “My bike was waiting for me in my cell, just like I packed it. I’ve already oiled the chain and inflated the tires.” Kate started to speak but he cut her

off. “I know you’re not keen on the idea but I’m gonna convince you it’s safe. But first I need to regain the strength in my arms and legs.”

“Well don’t overdo it,” said Kate. “We’re all still adjusting to the tug of gravity.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be a short workout.” Fisk pushed himself up from the table. “Gotta save some energy for the sauna,” he said with a wink. He spun about on his heels and exited the galley.

Kate ate another scoop of cornflakes, savoring their raspy texture and the cold milk. Each bite was a sensory explosion compared to five months of sucking meals out of pouches. On ski trips with her sons and ex-husband where they rented a cabin in the mountains they’d spend the first mornings grasping for any familiar comfort—a bowl of cornflakes, a cup of coffee—in a completely foreign space. As the days progressed the cabin would become a second home. Their arrival at the HAB was like the first few days in the cabin. They’d all settle in before too long.

As Kate enjoyed the morning quiet Miriam strolled into the galley. She headed straight to the kitchen, poured a cup of coffee, and joined the commander at the communal table.

“Morning commander.”

“Good morning Miriam. How are you?” Miriam looked groggy.

“Fine,” said Miriam, cradling her coffee. The mug was huge in her hands, her bone thin fingers matching her petite frame. “I was just in the control room. Satellite readout shows that big storm’s headed our way.”

“How much time before it arrives?” asked Kate.

“About fourteen hours.” Miriam sipped at her hot coffee.

“That should give us enough time for what we need to accomplish outside today,” said Kate.

Miriam nodded. Not one for smalltalk either the station chief said nothing more. She stared into her coffee, taking an occasional sip.

Kate ate several more spoonfuls of her cereal. Her bowl nearly empty she unwrapped one end of her protein bar and took a bite. Waves of ecstasy flowed over her tongue. She savored the tartness of the real raspberries, the sweetness of the shredded coconut, the subtle nuttiness of the almond milk, and the creaminess of the chocolate coating. The indulgence, vegan no less, contained the right balance of carbs and protein to sustain her energy levels. She'd need it for all she hoped they'd accomplish that day to make the HAB fully operational.

Kate bit into her bar a second time as Julian entered the galley. He was fully outfitted in his tan Mars suit, cradling his helmet filled with small tools and equipment. The black hood from the suit's thermal layer covered his ears and shaved head. Julian paused at the door—he seemed surprised to find others awake. The acting mission commander proceeded to the communal table, stopping at the end closest to the door. He emptied his helmet onto its surface.

“Where are you going?” asked Kate.

Julian rummaged through the pile of equipment, sliding items into the loops and pouches of his suit's utility belt. “Getting ready to head out,” he said without looking up from his sorting.

None of the outside tasks they needed to complete that day had been offered to any of the *Ares* astronauts. Julian had poor leadership skills, but would he really snag for himself one of the coveted exterior assignments that offered the opportunity to walk again on the surface of Mars? “I thought we'd have a sign-up sheet for day one tasks, draw straws or something for the people who wanted—”

“Getting ready to head out with Cheney for our primary objective,” said Julian, halting his

packing and looking square at Kate. He resumed stuffing equipment into his belt.

Julian's comment rendered Kate speechless. Regardless of the importance of their primary objective, whatever that was, they'd all be in trouble if they neglected their day one duties. "Our number one job right now is to get settled in—"

"We got settled in last night," said Julian without looking up from his packing.

"But we need to perform a full visual inspection of the HAB, both inside and out. We're not really able to settle in until we've completed all the steps of the certification—"

"You don't need me or Cheney here to do that," said Julian. "It might mean you're scrambling until sundown but the eight of you can definitely get that job done."

"There's a storm coming, Julian," said Miriam. "That big one NASA was tracking before we arrived. It's headed our way. The computer predicts it'll be here later this evening."

"Yes, I'm aware of the weather report," said Julian. "That's part of why I want to get out there now." He slid the last item, a compact, telescoping pickaxe, into a loop on his belt.

"Are you going somewhere close by?" asked Kate. "It's not wise to venture too far from the HAB, not with the storm bearing down."

"All details of the objective, including our destination, are classified," said Julian. "There's nothing I can share with you about it."

"You can't tell us anything, even now that we're all here on the ground?" asked Miriam. "You really think what you're working on will stay secret for an entire year?"

"It better," said Julian. "It requires a Top Secret/SCI security clearance."

"That's a military clearance," said Miriam. Julian froze for an instant. He'd apparently revealed more than he intended. The secret assignment wasn't some NASA-driven shift in

priorities after all. Julian and Cheney were tasked with a *military* objective. “I didn’t sign up to support some secret military op,” she continued. “I’m a scientist.”

“The only reason you’re able to *be* a scientist here on Mars is *because* of this op,” said Julian. “Or did you think the military and all those black budget agencies chipped in six hundred billion dollars just because they were feeling generous?”

“But why head out there now?” asked Kate. “We just got here. We’re going to be here for a whole year—”

“The AD stressed to me the importance of our primary objective and how I’m not to let anything stand in its way. In my judgement that means leaving now, to get to our destination and back before that storm arrives. This storm could turn out to be one of those freak year-long events. I can’t return to Earth saying I missed my only opportunity.”

Julian was correct about Mars’s unpredictable weather, including dust storms that engulfed the entire planet. But those storms typically lasted a month, two tops, not a whole year. The idea they’d be pinned down in the HAB for their whole time on the planet seemed hyperbole.

“Me and Cheney leaving now doesn’t make a difference,” continued Julian. “You’ll be focused on getting the station operational. You’ll all be so busy you won’t even notice we’re gone.”

“But if you get into trouble, *we’re* the ones who’ll have to risk our lives to come to your rescue,” said Kate. “Like Miriam said, none of us signed up to support a secret military op. We’re scientists, not soldiers.”

“Glenn used to be a soldier,” said Julian, hoisting his helmet to the light and inspecting a smudge inside the clear ovoid. “You, Kate, you’re an Air Force pilot. I know you’ve been on

missions, combat missions, where the objective changed right out from under you. That's just how things go sometimes. It's why I know what I'm saying isn't all that hard to understand.” Julian wiped the inside of his helmet, held the clear shell up to the light to check the results, then wiped again. “You need to stop worrying about what might happen to me and Cheney. Instead you need to focus on getting the HAB into operational readiness—those are my orders for you, Kate Bauman.”

In that instant Kate understood what had irked her so much about Julian during their trip to Mars. He had carried himself as if *he* were the leader of the mission, not her. He had merely paid lip service to her being in charge. In retrospect his ascension to acting mission commander was no surprise. He had simply bided his time until the announcement.

“Cheney and I will be back before the storm rolls in.” With that Julian spun about and walked out of the galley.

Kate and Miriam sat a few moments in silence until the station chief rose. “I’ll be in the control room.” She grabbed her coffee mug and left the galley.

Kate stared off through the panoramic window, catching the first orange rays as they spilled over the far off mountain ridge. The Sun floated into the sky, smaller than on Earth, a white disc rising against a red wash. She took another bite of her raspberry bar and tucked the rest in her jumpsuit pocket. The remainder would be her reward for getting through the day.

4

“Commander Bauman.”

“Go ahead.”

“You asked me to keep you apprised of the storm.”

“What’s the latest.”

“It’s not good.”

Kate stood in her Mars suit on a graded section of red soil in the shadow of the station’s greenhouse. Her eyes flew to the eastern sky. The mountain peaks visible in the early morning had long since disappeared, shrouded by a towering dark wall of ruddy dust.

“The storm’s moving a lot faster than projected,” said Miriam. “It’ll arrive sooner than we thought.”

Lightning flashed, its neon tendrils striking from the turbulent cloud tops. The static electricity signaled highly agitated dust particles in the atmosphere. The storm would pack a punch but hopefully spare their electrical systems. “We’re almost done out here,” said Kate. “Just one more cell to inspect.” She’d pushed Fisk and Voss to work quickly. Completing the HAB’s exterior qualification ahead of schedule would give them more time to help the others with the tasks inside.

“It’s not you I’m worried about,” said Miriam, “it’s Julian and Cheney. When they left this morning they thought they’d have ’til sunset to return. If they’re shooting to be back by then they’ll be caught in it for sure.”

“Have you informed Commander Grimes?”

“That’s just it, I can’t raise either of them on their suit comms.”

Commander Bauman cursed under her breath. If they couldn’t reach Julian over the comms they’d need to try to find him. She removed a set of compact scopes from a pouch at her hip and aimed them at the western horizon. Kate hunted for any sign of movement along the crest where the two men had dipped from view earlier that day. They’d been fools to venture out before the onset of a major storm, the hard stop of its arrival leaving no margin for error.

“Did they say where they were going?” asked Kate.

“No ma’am, and they didn’t file an excursion plan either,” said Miriam. “However Cheney’s suit pinged the basin relay tower for about an hour after they left. Probably an oversight considering how secretive they’ve been.”

The coordinates from those pings would reveal the route the two men took, at least up until the signal cut out. They’d likely discovered their mistake and silenced Cheney’s suit. Kate swore again, her worst case scenario beginning to play out. Julian’s rash decision would put additional lives at risk. “Upload the data to my suit.”

“Julian’s the mission commander,” said Miriam. “He’s responsible for his own skin, and for Cheney’s because he dragged him along.”

“*Acting* mission commander,” said Kate. “This is still my mission, Miriam. The AD might’ve given it to Julian but I’m gonna get it back, and when I do I don’t want it to come with a list of dead astronauts.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Miriam, the usually spirited station commander short and sheepish in her reply. Kate’s response had more bite than she intended. “Data coming your way.”

Kate needed to wrap up her work outside. “Fisk, Voss.” Their helmeted heads peeked from behind the Greenhouse. She waved them over.

The two astronauts arrived with expectant faces. Their suits were dusty orange with tan rivulets at their joints where the creases had kept the dirt at bay. Brick-red earth soiled their palms and knees. They’d spent a good portion of their time on the ground inspecting the connection points between compartments.

“We calling it a day commander?” asked Fisk.

“No,” said Kate. “I called you over because of the storm. It’s coming in a lot faster than we thought. Julian and Cheney are still out there. I need to warn them so they can head back in time.”

“That’s no problem commander,” said Fisk. “Voss and I, we’re old hands at this now. We can finish up on our own.”

Kate addressed Voss. “I want you to finish qualifying the Greenhouse and then head inside to coordinate completion of the interior integrity checks.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Voss. She saluted the commander and headed back to the far side of the Greenhouse. Fisk, confused for a moment, turned to follow.

“Mission Specialist Fisk.” The professor froze mid-stride. He looked sheepishly back at the commander. “You’re with me,” said Kate.

Fisk crinkled his nose, incredulous. “I’m with you *where?*”

“I can’t go searching for Julian and Cheney alone,” said Kate. “I need someone to come with me.”

“And you’re saying that someone is me?” asked Fisk. Kate nodded. “What about Voss?” he

asked, pointing after her. “You didn’t even check if she wants to go.”

“I need Voss to stay here and do my job, which is overseeing the completion of the interior integrity checks,” said Kate.

“I can do that,” said Fisk. “I have a whole lab of grad students back home. I’m very good at telling people what to do.”

“Voss is also the HAB’s engineer,” said Kate. “We can’t risk losing her to look for Julian and Cheney.”

“But we can afford to lose me?” asked Fisk

Kate shook her head and walked away. Every moment she wasted arguing with Fisk was a moment longer they risked getting caught up in the storm themselves.

Fisk’s footsteps crunched over her suit audio as he scrambled to catch up. He pulled alongside her. “What about Glenn? Or Engles?” he asked.

“They would be excellent, *brave*, choices,” said Kate. “Problem is it’ll take too long for them to drop what they’re doing and get suited up. By time they come out we could be halfway there already.”

“Where’s there?” asked Fisk.

“Wherever Julian and Cheney are,” said Kate. “Miriam sent me a trail for us to follow—”

The crunch of Fisk’s boots stopped. “I respectfully request to remain here at the HAB,” he said.

“Request denied,” said Kate, without looking back. She activated her suit nav with the coordinates from Cheney’s tower pings. The green trail stretched to the horizon on a due west heading. She set off along the glowing path with Fisk again scrambling to catch up.

The terrain turned rough just beyond the manicured grounds around the HAB, assaulting them with rocky outcrops that resembled a mad artist's attack on sculpting clay. Red silt, some coarse, some fine-grained, covered the flatter surfaces and filled the crevasses.

"Is that...?" asked Fisk ten minutes into their trek. He stooped and examined something on the ground. "It is!"

"It is what?" asked Kate, angling for a view of whatever the fuss was about.

"Mudstone!" said Fisk. He crouched, brushing his gloved hand across large flat blocks of dark stone. "This means standing water existed here for quite awhile. You don't get this kind of sedimentary layering without an extremely long time period for the silt deposits to solidify."

Kate studied the rocks. They appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary. "Let's keep going." She resumed walking. The professor eventually followed, leaving his find behind.

"Look at this!" said Fisk minutes later. "Shale!" He stooped and grabbed a section of thin, flat rock that jutted from an outcropping. A portion snapped off in his hand. "It's incredibly fissile." Fisk stood with the shard in his palm, offering it for the commander's inspection. "This forms when minerals settle out of an aqueous suspension." He crouched again at the outcropping.

"Fisk!"

The scientist jumped to his feet and stood rigid, like a child caught red-handed.

"We don't have time for a geologic tour," said Kate. "There will be plenty of opportunities for that *after* we find Julian and Cheney."

"Aye, aye, captain," said Fisk. He banged his hand against his helmet with another awkward salute.

"You're not an officer, so don't try to salute me," said Kate.

“Aye, aye, captain,” said Fisk.

“And this isn’t the Space Force so don’t ‘aye, aye, captain’ me.”

“Aye, aye... I mean yessir.”

“It’s ma’am.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Fisk. “And I’m sorry. My whole life is rocks. I hope you can understand the excitement of walking on a planet’s worth of stone that no one has ever explored.”

“I get it Fisk,” said Kate. “We just don’t have time right now.”

Kate continued plotting a careful path through the jagged landscape. The rugged terrain soon quieted, opening onto a broad section of rolling ground littered with rocks that ranged from pebbles to small boulders. Further west the land sloped gently downward, forming a shallow bowl-like depression. At the bottom they shuffled through a stretch of fine red silt so deep it completely covered their boots. She guessed it the remnants of a long-dead lake.

“By the way commander, where exactly are we going?” asked Fisk. Flashes of light played across his face as his nav received the path from Kate’s suit and rendered it on his heads-up display. “Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me,” he said.

“What?” asked Kate.

Fisk laughed. “OK,” he said, “of course. Of course!”

“What are you talking about?” asked Kate, growing annoyed.

“This trail we’re following, where it’s leading us—it ends not 500 meters from the Face.”

“The face of what?” asked Kate.

“The Face on Mars,” said Fisk. “I *told* you this secret black op is about retrieving alien technology.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” asked Kate. “In aliens I mean, carving a giant face on Mars? Did you attend the briefing on the Face and the ‘pyramids’ and all the other supposed structures in Mars’s so-called city of Cydonia?”

“I didn’t want my mind polluted with disinformation,” said Fisk.

“You mean you didn’t want to sit there for two hours while they methodically debunked all those theories about aliens on Mars.”

“Well I guess it’s case closed, then,” said Fisk. “Like I told you, all these governments, including ours, are in the business of claiming aliens don’t exist so they can keep their discoveries to themselves.”

“You really believe there’s something to the original Viking lander photos?” asked Kate. “Those grainy images certainly show what looks eerily similar to a human face but NASA analyzed the heck out of them. In the end they proved the Face is just a rock formation.”

“They didn’t *prove* anything,” said Fisk. “That whole ‘analysis’ was a snow job, and a pretty bad one at that. Someone just ran the original image through a bunch of filters ‘til they got a photo with all the detail washed out.”

“Subsequent photos taken with higher resolution cameras showed the Face to be a completely natural rock structure,” said Kate.

“The camera that snapped those photos was built under contract by a company whose owner is an avowed Face skeptic,” said Fisk. “Somehow he was also the lone person NASA assigned to process all the camera data before revealing it to the world. So no, I don’t trust the high resolution data either.”

“You think the Face is real,” said Kate.

“I never said that,” protested Fisk. “I’m just pointing out the problems with the official story. I also found it very interesting how they called a meeting to debunk all the theories but not two weeks later they revealed they were placing the HAB three kilometers from the Face.”

“I don’t remember them telling us we’d be that close.”

“That’s ‘cause they never uttered those words,” said Fisk. “In fact they were very careful not to let on about the Face being nearby. Do you remember the satellite photo where the HAB’s location was marked with an ‘X?’ When you have a point of interest like that you always center it in your photo. Do you recall how the ‘X’ was down in the lower-left corner? That’s because if they had centered it we would’ve seen Cydonia off to the left.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” said Kate. “The ‘X’ being off-center struck me as strange. I just figured they wanted to show the significant land formations to the east.”

“Did you know that wasn’t even where NASA wanted to put the HAB?” asked Fisk.

“What do you mean?”

“I have a buddy, a friend from my undergrad days at Princeton. He works ... let’s just say somewhere within the military industrial complex. He’s a little bit paranoid but his information is always spot on. When I told him where they were setting us down he said there had been a whole back-and-forth between the military and NASA over where to place the HAB. Did you know NASA wanted us near the equator? There’s more sunlight, the temperatures are not as extreme, and the planet spins faster which makes rocket lift offs easier. The military nixed that plan— apparently they threatened to pull the funding. So here we are, above the fortieth parallel.”

The deep dive into Fisk’s conspiracy theories pushed the limits of Kate’s patience. “All this talk is hurting my brain,” she said. “Can we just focus on following the trail for now?”

“Of course commander, we don’t need to discuss everything today,” said Fisk. He grinned.

“We have a whole entire year.”

The two astronauts picked their way through more rugged land. After twenty-five minutes of travel the terrain shifted to a smooth plain of long-dried mudflats. Red dust filled the arterial network of cracks between the clods.

Kate needed a break. The two stopped and sipped water from their suits’ reclamation systems. The Face loomed ahead, though too far to discern any significant details in the hazy distance. The commander trained her scopes on the formation. She couldn’t say much about the top but from the side it appeared to be a flat-topped mound of striated rock. “For all the claims of intelligent design it sure doesn’t look like anything special,” she said. “It’s just a mesa.”

Fisk grabbed the binoculars and studied the Face. He remained quiet for once. Apparently Fisk could be silenced, it just took facts he couldn’t dispute, ones that came from his own eyes.

Kate glanced back at the HAB, its gleaming white cells and tubes silhouetted against the advancing storm. “Let’s keep going,” she said.

The two resumed their march. On their left a small sandstone mesa, river-carved according to Fisk, rose from the flat plains. Cheney’s path paralleled the gentle curve of the formation’s rugged rock face, steering them gradually southwest. After twenty minutes of walking they reached the dot at the end of the green nav line.

“This is where the trail cuts out,” said Kate.

Fisk didn’t respond. He stood agape, staring at the Face. What had been a mythical alien structure in a grainy photo was now in full view, a massive mound of sedimentary rock whose natural origins were clear and indisputable.

Kate switched her suit comm to the broadcast channel. “Julian, Cheney, this is Commander Bauman. Do you read?”

Silence fed back over the comms.

“Julian, Cheney, do you read me?”

More silence.

“Now what?” asked Fisk.

“I’m not sure,” said Kate. She figured they’d have a good chance of contacting the men once they reached the end of the trail. The commander eyed the gently rising terrain between them and the Face. “Maybe if we’re on higher ground.”

Kate led Fisk up the shallow slope, a stretch of smooth rock with a network of hairline cracks. They stopped at a ridge line where the ground dived ahead for thirty meters before flattening out in the final run to the base of the Face. The immense rock structure towered before them, nearly a kilometer high.

A roughly round black patch, situated at ground level, interrupted the mesa’s red and orange striations. Kate removed her scopes and trained them on the feature. “Looks like there’s an opening in the rock.”

“You mean like a cave?” asked Fisk.

“Something like that,” said Kate. According to her scopes the opening measured two meters wide and three meters high at its tallest point. She couldn’t make out any details within the deep black—the cavity had to extend a good distance into the rock.

“That’s where they are,” said Fisk.

“You don’t know that,” snapped Kate. Fisk talked as if relaying a well-known fact but his

claim was based on nothing at all. “You have no idea where they really are. You’re only guessing they even came this way. They could just as easily have headed off in some other direction at the end of Cheney’s trail.”

“Oh they’re in there for sure,” said Fisk. His eyes widened, the researcher entranced by his imaginings. “The Face really *is* an alien structure. And we just found the way inside. NASA must’ve discovered artifacts, weapons or technology, spoils so compelling they sent a live, astronaut extraction team.”

Contacting the men would end the debate, and get them started back home. “Julian, Cheney, you copy?” Their vantage point on the ridge provided kilometers of visibility in almost all directions. The Face was the only exception, though reflections would bounce the signal behind it. If the two *Ares* astronauts were anywhere nearby they should have picked up her transmission. Only the faint hum of an empty connection came back across the channel.

“You can’t reach them from here,” said Fisk. “All that red in the rocks is rust, iron oxide. The ferromagnetism creates an electromagnetic shield the comms can’t penetrate.” His jaw went slack with more imaginings. “Besides, they’re probably standing in a vault room—no telling what exotic material it’s made of.”

Kate muted Fisk’s channel, giving herself space to think. Even if the two men ignored her hails the comms would still show a connection lock. Julian and Cheney weren’t anywhere on the open plains, or were too far away to worry about trying to help.

The clock in her heads-up display nagged. Kate looked back towards the HAB, its network of cells hidden behind the smaller sandstone mesa. Clouds at the storm’s leading edge floated high in the eastern sky, spitting lightning against a roiling dark gray backdrop of dust. “We’ll go down

and take a look inside that opening. If we don't make contact we'll start back." She didn't want Julian and Cheney to die but she could only do so much against stupidity. They'd spent enough time trying to save their asses. "C'mon," she said, stowing her scopes and starting for the Face.