

PHOBOS

By Philip Rainford

The energy beam came from nowhere. It did no damage to human habitation but its origin was a mystery. It came from space but there was nothing out there. Was it a cold war weapon gone rogue? If it was, no one could find it on the trajectory of impact; a trajectory that if extended out into space, intersected with the position of Mars at that time. But that was impossible!

It struck the Nullarbor Desert in Australia leaving a one-mile-wide crater; killed a family of kangaroos, eleven termite nests and a couple unfortunate enough to be camping in the Outback. Scientists were at a loss to explain it as anything other than an energy ball. There had been no meteoric debris, no radiation, and no evidence of an exploding missile. Therefore, what was it and where did it come from?

It became my job to find out. My name is Virginia Colby and I'm the Captain of the first manned flight to Mars. My crew consisted of two scientists and a pilot. We were six months into an eight-month trip when we first heard of the beam. We were given instructions to delay our landing on Mars and inspect the surface of one of its moons, Phobos, for any sign of a weapon. We were informed the authorities at home believed someone had got there before us and fired a warning shot, probably to keep us away. This made us more than a little uneasy as we felt like an unarmed target moving straight into an ambush.

Despite our fears.... We changed course.

Two months later we entered into orbit around Mars. There had been no further energy beams, so we relaxed but only a little. "How long until we reach Phobos?" I asked the pilot, Steve Cargill, a blonde-haired man in his thirties who took his work very seriously, rarely smiling. Although he had an exacting job, he seemed unable to let go and enjoy the moment. "It will be coming up on our port side in about seven minutes".

Nadia Polenski, our geologist, was bursting with excitement as she peered out the small port hole in our confined spacecraft. "Aren't you the least bit excited Steve?"

"No time. If I get this wrong, we crash on Mars or... spin off into space."

"Wouldn't want that would we," she mumbled turning back to her view of the planet.

The fourth member of our crew, George Jensen, reminded most people of the cartoon character of a similar name; a tall thin man in his forties and a biologist. His job being to seek out life signs on Mars. He was not happy about the delay and decided to remain in his quarters, or rather his bunk, reading.

"There it is!" shouted Nadia as the moon came into view over the horizon of the red planet moving beneath us. As we approached, the poorly lit object grew larger, but it was nowhere near the size of our moon, this was more a large asteroid captured by Mars and drawn into orbit rather than a real moon. It orbited only six thousand kilometres above Mars and was the larger of its two moons. Its rocky surface excited the crew as it was something new, a place where people had never been, or rather that was the belief before the energy ball was fired.

Our ship was nothing more than a large cylinder containing sleeping and exercise compartments plus navigation stations. In storage were laboratory equipment to be installed in prefabricated huts to be built on the surface, along with oxygen generators and other survival equipment. It felt cramped but it had been our home for eight months and we were used to it. We'd all been looking forward to stretching our legs once on Mars, so the delay in scanning the moon was not welcomed but on the other hand, it was an exciting detour.

"Phobos, coming up! Entering into orbit," announced Steve.

“Okay everyone! Get to scanning for any man-made installations!” I ordered. So began our search for evidence of someone being here before us, perhaps someone hostile.

“What’s that?” asked Nadia after two hours of scanning the moon in minute detail. We all came over to look at her find, peering over her shoulder at her display screen.

“That looks like a bunker,” I announced after studying what looked like a concrete structure on the surface embedded into the side of Stickney Crater. This was a massive impact crater that had created a huge concave impression in the surface that dominated the landscape. The structure was badly battered and scarred by meteor hits.

Nadia looked up at me. “It also looks like it’s been there a long time.”

“Wasn’t there speculation Phobos was hollow?” asked Steve.

Nadia nodded. “Never confirmed but it could mean it’s an artificial satellite.”

“Send the pictures back to Earth,” I instructed Nadia and turned to Steve. “Can you put us down there?”

Steve looked uncertain but one could see even his curiosity was peaked. “You think that’s a good idea?”

“That depends on whether we can still complete our primary mission?”

Steve hesitated, his mind ticking over. Then he decided. “We were given manoeuvrability in case we needed to move research sites so... yes.”

“Then take us down.”

Nadia looked sceptical. “Should we check with the guys at home?”

“It will be twenty minutes before they get our message and another twenty before we get a reply. They want to know what is down there, so let’s find out since we’re the only ones in the neighbourhood. Let’s just do it!” I suggested. No one objected so the ship descended.

No one that is, except George, who came charging into the navigation cabin moments later. “What’s going on here?”

“We’ve found a structure on the surface and we’re going to investigate.”

George glared at me. “Are you crazy? That could jeopardise our mission and put us all in danger! We don’t know who is down there. We need to just report what we found.”

“Decision’s made, George. We’re explorers and we’re going to explore. Take a look at that thing and tell me you’re not interested in finding out more?” I asked gently guiding George over to Nadia’s screen. He looked at for a moment.

“How old is that place?” he asked at last but none of us knew.

The ship landed on the rocky airless moon in a gully just below the structure. Temperatures outside could reach –112 degrees Celsius. On a warm day it was –4 degrees. The structure was much larger than it looked from space - in fact it was huge. As we stepped away from the ship, we looked up at the structure embedded in the side of the crater wall; the entrance was large enough for our ship to have flown in, if the door had been open. We climbed up the face of the crater wall towards the structure and stood before it.

“This can’t be right,” reported Nadia in disbelief. “My readings of the geological structure of the crater wall, the damage and the age of the building materials puts this structure as over ten thousand years old.”

“That’s ridiculous!” exclaimed George. “Not possible.”

Nadia was offended. “That’s what it says. Want to try it yourself?”

“Yes. I’ll do my own tests.” George moved towards the structure and opened up a small suitcase containing his instruments. He chipped off pieces of the artificial rock, ground it in a small machine and then fed the granules into another machine. A few minutes later he got the results. “Not possible!”

“What did you find?” I asked.

“This material is man made. It contains biological agents confirming it originated on Earth, but it also confirms these agents have been dormant for over ten thousand years.”

“Well... that would tend to indicate the place is deserted and offers no threat,” I suggested. “So let’s see what’s inside.”

“How can you be so casual about this? This is amazing! It’s monumental! Someone built this when our ancestors were living in caves! What have we missed in the archaeological record of our species?” protested Nadia.

I looked up at the huge arch - shaped entrance which was a pock marked concrete slab with that unfinished look of a car park wall. Not what you’d expected from an ancient civilisation that may have inspired the building of the pyramids or any other great megastructure, which rose at least twenty stories above the crater floor and was half a kilometre long, a megastructure indeed but nothing artistic about it.

“This is just not possible,” said George, incredulous and unused to things he couldn’t understand, especially if it questioned his understanding of the universe.

My response was simple. “Let’s find out by going inside.”

“Great idea! Where’s the door?” quipped George.

“Well, there must be one, Nadia you scan the main facade George you take the rock face behind us, I’ll take above; Steve you take below. The builders got in, so can we.” The mystery had captured everyone’s curiosity to the point that no one questioned my orders they set off on their respective searches.

As I climbed the rocky cliff face, I found it quite easy in the low gravity. Not being an experienced rock climber, in fact I’d never done rock climbing nor even abseiling, I would never have been able to scale this cliff face on Earth.

As I got close to the top of the arch, I got a bit overconfident. The next thing, I found myself sliding down the rock face towards the entrance. I held a climbing pick, which I managed to slam into the rock face stopping my slide just in time, but it left me dangling precariously by one hand with a twenty-storey drop beneath me. Heights had never bothered me, but this left me fighting the rising feeling of despair and panic as I was uncertain whether I’d survive the drop, even in low gravity. My mind calmed as it became confident I was going to get out of this. I struggled to gain a foothold, the smooth face of the archway gave me nothing to help steady my position. Determined to survive I kicked and I swung my other arm around and managed to get a second handhold but had no leverage to get my body back into the safety of the upper rocks. I looked down...the bottom was a long way away. I searched for a foothold but could see none; my arms began to ache from the strain. Just as I thought I could hold on no longer, my foot found a pothole in the concrete, made from some long ago impact, this gave me an advantage and I was able to pull myself to safety. Breathing heavily, I took stock of my situation. My thoughts were interrupted.

“I found something! Another door!” It was Steve.

The entrance Steve found was another cement door imbedded into the rock, normal size but equally impenetrable. “Can we blast it open?” asked George.

“We aren’t a mining expedition. We have no explosives,” retorted Steve.

“We do have core drills. We could drill through! They’re supposed to drill through anything,” suggested Nadia.

I felt sceptical. “At best we’d only get a keyhole view of the inside.”

“Maybe we could try ‘Open Sesame.’” George’s sarcasm was not appreciated.

“I suppose there’s no hidden key under the doormat?” I asked.

Steve shook his head. “I felt around the frame for hidden latches but no...”

“Maybe the core drill could trigger something,” pressed Nadia. “What have we to lose?” With an absence of ideas we decided to give the drill a try. As we walked off, the door slid open.

“Did someone touch something?” I asked as everyone looked stunned and guilty at the same time, but no one had consciously done anything. I peered inside. Although it was dark, I could just see another door. I stepped inside, switching on my torch. The others followed, all excited as kids who’d found a cave and were going exploring.

Once everyone was inside the outer door closed. “What the...” screamed George as he raced back to stop the door but was too late. “Now how do we get out?”

We had no answers, so no one attempted to respond besides our attention was redirected as a light switched on bathing each of us in a brilliant spotlight before cutting out. A dim light remained. It was Nadia who cut the tension. “The room...it’s filling with air. I think it’s an airlock.”

George moved to remove his helmet. “No! Keep the suits on, we don’t know how well this system is working and it might still be a trap,” I warned. George froze.

“The air is a slightly different composition to that we are used to.”

George jumped on her. “I suppose Nadia you’re suggesting it was air as it was ten thousand years ago.” Nadia ignored him but George got the message he was right. “This is bullshit! Next you’ll be suggesting alien visitation like some of those whacko’s back on Earth. This is probably a Chinese or Russian base of a decade or so old. They beat us here – face it!”

The inner door opened to reveal a long rocky corridor stretching off into the darkness. It wasn’t man made; it was a natural cave. Cautiously I led the way, the corridor stretched on for about one hundred metres before reaching steps leading up into the darkness. In silence, they followed me up the steps and into the unknown. On reaching the top, lights flicked on to reveal a huge chamber. Behind us was the inside of the arched entrance but the room was only half the height of the twenty-storey doorway. “What do you make of this?”

Nadia, already taking readings, was the first to respond. “I’d say it was a launch chamber and hanger.”

The ever-sceptical George responded. “A launch chamber for what? The place is completely empty, no tools, no instruments, nothing.”

I headed towards a door on the far side of the chamber. As I did, I noticed the chamber was wedge shaped. While the others looked around, I entered the doorway. Inside I found a spiral staircase and three other doors. I opened each of the doors and found myself in identical chambers indicating the stairwell was the hub of a wheel and the four chambers marked the spokes. “Hey guys! I found something!” I returned to the doorway where the others awaited my return. They entered the stairwell and saw what I saw. George and Steve confirmed the other two doors led to two more chambers.

“It must rotate the hangers to the entrance for launch but what are they launching?” No one was prepared to venture an opinion.

“I suggest we take a look upstairs.” As suspected, at the top of the spiral stairs were four more launch chambers. Three of the chambers were empty and deserted. The fourth in position for launch contained a huge spaceship.

“That is not anything the Chinese could build,” admitted George staring up at the six-storey ‘flying saucer’ shaped craft. It was dull grey like everything else in this structure with windows defining the various levels inside. It stood on four legs and in the centre was a ramp leading inside.

“We need to find the Control Centre,” I suggested noting the central stairwell went up another floor. They all followed; as we reached the top landing we found a well preserved body dressed in a light blue jump suit!

Nadia approached the body. “Male, dead, body partially frozen and subsequently preserved.” She then scanned the body. “Cause of death asphyxiation.”

“Do we still have atmosphere in here?” I asked.

Nadia nodded. “Yes, but I’d say freshly generated otherwise it would be stale and this body would be badly decomposed. Also, the temperature in here is a comfortable 18 degrees Celsius. The body is frozen implying the temperature before we arrived was much colder.”

“So... who is controlling this place?” asked George unnerved.

“Let’s go find out. I suspect it’s automated.” I led the way inside. We found the Control Centre, an octagonal shaped room with windows overlooking the four wagon wheel bays with the Control Centre as the spoke of the wheel. The most disturbing part of this journey of discovery were the thawing bodies lying around. They were all lying where they fell and looking as if it only happened yesterday.

“What happened here?”

“The place was evacuated, and they were left behind,” suggested Steve as he examined the closest body. “Their clothing is not a design we’re familiar with in any culture. The fabric seems expensive and well made; they’re all wearing the same gear indicating a uniform. This symbol on the cuffs is an ancient Egyptian symbol for Tepi, the before time.”

“So, what are you saying? The Ancient Egyptians had space travel?” scoffed George.

“No, Tepi refers to the time before Egypt, the time of creation; a time when the gods ruled the Earth.”

“And these are the gods,” suggested George sceptically. We all scanned the room silently; bodies sat at every station as if waiting for the signal to lift off; a signal that obviously never came.

“What happened here?” asked Nadia.

“We were attacked.” A deep male voice boomed from nowhere. It echoed through the dead control room like a biblical god...a voice that left our hearts pounding as if suddenly placed before a vision of the Almighty.

“Who, the hell, are you?” I demanded, angry at the scare but not prepared to accept the presence of some deity.

“I am the Sentinel. I am protector of this base.”

“Did you kill all these people?”

The voice hesitated. “No. We were attacked by the Lamechites.”

“Explain!”

A visual record appeared on screen playing like a movie re-enactment, but this was the official records of events that had taken place in this same room some ten thousand years ago.

“This is Base Commander Vere”

The Control Centre crew were all focused on the main screen, displaying the events unfolding on the home planet. Their view from that distance was restricted to that of an orbiting satellite, obscured by large plumes of black and grey smoke pouring into the atmosphere from active volcanos. Beneath that growing cloud of volcanic dust the oceans were in turmoil. The spine-shaped island, in what would one day be known as the Atlantic Ocean, was sinking beneath the waves as earthquakes rumbled across the landmass. Ripples through the water grew into huge tsunamis that swept across the ocean, huge walls of water mounting the surrounding landmasses of Africa, Europe and the Americas to create what future generations would call the ‘Great Flood’.

“Any word from the Lamechite colonies, Mr Bosh?” asked the Commander solemnly. He knew the answer; the rebel colonies under the leadership of Lamech had been at war with the mother colony for several years now and were using the disaster as a means of winning the war.

“They’re not responding to the pleas of the refugees, many are on route to us, seeking asylum in the interstellar colonies,” advised the young officer clad in the blue jump suit uniform they all wore.

Commander Vere was angry, once they’d been a united people under Methuselah until he’d divided Atlan into colonies under the rule of his sons. They had disagreed on how the colonies should work together and had become divided. The rebel colonies united under Lamech and the loyalists under Methuselah. “Prepare all star liners for launch and open the doors to all refugee ships. If that’s what they want...we’ll leave this ruined world to the Lamechites!”

The massive doors of the Base, showing no sign of the pock mark damage of millennia of meteor damage, opened to reveal two massive ships. The bellies of these ships were open to allow refugee ships, interplanetary shuttles to enter and land. As each ship filled up, the bay rotated around the hub to reveal two more star-liners resting on the two levels of the launch chambers.

Officer Bosh watched as the massive Hanger doors closed and he turned to the Commander. “All ships accounted for.”

The Commander didn’t answer immediately attention focused on the sight of the island of Atlan sinking beneath the waves. Their view was obscured by the dust and debris that would plunge the world in a ‘nuclear winter’ simultaneously ending the Ice Age. “Ready all ships for launch.”

Bosh snapped out of his shock as he issued instructions to the star liner Captains and his surrounding Command Centre personnel, waking them out of their shock and getting them to perform their jobs. Finally, the Base was back in operation, the view of the disaster unfolding at home, now shut down. His instrument panel contained a display of green lights in eight rows which lit up as each ship completed its pre-launch checks. “All green! Ready to launch Commander!”

“Commence Launch sequence.”

The massive doors re-opened revealing two ships set for launch. The loading bays were shut, shuttlecraft tucked in for the journey to the interstellar colonies. Their engines had activated but the roar could not be heard; the lack of air preventing the sound from echoing across the rocky moon’s surface. The vibration became stronger as the launch sequence completed. The upper ship in Launch Bay 1A was the first to gently lift off the Hanger floor and drift out before climbing quickly into the dark sky. The lower ship in Launch Bay 1B followed just seconds later.

The Launch Bay structure rotated to the second position where two more ships awaited launch. The ship on the Upper Level 2A prepared for departure, its engines causing the ship to vibrate but something was wrong.

Officer Bosh noticed a number of green lights went off and the vibration from the engines became dangerously violent. “Launch Bay 2A terminate launch!” he ordered. The engines slowly closed down. “Launch Bay 2B launch!”

The lower ship departed quickly, the upper-level ship remained dormant as the Launch Bay structure moved into its third launch position.

Officer Bosh watched the star-liners climb into the sky completing the third launch sequence. Others in the team, which totalled about fifteen, were now performing their jobs.

An eerie silence fell over the Centre, the horror of events at home dwelling on their minds as they prepared for Launch Sequence 4.

“Any word on Star Liner 2A,” asked Vere.

Officer Bosh shook his head. “None. They are rechecking everything but so far can’t identify the fault. We transferred all passengers to Star Liners 4A and 4B leaving us 2A to escape in ourselves.” Vere nodded his acceptance of the situation as Launch Chamber 4A discharged its cargo into space.

“Commander! A Lamechite Warship is approaching, demanding the immediate surrender of the Base.” Vere turned to the female communications officer Talinda, a blonde-haired young officer who was secretly having an affair with Bosh. They didn’t think he knew but he’d observed them together long enough to know.

“Get Star Liner 4B launched. Then secure the Base. How long until they arrive?”

“Five minutes, Commander,” reported Talinda.

“Maintain communications silence.”

The Lamechite ship, like all Atlan style ships was circular, much like a flying saucer, but smaller than the Star Liners. The numerous weapons attached to its hull disrupted its streamline design giving evidence of its conversion from a transport vessel to a less benign ship. It approached the site of the Base in what would be known as the Stickney Crater and hovered menacingly outside the entrance.

Vere watched them on his screen. “What is the status of the remaining Star Liner?”

Bosh replied, his eyes staring nervously at the Lamechite ship. “They have not isolated the problem. The Star drive is overheating.”

Everyone watched the enemy ship awaiting Vere’s orders. “Telinda! Open communications.” The young woman obeyed. “This is the Base Commander. If you do not depart this area immediately, we will be forced to fire upon you.” Vere cut the link. “Align weapons on that ship and prepare to fire!”

Another officer nearby activated the weapons display and threw up the targeting system on screen for all to see. Vere could not remember his name and it annoyed him he was only new but Vere prided himself on knowing his team by name.

“Commander!” It was the Sentinel. “The enemy vessel is attempting to access my systems to close down life support.”

“Fire weapon!” ordered Vere. The beam shot out and struck the ship destroying it instantly, the surface of the moon was littered with debris, but the bulk of the ship was blown out into space as it disintegrated “Sentinel! Are you still operational?”

Silence reigned. “Commander, life support has been terminated!” reported Bosh.

The picture faded and Sentinel continued the dialogue. “That was twelve thousand years ago, they attempted to over-ride the instruction but were asphyxiated before they could rectify the situation.”

George as usual, didn’t believe. “If you claim to be twelve thousand years old, how can you speak our language?”

“I have monitored your communications for over a century. I also scanned the language centres of your brains as you entered the airlock to enable complete communication.”

George just shook his head in disbelief. “Can’t be?”

Nadia was scanning the room puzzled. “If you are the Sentinel then surely you are that computer and you did kill these people, even if it was a command you had no choice but to follow.”

“I was given two instructions; one, to maintain zero atmosphere until a ship arrived and two, to defend the base against any unidentified probes. I have now completed my first instruction destroying any probes that came within range.”

Steve was furious. “You destroyed the various probes we sent to Mars over the years? Do know what that cost us in money and research data. What gives you the...”

I stopped him in mid-sentence wishing to hear more from Sentinel and less from George. “What are your instructions now?”

“I have none. I await your instructions as the current inheritors of the planet.”

“You can stop destroying our probes for a start!” yelled Steve.

“We need to get back to our ship and report our findings. Then seek instructions.” I suggested. “Can you let us out?” I asked the voice from nowhere.

“You may leave whenever you wish. You can contact Earth direct from here without a time delay.”

“How can that be,” I asked.

“We have an instantaneous communication system here. I will access your latest communications.” Sentinel played the message. “Do not enter the structure! Proceed with original mission!”

“A bit late now,” remarked George.

“Can you make contact? We need to update them on what’s happening here.” The Sentinel opened communications. “Mission Control this is Mars Mission, your instruction arrived a bit late. We’ve entered the Phobos structure and found traces of an ancient base; awaiting instructions.”

There was a long pause making me doubt the credibility of instantaneous communication. Then it came, as if they’d been contemplating a response. “Leave Phobos now and continue original mission. We have launched second mission to investigate. Mission Control out.”

“Why wait? I asked. “We’re here and can provide intel on the base.”

Colonel William Baker at Mission Control was taken aback by the quick response. He didn’t like surprises and was very unhappy when things didn’t go to plan. A man in his fifties, a war veteran now retired to a commanding desk job with an expanding waist-line and declining fitness. Uneasiness was reflected in his cleanly shaven craggy moon cratered face. “How can you be responding so quickly?”

“We activated the base communications system, they have instantaneous communication. Don’t ask me how it works.”

Again, a slight pause while Baker considered his response. “Return to your ship immediately. Do not investigate further. Do not leave Phobos; await further instructions. You will be de-briefed later. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly, Phobos mission out,” I replied.

“They don’t sound very happy,” remarked George.

“You’d think they’d be more interested in what we found,” suggested Nadia puzzled. This was not the response any of them expected, it should be one of surprise, mixed with excitement at their discovery. New frontiers were being opened here both in history and science. What was their problem? Fear?

Steve was more practical. “I suspect they don’t want anyone eavesdropping on our conversation. Think what an enemy power could do with this technology?”

“Think what we could do with it,” suggested George pragmatically.

“I think we should head back to the ship and wait for their response,” I suggested.

“Why don’t we wait here? It’s far more comfortable than that cramped ship of ours...” suggested Steve. “...besides I’d like to spend some time examining how the ship works.” They looked down at the last remaining ship abandoned in the landing Bay.

After a brief consultation among ourselves we decided to stay but our first task would be to visit the ship. Everyone returned to the central hub stairwell and descended to the awaiting ship.

We walked up the ramp and found the saucer had an outer corridor with rooms embedded into the central core or hub of the circular design. There were several levels; this level appeared to be the accommodation level with individual rooms for passengers. Finding a lift we decided to head for the top floor where the lift opened into a large Control Room, its walls lined with blank view screens. The floor was littered with bodies slumped over their consoles. Sentinel turned on the view screens. One showed our ship parked outside, another, the planet Earth in close up, the rest showed various aspects of Mars.

“This is amazing,” remarked George becoming excited as he examined the equipment. Each console had a back lit touch pad in a foreign language he could not read. “Can we scan the planet from here?”

“You can. I will convert instruments to your language,” replied Sentinel. Instantly, the console George was viewing went blank then reactivated with instrument readings in English.

George stared at the instruments, becoming more excited as time passed. “We don’t need to go down there to complete our mission we can study it all from here.”

“I’d still like to get actual samples and see the ground for myself,” replied Nadia.

I was in full agreement we were safer here, better placed to do remote studies. “Agreed but we can first, select the perfect landing sites and be much more prepared to complete our mission when we do go down.”

For the next few hours we examined the planet below collecting much of the data we had come to uncover until our work was interrupted. “We have a visitor,” announced the deep resounding voice of the Sentinel.

One screen switched views from Mars to a ship approaching their position. I recognised it immediately. “That’s a weapons platform.” I had worked for intelligence organisations in the past. I knew what was happening and we were in trouble.

“Where did that come from?” asked George.

It was Sentinel that responded. “There are several in orbits around Mars; they have been here for years guarding the planet. Until now they have never come near this base.”

“What? Have they come to protect us?” asked George distracted from his own instrument panel and walked over to join us in viewing the approaching craft. “But protect us from what?”

The next event left us all stunned as the platform opened fire and destroyed our ship. At the same time, Sentinel fired a beam destroying the weapons platform. As the debris fell slowly to the ground, everyone watched in stunned silence.

“What the hell are they doing?” asked George.

“Removing witnesses, we’ve seen too much. Someone wants this place for their own and we’re in the way. That’s why they wanted us back in the ship. Sentinel! Get me Mission Control.” When they answered I replied. “You missed!”

“What do you mean?” replies Baker.

“A weapons platform just destroyed our ship, but we were not in it.”

“We know nothing of this Captain. Is everyone alright?”

“No one is hurt but if we’d followed your orders, we’d all be dead, now we’re trapped in the ancient base.”

“Do you have supplies? Our follow up Mission is still more than eight months away. Can you last the distance?” asked Baker.

I hesitated. “Unlikely.” The others tried to protest but I waved them back into silence.

“Then good luck, Mars Mission. Keep in touch. Mission Control out.”

“What was that?” protested George.

I ignored him. “Sentinel, is there any way we can survive here until relief comes?”

“There is food, everything you need is here.”

“10,000 year-old food, it must have passed its use by date by now surely,” protested George incredulous that even such a suggestion was being considered.

Sentinel replied. “It will sustain you.”

“Then we have work to do, I suggest that follow up mission was launched shortly after we were redirected which means they’re six months away not eight. We need to get that Atlan ship operative and ensure we retain control of this base. Sentinel, do we have the parts to repair that ship?”

“We do.”

“Then we’d better check out that food and get started.”

Six months later, Steve was staring through a window watching the power surge through a frequency wave generator drawing limitless energy from giant crystals absorbing energy from the cosmos itself. George entered, carrying food packages in brown wrapping and handed one to Steve. “How’s it going?”

“This is amazing; this engine could run for 50,000 years without refuelling. It draws its power from the unseen energy around us, focuses through that crystal which amplifies it into something useful.” Steve opened his ration pack to reveal a solid brown cake-like substance while George’s contained a yellow harder substance about the size of a bar of soap. “What have you got?” he asked looking at George’s food.

“Never sure, all I know is its tasty! Never thought 10,000-year-old food could taste so good,” replied George biting into his yellow bar. “Tastes meaty, could be Mammoth for all I know.”

Steve bit into his brown cake. “I think mine is vegetable and even the wrapper is tasty, no wasted packaging,” he said jovially as he bit off a piece of wrapper. I interrupted their conversation over the PA by requesting a status report. “Still having problems with the thrusters but we’re close now that I understand how they work - commencing next test in three minutes.”

“Acknowledged,” I replied as a screeching alarm sounded.

In the Control Centre, I turned my attention to the screen Sentinel was directing us to, it displayed a picture of a small object approaching the base, unannounced. “Shall I destroy it?” queried the computer.

“No. Let’s see who it is and what their intentions are; open up communications.” I ordered and then directed my attention to the ship. “This is Phobos Base to unidentified ship. Please identify and state your business here.”

There was a long pause before a response was forthcoming. “Is that Captain Virginia Colby?”

“It is, who is this?”

“We thought you were all dead! How did you survive all this time? We were told your ship crashed on Phobos. They’ve had memorial services and raised statues to your heroism.”

“We didn’t crash. We were shot down and left to die. I presume your mission is to secure the base”.

“That is correct. We’re coming in, prepare to receive visitors.”

“I’m sorry, permission to land denied.”

After a long pause the Captain of the other ship replied, his tone a lot less pleasant. “You realise we cannot accept that. Our orders are to secure the base.”

“Your orders are to ensure that we are silenced. This base is under our control, and you are instructed to leave or you’ll be fired upon. Are we clear?” I cut the communications link.

“What are you doing?” protested George entering the Control Room.

“They’re not here to save us, George. They blew up our ship because we found out more about this place than we were supposed to. We have been declared dead, now they can’t have us miraculously return from the dead without revealing the existence of this base.”

“So what do we do? Spend the rest of our lives here?”

“No. We return to Earth in that ship and reveal everything we’ve found to the world.” I suggested. “Sentinel! What is that ship doing?”

“Ship has not changed course, it remains on approach.”

“Put a shot across the bow,” I ordered. Sentinel fired as we all watched. The ship halted its approach.

George was not happy. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“They’re not going away and if we let them in, they kill us!” I replied and called to Steve on the intercom. “Steve! I need to get those thrusters operating and the ship ready for launch.”

Four armed soldiers in space suits approached the cliff face entrance to the Base. They had left their ship on the far side of the moon and trekked across the moon, a radius of just over 12 kilometres. They planted an explosive charge on the door and took cover. The silent explosion from their point of view, reverberated through the Base and blew open the outer door.

Alarm bells sounded, alerting us all to the source of the intrusion. “They’ve blown open the outer door of the airlock. If they do the same to the inner lock, they’ll open the Base to vacuum,” reported Nadia.

“Sentinel! Can we stop them?”

“I can only slow them down. Once they enter the launch chamber I can seal off the entrance to prevent loss of life support.”

“Do that and put me in touch with their ship!” I instructed. “Steve! Report Status. We need to leave. They’ve breached the Base defences.”

“Engines should be a go. Come aboard Captain!” reported Steve.

“Sentinel! Defend the Base! Once we’re on board the ship, close down all life support systems and do not reactivate the Base until instructed by us. Activate independent ship control systems!” I ordered as we departed the Control Centre for the ship. As we left, I took one last look at the place we’d called home for the last six months.

An explosion ripped open the door to the lower launch Chamber allowing the four soldiers to enter but not before a blast of air nearly ejected them back out into space. Sentinel began shutting down all life support, lighting and power plunging them into darkness. Undeterred, they switched on torches and proceeded, protected by their suits from the failing life support systems.

I entered the Control Room of the ship with Nadia. George and Steve were still in the Engine Room. “Sentinel! Activate Launch Sequence!”

“Outer doors opening, activating Simitar.”

“Thank you, Sentinel, for everything. We will be back to ensure the treasures of this place belong to the world and not just one greedy power.” Sentinel terminated comms and I immediately turned to internal comms. “Steve! Activate engines and get us out of here, armed

soldiers in lower launch chamber.” I ordered and instantly a powerful vibration rocked the ship.

“All systems green and ready for launch,” reported Nadia at her station.

The engines roared louder in the launch chamber as their power prepared to propel the ship into space through the open hanger door. Outside, the rocky peaks and flat crater floor stretched out in front of us giving a clear unobstructed path. In the far distance, only 6,000 kilometres away was the surface of Mars filling the sky.

“Launch!” I ordered as I noticed the armed soldiers enter the launch chamber.

The roar of the engines increased but the ship didn’t move. Then I noticed that one of the soldiers held a rocket launcher. “Simitar! Can that rocket hurt us?”

A female voice responded, in stark contrast to the deep voice of Sentinel. “Our impact shield is only designed to protect us from space debris, unsure of our ability to sustain an explosive impact.”

“Steve! We need to leave now! They’re about to shoot us down before we become airborne.”

“Working on it, Captain! Still having a problem with the thrusters!” replied Steve as he dove into an access tunnel, climbed down a ladder, and began checking a crystalline alignment. “Try now!” The engines roared yet again but still no movement as I watched in horror as the soldiers took aim. Steve re-arranged the crystal alignment. “Now!” Again, it failed.

“Simitar! Can we fire upon them?”

“No. This is a passenger liner not a warship.”

“Steve! They’re going to fire on us. We need to go!” I got no response but then noticed a gust of hot air shower the soldiers causing them to back away, delaying their ability to fire.

“Just letting off a bit of hot air,” announced Nadia. I looked puzzled. “Directional thrusters for changing course.”

The engines roar increased; this time stronger. “Try now!” yelled Steve.

Still no response to thrusters as the missile was launched. The impact violently shook the ship. “Damage Report!”

“Impact screens held but weakened. Another strike will cause hull damage,” replied Simitar casually as if reporting the weather.

Feeling both helpless and vulnerable I watched them load up a second ground to air missile, that was sure to end our mission I put all my faith in Steve. “Steve! Up to you! Last chance to get us out of here!”

Steve stared at the complex array of crystals trying to locate which one was out of alignment. He had spent six months studying this system; he knew they had to be aligned in a certain pattern to work effectively. He knew it was something simple; then he saw it, a crack in one of the crystals. He quickly removed and replaced it. “Now baby. Don’t let us down, start!” He opened comms to the Control Room. “Try Again!”

This time, the thrusters burst into life and the ship lifted off, swinging around nearly decapitating the soldiers. They were forced to flee for cover or be squashed, as the ship moved towards the launch chamber exit. Then without warning, the forward thrusters took control and propelled the ship into space. Climbing quickly, the arc of the planet Mars sank below the view screen now filled with stars as the ship moved into a Martian orbit over the northern pole.

“Course set for Colony A, travel time two days,” reported Simitar.

“Colony A? Explain?” I asked as a map of the stars zoomed in on the star system of Sirius. “The Ancients had a colony in Sirius?”

“I am programmed to take the colonists on this ship to that colony.”

“How many colonies are there?”

“Two.”

Nadia interjected as Steve and George entered the Control Room. “Impossible! Not in two days, it’s light years away.”

“Maybe we should go,” suggested George.

“I agree but I’d like to take a detour first,” I asked of the computer.

“I am at your command.”

“What have you got in mind?” asked George.

“We complete our mission and become the first humans to step foot on Mars in 12 thousand years and I’d like to visit the Face of Mars. Anyone disagree?” There were no objections, so Simitar set course for Cydonia on Mars.

The ship, the size of an ocean liner, descended towards the Face of Mars, in Cydonia bordering the Acidalia Planitia and Arabia Terra Highlands of the Northern Hemisphere. The ship descended like a feather as we approached, the features of the face disappeared, revealing a rocky outcrop that had coincidentally formed a face. It was disappointing, as we had hoped to find further evidence of the ancient lost civilisation. We decided to land anyway and take a look; we still wanted to be the first to walk upon the planet, even if we were only the first to do so in 12 thousand years.

We opened the ramp after the ship landed and walked onto the surface of Mars. “Mars, God of War, we come in peace,” announced George as we all took the first step on to a new planet.

“Very philosophical, pity no press around to record those immortal words,” I commented.

George ignored me as he and Nadia approached the rocky Uluru-like formation. It was bigger, smooth in spots and jagged in others, impossible to climb, impressive in its size. Mars seemed to do everything in huge splendour.

“Hey, guys look at this,” yelled Nadia approaching a cave entrance. She vanished inside before checking if we were following. As we were all wearing space suits, we were not dependent upon sound waves to hear, our radio communications operated out of sound range.

We followed her into the cave. On one wall we saw a carving, a picture of the Earth but not as we knew it. The land formations were much different. “Look at the Atlantic... it has a spinal shaped land mass down the centre, what we know as the Mid Atlantic Ridge separating the African and South American plates. There must have been a massive tectonic shift that moved the continents causing the Mid Atlantic Ridge, a progressive bulge that runs along the Atlantic Ocean, to sink. That must have caused the Atlantic Massif to be pulled under the ridge and created the Gulf Stream! This would have ended the Ice Age,” reported Nadia excitedly.

“I wonder what lies further inside?” asked George. Before anyone could speculate another voice from behind them interrupted

“Maybe we should all find out together.” Behind us stood four armed soldiers, their weapons aimed at us. “Or maybe not.” They raised their weapons to fire, and we all dived around the corner and ran down the corridor descending into the massive structure. Bullets tore off pieces of rock and showered us in dust but the winding passage protected us from attack as our pursuers could not get a clean shot.

Finally, the passage ended and we found ourselves at the gateway to a large underground city. A city of black pyramids each with a flashing beacon on top lighting the streets below. “Quick!! To the right and down the street,” I instructed, avoiding going straight to confuse our pursuers. They obeyed and we were soon running past huge pyramid shaped buildings. I led them to the right after several blocks and then inside one of the pyramids. As

soon as we entered, the interior lit up to reveal a number of interlocking chambers linked by passages and ladders. The city was deserted, unlike the Base, there were no bodies. This place had been abandoned but the power was still on. How? After twelve thousand years?

“You guys hide in here and maintain radio silence, they can hear everything we say,” I instructed and left them alone. Nadia, curious about what was inside, began exploring the interior, climbing a ladder from an empty foyer to rooms that were obviously living quarters, with beds and cooking areas all in different chambers linked by ladder or ramp. If you’ve ever been inside the Pyramids in Egypt, it had a similar feel to it as I did my own exploration seeking our attackers. I found them spread out searching different streets and buildings to narrow down our location. The interior design of the pyramids made them hard to search. It also made them easy to set an ambush, positioning myself in a room overlooking another able to leap on top of an unsuspecting trooper when he entered. I estimated his helmet may have protected him from concussion but a blow to the head should leave him stunned. I pounced and he collapsed, I threw away his machine gun, a model I was not familiar with, and attempted to subdue him as he came around. Unfortunately, he drew a knife and attempted to cut my suit, the knife caught me off guard and he almost succeeded. I tried to convince him to give up, but he refused, leaving me no choice. After a few tense moments I managed to cut his suit, more by accident than design, as it turned out, and he quickly suffocated in the Martian atmosphere that was 96% carbon dioxide. I left him and took his weapon. The commotion we created had been heard over the radio and his companions were coming. I imagined each had a GPS so they wouldn’t be far behind, these structures had one disadvantage, only one entrance that I could determine and thus one exit.

I left quickly but was spotted, a hail of bullets tore into the rockwork of a pyramid as I turned a corner. Two of the three remaining soldiers took up pursuit while the remaining soldier went inside. As he rounded the corner, I opened fire. My assault drove them back and gave me time to disappear across the open square, or rather ‘triangle’ that had probably once been decorated with flowers and trees but was now long dead barren ground. The two men split up and saw me as I moved from cover to cover seeking an escape route down one of the avenues of pyramids. I ducked as they fired, closing in on my position. I returned fire narrowly missing them. After a running gun battle, I finally escaped unseen, into a pyramid, and they moved on.

While I waited, I heard the comms of the others as they found their dead companion. They were angry, making them even more determined and dangerous. It also meant I couldn’t afford to give them any quarter. I heard their leader instruct them to change frequency. No longer able to listen in I’d have to track them visually. I switched my comms off so they couldn’t listen to me then went on the hunt.

Once in a secure position, I watched their movements from within one of the pyramids, one of the biggest with several exits. I watched as one team approached and took careful aim before firing. A bullet passed through the visor of one of the helmets and out the back splattering the interior with red matter. The surviving assailant took cover as I quickly left the pyramid and took up another position down the street and waited. I didn’t have to wait long until the comms re-opened.

The surviving assailant had re-joined his companion and realised they were being hunted. “She’ll pick us off one by one. We need leverage. She’s acting alone; the others are only scientists. They’ll be hiding somewhere close by.”

The fact they’d re-opened comms proved to me they were setting a trap, they wanted me to think they’d tracked down my crew in the pyramid where I’d left them. A short time later the leader made contact. “We have your companions. Surrender or I’ll kill them.”

“You will kill them anyway,” I replied as I left my current position, unsure how true their claim could be. I suspected that if they’d been found they’d already be dead.

“Are you prepared to take that risk? I might be prepared to take you back alive if you hand over both the ship and Base.

“I don’t think so. Your orders are to ensure we never return. Our memorials are built, and it would be embarrassing for us to return. Besides we know too much.” I took aim.

“Then you leave me no choice,” he said having my crew led out into the street and indicating Nadia be brought forward. She was forced to her knees while George and Steve were held by the remaining soldier. The officer held a gun to her head. “You have until the count of ten to surrender or... I’ll kill her!” He began counting.

My field of vision made shooting him a tricky shot but his foot soldier holding George was a perfect target. I fired; the soldier was thrown back and landed face up, air escaping from his suit. I fired a second shot landing at the feet of the leader. “I warn you... the next shot will take off your head.” George, who was still recovering became animated and took the gun from the leader roughly pushing him aside as he helped a terrified Nadia to her feet. Once I knew the crew were in control of the situation, I joined them.

“You cannot win, Captain! We are prepared to die to protect our government’s interests! My people have taken over your ship and will simply leave us all here to die!”

I did not respond, instead I switched frequencies to the ship. “Simitar! Shut down all life support and seal the ship. Do not reactivate unless you receive direct command from me.”

“Understood. We do have two humans on board who do not have protective gear activated at present.”

“Cut life support anyway, they mean us harm - Ground crew out.” I turned to our captive. “Now you have a choice. Return to your ship peacefully and we’ll release your people, or I’ll shoot you now! You have little time to decide your men are already losing the ability to breathe.”

“You can’t!” objected Nadia.

I totally ignored her and stared the leader down. “And what will you do then?” asked the leader, attempting to maintain control.

“I’ll work that out once we’re back on our ship! So... what’s it going to be?” I cocked my weapon and pointed it at him. Nadia moved to object, but George pulled her up. We all waited, the leader of the assault team trying to stare us down.

“You wouldn’t dare shoot us in cold blood,” he challenged.

“Tell that to your dead companions. We don’t need prisoners getting in our way. So decide!” I fired my weapon tearing up the red earth in front of him, the sudden burst unnerving everyone.

The leaders resolve faded. “You have a deal; now help my people on your ship.”

“Simitar, warn them to leave the ship or suffocate!” I cut the link and addressed the others. “Let’s go!” Soon, we were back on the surface. The two soldiers were standing outside the ship waiting. “Now get back to your ship and do whatever you have to but be warned, stay away from us. Next time you won’t be let off.”

George and Steve released the Captain and let him walk away towards their ship, tiny in comparison to the multi-storey craft we had inherited. “Simitar! We’re coming back aboard.” As we approached, we saw the our attackers heading back towards their ship. As we entered our ship, we noticed the smaller ship was making no effort to depart. It was watching and waiting to see our next move.

“What are they planning to do?” asked Steve.

“Whatever they can to get control of this ship,” I speculated.

“And what are we going to do?” asked Nadia.

“Whatever we can to stop them but meanwhile let’s go visit Colony A,” I suggested and went inside leaving the others feeling unsure if that was a good idea. Would they be welcomed? They quickly followed and the doors shut.

The ship was soon in space and the crew assembled in the ships Control Room or Bridge. “Resuming course for Colony A” announced Simitar.

“Show us on screen where exactly is this colony?” I asked. A star map appeared on screen of a distant star system and zoomed in on one particular star.

Steve, as pilot knew the stars and recognised the map. “That’s the constellation of Canis Major and they’re indicating Sirius, known as the brightest star in our sky but that is more than eight light years away. Not possible to get there in 48 hours.”

“We have a space-time distortion drive,” replied Simitar.

“A what? It’s not one of those two days away for us and 200 years passes on Earth?” pressed Steve still sceptical.

Simitar tried to explain. “No. It employs time displacement technology to ensure the same time elapses at your source as experienced by you as being absent.”

“I don’t understand,” continued Steve now totally confused. “That would defy Einstein’s laws of physics!” The explanation ceased at that point as the ship shook violently as if struck by something. “What was that?”

“We’re under attack from the Earth ship,” reported Simitar placing a view on screen of the ship in pursuit and firing a second missile.

“Evasive action!” I ordered but too late, the missile struck, and the ship shuddered violently again. “Can we fire back?”

“As pointed out before, we are not a warship, and another strike will cause our shielding to collapse. Third missile fired!”

We watched helplessly as it approached. “Evasive action!” I ordered.

“We are too big to move quickly,” reported Simitar as the ship rocked again by an explosion. “We have no protection; a fourth missile has been fired.” We watched it closing in, knowing it would cause extensive damage. Then out of nowhere a beam struck the missile causing it to explode harmlessly followed by a second beam destroying the hostile ship. .

“Sentinel!” I whispered. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief but was also shocked that the entire hostile crew of Mars Mission II were now dead. Although they had tried to kill us we felt guilty at killing them in this lonely empty place called space. “I suppose we’re off to Colony A. Out of curiosity, where is Colony B?”

“I am not programmed with that information for security reasons.”

“Pity. Then take us to Colony A and let’s see what we find,” I instructed feeling everyone’s sudden excitement at taking an interstellar journey.

Sirius is actually three stars. Sirius A which is twice the size of our Sun. Sirius B a white dwarf that had once been a red giant and Sirius C, a black or brown dwarf. Known to the ancients as the Star of Isis or Sothis, they were aware of it being a binary star, despite not having any means of discovering this fact. It being the brightest star in the sky its rising set the original date for New Year’s Day in the west. What no one knew was that amidst this collection of interacting stars were a series of planets; one was known as Colony A, and it was capable of supporting human life. As we approached this new world, we could make out land masses and oceans. The team were analysing the planet as we approached using the advanced instrumentation on board.

“I’m detecting life on the planet; vegetation and animal life,” announced George. As our biologist, he sounded very excited and that spread to the rest of us. “Atmosphere is very

Earth like and completely pollution-free. The planet is of a similar size and similar climate. I'm not detecting any signs of technology, or any cities."

"Where are the cities?" asked Steve, our pilot, feeling superfluous as the ship flew itself. No one could answer so we waited and watched as the ship zeroed in on a continent in the southern hemisphere and commenced re-entry. It was not long until we approached a familiar structure; a landing base nearly identical to that on Phobos, except instead of two stories of hangers there was only one. The hanger doors opened, and the ship slipped smoothly into the launch chamber and landed as the doors closed.

"I guess we're here and in... 47 hours 19 minutes," I announced.

"And what now," queried Steve still feeling redundant.

"I hand over control to the Base Computer system - Sincrom," announced Simitar. A new voice came over the intercom. Again, a male voice but not as deep as Sentinel's booming voice. "Welcome to the Lost Colonists. We have waited a long time for your arrival."

"Lost colonists?" I queried.

"Yes, when we evacuated the home world, one ship never arrived but now it has, and our evacuation is complete. How did you survive the destruction of the home world?"

"It was not totally destroyed. Many survived and the planet healed itself."

"But our enemy the Lamechites still remain; I am informed by your ship who has also updated me on your language and of the events that brought you here."

"We may no longer call them Lamechites but evil men still try to gain power, to the detriment of the planet and its people," I reported, having studied their historic records during the six months that we'd been on the moon of Mars.

"That is unfortunate; the people here have lived in harmony since their arrival. I shall send for Zeeglevarg. He will introduce you to the community."

"Where is your community? We can find no cities?"

"There are no cities! We live in small self-sufficient communities. Zeeglevarg will join you shortly." The computer shut down the comms link, ending the conversation.

"I guess we wait," I said but the crew were curious and spent the time studying this new world from the instruments on board.

Steve, being the pilot, devoted his time to studying the solar system. He found that a day on this planet was about 26 hours and a year 673 days. Sirius A is twice the size of our sun and takes fifty years to orbit Sirius C. Sirius B spins on its axis 23 times a minute. This planet orbits Sirius C along with the other two stars. Two of these suns were visible in the sky and the planet had a blue tint to the lighting distorting the colours.

Three hours later Zeeglevarg arrived. He was an elderly man dressed in a simple sleeveless shawl and a brimmed straw hat. He met us outside the complex in the forest beyond. "Welcome. We have waited millennia for your arrival and my people are eager to hear your story this evening, over a meal."

"How did you learn our language?" I asked surprised at how well spoken was this community elder.

"Simitar taught us through synaptic implantation of data. Simitar tells me it is much like you loading software into a computer," replied Zeeglevarg. "Shall we go?" The elder turned and walked away. We followed him to what could only be described as a native village of nineteen primitive huts or log cabins. People emerged to greet us; all dressed similarly to our guide Zeeglevarg and all spoke English.

"How big are your communities? And how many are there?" I asked.

"Each community is around fifty strong and we have lost count of the number." We were led by a gathering crowd to a central square around which the huts were built. In the

square were lots of wooden benches laden with foods where the population sat waiting. Zeeglevarg addressed the group. "We welcome the people of the lost ship."

Everyone clapped then we were taken around to each table and introduced before being seated and served our meals in silence. Once the meals were served conversation recommenced. As we were greeted I noticed the women, who wore similar clothing to the men, had jewellery made of coloured gems and stones set in metals; pieces that would be worth a fortune on Earth. As night descended the camp remained lit. I turned to the woman beside me who had taken on the role of my minder and had identified herself as Yarling. She was an attractive woman with long red hair, probably in her thirties of slim build and healthy complexion. In fact, I could find no sickly or overweight people in the community.

"Yarling! How is it that the camp remains lit?"

She smiled. "We may enjoy a natural lifestyle, but we are not entirely without technology. We have cosmic energy stores drawing energy from the sky suppling lighting and heat for cooking or for our comfort."

"I see," I replied. Later I was asked by Yarling to tell our story to the community. They were captivated but once the meal finished and my story told, the people abruptly picked up their bowls and dishes and disappeared, all without a word. For a moment I thought I'd offended them until Zeeglevarg rescued me.

"It's simply time to retire. Come allow me to show you to your accommodation," he explained leading us towards a cabin. It was clean and comfortable inside, even modern in appearance. There were the basics; beds, chairs and tables but no pictures, no ornaments. The beds were covered in woven blankets and mattresses stuffed with a soft rubbery substance making them extremely comfortable. We slept well despite the unfamiliarity of our environment.

Next morning, we were greeted as if we were long lost family and, in a way, that's exactly what we were. We ate that first meal of the day under a very bright morning sun - a star forty percent bigger than our sun, the lighting uncomfortably alien.

The meal consisted of fruits and juices, some familiar, some not. As the people became more relaxed with us, we learnt that the community was built on mutual co-operation. If something needed repairing, vegetables to be grown, cooking or hunting to be done everyone did what they were skilled at doing. The rest of the time was spent in philosophical discussion, reading, researching and study of the universe. We learned that our story had been recorded and archived for future generations.

After a few weeks, we began to have philosophical discussions of our own on the impact of Earth's culture upon this community. "They would destroy it!" insisted Steve rigorously. "Look what they did to native cultures around the world in the last five hundred years - The Aztecs; the American Indian; the Australian Aborigine, the continent of Africa?"

"How will they find us?" asked George.

"You've got to be kidding!" I replied. "The moment they find the base on Phobos, or the one on Mars they'll soon work it out. Not to mention the historical records on Mars relating to colonies in the Sirius system."

"But what can we do?" asked Nadia. "What can we do to stop them?"

I thought for a moment. "I have an idea."

A week later, our ship entered into Earth's orbit and opened communications with NASA Mission Control. "Captain, we thought you were dead!" The surprised response came from their Mission Commander, Colonel Baker.

I scoffed at the serious face on the screen. "I find that hard to believe given you sent a hit squad to kill us. Unfortunately for them, it is they who will not be returning."

“That is a serious accusation. Your actions could also be considered treasonous.”

“We don’t think so sir, in fact *I* think our return might spark off all kinds of conspiracy theory flack for you. We do have control of an advanced ship you’d rather the world didn’t know about.”

The Colonel dressed in full US Air Force military uniform didn’t seem phased but was definitely weighing up his options. “Look Virginia. If you land, we can work this out. No one wants you out in the cold and where would you go – Mars?”

“Sorry not going to happen. We’re here for one reason only, to warn the people of Earth to stay away from Mars and its moons. It was claimed millennia ago by the people of the nation you’d call Atlantis. They fled the Great Flood on Earth in Biblical times for Mars and beyond ... they don’t want visitors. Any ship entering within one million miles of Mars will be assumed hostile.”

“You can’t tell us where we can or can’t go.”

“As the Ambassadors for the nation of Atlantis, who claims its origins on Earth, also seeks to enforce its rights of nationhood as would any other nation on Earth. They claimed Mars ten thousand years ago as their sovereign state and they’re certainly not surrendering it now.”

“And what of you and your crew?”

“We are returning to Mars to live so we don’t disrupt your fiction about our fate or that of our ‘rescue’ crew. I’d recommend you take this warning seriously.”

“Sir!” interrupted Simitar. “Missiles closing in from the surface.”

While still aware of the open communication link with the Mission Commander I gave my orders. “Take evasive action and have Sentinel respond.”

It took only three minutes of evasive flying until a beam of intense energy struck and destroyed the missiles. A second beam followed a minute later taking out the base that launched them...no survivors.

I watched as the Colonel received word of the outcome. “You have just declared war on the Earth!” he shouted, indignant and angry – blinded by his own hypocrisy.

“I think you are mistaken, sir. It was Earth that just launched an attack upon us. There will be no further retaliation from Mars as long as you stay away.” I cut the link and turned to Steve. “Take us to Phobos.”

On arrival, I instructed Sentinel on his new orders. No ship from Earth was permitted to approach within one million miles of the planet and its moons. They were to be warned only twice and then destroyed if they did not comply. A ship from Colony A would visit from time to time to re-assess the situation to decide whether the people of Earth had matured enough for peaceful contact. Sentinel accepted his instructions and we set course for the Dog Star, the second home of humanity in the stars. As we returned, we speculated on the location of Colony B.

Seventeen months later, I had returned to Mars with a group of colonists curious to return to the home world which had been forbidden for fear of alerting their old enemy the Lamecites. The rest of my crew had chosen to remain at Colony A, so I was the sole member of modern day Earth. We had re-established the Mars base, reactivated the life support for the underground city and built hydroponic gardens for food. We had settled in nicely until we got a message from Sentinel.

Although only sparsely populated, the city of pyramid shaped houses was ablaze with light as people went about their business. Children played in the street, adults gossiped while also discussing news from home. We had also tapped into Earth transmissions including television broadcasts which were a new concept to the Atlans. It also kept us abreast of news

on Earth. Direct communications with Sirius were available but other news came in the form of deliveries from home...gifts, food, and other treasures not available on Mars.

I made my way to the comms tower, a tall structure with a control room at its base. "Report!" I ordered the monitoring computer on Phobos.

"A large ship is approaching from Earth, it's not responding to warnings."

"Put me through." I waited for the line to clear. "This is Mars base, state your purpose or be fired upon!"

"Who is this? We are not aware of any base on Mars! Which nation do you represent?"

"I represent the independent planet of Mars and your people have been warned to stay away. What is your business here?"

"Exploration! Are you human? How do you know our language?"

"I'm Captain Virginia Colby of the First Mission."

"That can't be, you were all killed when your ship crashed on Phobos. We are here to investigate the disappearance of the Second Mission."

Obviously, the real story had remained hidden back home but now they were testing our threats by sending another mission. "I can answer that; they were killed trying to kill us."

"I cannot believe that, why would they do that?"

"To protect what we found up here and wouldn't share because of its destructive capability. And who am I talking to?"

"Captain James Macau, so what now? You expect us to just turn around and go home?"

I was tempted to say yes but thought it might be wiser to show these guys what was here, and that Earth had no place in this community. "I will supply landing co-ordinates. Do not deviate we can and will blow you out of the sky if you do not follow directions precisely."

The ship descended loudly, its engines roaring as it burned its toxic fossil fuels. It reminded me of an old Earth Shuttle craft from the eighties, but it had hovering jets that didn't require a runway. It settled gently on the surface and four suited humans emerged. I greeted them in my suit at the entrance to the underground city. "How many of you are there?"

"Just us four plus one more guarding the ship," replied Macau.

I led them inside passed the invisible air lock and removed my suit. Hesitantly they did the same. So far, the cave was just a cave but as we entered the underground chamber they saw the city in all its glory. "How did you build this place in seventeen months and who are all these people?" asked Macau stunned.

"This city was built over 12,000 years ago by our ancestors, those who inspired the legend of Atlantis." I showed them the map of the Earth at the entrance showing the spine like land mass down the centre of the Atlantic.

"So what does this mean for us?" he asked.

"That depends on you convincing your people we are serious about protecting our planet from the territorial nature of your people, their greed and self centred need to control everything. None of that exists here, we live in peace with each other and wish to remain so. That doesn't mean we're a push over should you decide to invade."

Two colonists came forward approaching up the stairs from the city. "You will need to surrender your weapons."

They clutched their handguns tightly although they were still holstered. "We're not surrendering our weapons!" stated one of Macau's crew, his tone threatening.

"And you are?" I asked.

"Flight Lieutenant Antonio Sanchez," he replied angrily, obviously one who didn't like being told what to do.

“Well Antonio, you can remain here and keep your weapon, or you can accompany us into the city. Your choice,” I replied.

He looked to his Captain for support but didn't get it. “Do as they say, Antonio.” Reluctantly they handed over their side arms.

Disarmed they followed me down the steps and into the main street. I led them to a park area where trees had been planted and a group of three Elders awaited our arrival.

“These are our Elders; they are the closest thing we have to a government. I will not introduce you by name as the custom requires a formal introduction of honoured guests. I led them to a table in the park, gathered around were other members of the community. As we stood around the table the head Elder Zeeglevarg gave a sign, and everyone clapped as a welcoming gesture. As the Elders sat, the clapping stopped, and I indicated our visitors could now sit. Zeeglevarg had accompanied us from Sirius now introduced himself and the other two Elders. I introduced the Captain who then introduced his crew. That completed the people served food. Macau and his people were taken aback by the welcome and were hesitant to eat the bread like substance covered in fruit along with wine; every human civilisation seemed to develop wine though in this case maybe they started the trend.

We all ate until interrupted by the arrival of a fifth crewman. “What are you doing here? Who's minding the ship?” asked Captain Macau, surprised and concerned.

“There is nothing to worry about,” assured Zeeglevarg. “There is nothing out there that can harm your ship and it would be rude of us to not feed your crewman.”

Macau looked to his crewman. “The ship is secure, they gave me no choice.” Macau turned to me, and I assured him all was fine and encourage his crewman to join the feast. Finally, he consented but needed more assurances. “What is our position here?”

“That depends a lot on you and your superiors back on Earth. We simply wish to be left alone. If your people come, they will fight over resources, build cities, introduce commerce, religious groups will attempt to contaminate these people with their ideas. We don't need any of that. We have not had conflict here since leaving Earth at the end of the Ice Age. They don't want or need to be contaminated by the evils of your world.”

“And if they don't listen?” queried Macau.

“They have already seen what we can do, such as the destruction of your military base over a year ago.”

“That was a freak meteor strike!”

“No, it was us firing a warning shot after that base fired at our ship in orbit.” Macau was taken aback; he had a lot to think about. I noticed crewman Antonio was watching a number of the young girls and I didn't like what I saw.

The celebrations continued into the evening, the food kept coming and so did the wine; the crew and the locals were enjoying themselves and becoming more inebriated by the minute. Finally, the party faded as people drifted off to bed and the visitors were shown their accommodation.

Next morning we were all awoken by an alarm...that alarm taking the form of a woman screaming. Given there were only fifty people in a small portion of the city everyone heard it and came rushing. I joined the gathering crowd where the party had been held to find an unconscious young girl lying on the ground. She was badly bruised, her face swollen and bleeding; her clothes torn. Zeeglevarg gently pushed his way through the crowd and found me bending over the injured girl. Zee went to conduct his own examination as I left to confront Captain Macau. “She's been beaten and I suspect raped. Only your people could have done this!”

“Why us?” challenged Antonio remaining aggressive. “It could have been anyone!”

“There has not been a rape among these people in living memory, there’s no real crime here. They live by one very simple code ‘You are free to do as you wish as long as you do nothing to prevent others from doing what they are free to do.’ Very simple!”

“So then we’re free to rape under that rule,” stated Antonio defiantly, his smug face convincing me he was the guilty party.

“The act of rape prevents that person from not wanting sex and her injuries prevent her from living normally as she wishes. This is why we don’t want contamination from your kind.”

“What do you mean my kind?” he shouted stepping towards me as if he was going to punch me out, only further confirming my suspicions.

Macau stopped him. “If any of you are responsible for this you have probably destroyed all chance of establishing friendly relations with these people.”

One of his crewmen, a sandy haired female, turned on Sanchez. “You did this! You self indulgent pig! I’ve had to put up with your unwanted advances since we left Earth!” she slapped him hard across the face and walked off. Sanchez was about to go after her, but Macau stopped him.

“I can’t help it if a local comes on to me!” he protested. “It’s not my fault! She wanted it!” I could see he was stunned, unaware that he’d done anything wrong.

“Zeeglevarg!” I called. The Elder had been organising a stretcher to take the girl for treatment. He joined me. “He’s responsible! You have my support to take whatever action the Elders think best.”

The Elder looked to Macau. “You have our support, but I’d like to be briefed on the possible outcome. I would also like to act in his defence.”

“It is permitted. Virginia will brief you!” replied Zeeglevarg as he summoned two locals and had Sanchez led away.

“You can’t do this! I haven’t done anything wrong. She wanted it!”

Once they’d left, the crew gathered around me. “You’ve got to help us. He should be tried under our laws,” insisted Macau.

“You are in their jurisdiction, Earth laws don’t apply. As to his fate, as there is no crime here there are no statutes to provide guidance so maybe use Earth precedence to argue punishment. He has confessed,” I pointed out.

“You’re from Earth, are you turning your back on your home planet. A traitor to your own kind?” pressed Macau.

“It is your leaders who are the traitors; I’m protecting my adopted people who believe in peace not conflict. The Earth has a lot to learn before its ready to come out here into space.”

“And what do you know of ‘out here’? You’re only on Mars!”

“These people have been out among the stars for 12,000 years. They know a lot,” I replied and left. I’d had enough of Earth people justifying their own actions.

The next morning a tribunal was held with the three Elders holding court. Zeeglevarg chaired the hearing held out in the open where all the people could observe. The former welcoming faces now were quite hostile to the crew but a passive hostility of angry stares rather than violent shouting or attempts to attack them. I opened the hearing. “I have been appointed an officer of the court as I’m familiar with both cultures and can interpret the differences for the court. All statements of evidence will be addressed through the Tribunal of Elders.

Macau jumped to his feet. “I object on the basis that we’ve had no opportunity to review the evidence.”

Zeeglevarg responded. "You will review the evidence as it's presented like the rest of us. We shall begin with the medical evidence!" Macau sat down as another man rose to his feet. He had a long white beard that stretched to his waist with a balding patch on the top of his head. He was a solid man but like everyone in this community, no one was overweight.

"I am Doctor Melwich, the victim Shashella, daughter of Hellom has a fractured skull and remains in critical condition. She has extensive bruising to most of her body consistent with a vicious beating that also resulted in a broken arm, facial lacerations. She was sexually penetrated by the accused proven by medical examination. She remains in a coma and will be unable to be present at these proceedings." The doctor sat down.

Macau stood up. "I object, we have seen no medical evidence to support those claims."

Zeeglevarg replied a little surprised at the evidence being challenged. "You have heard the evidence of the doctor. That is all that is required. He has no reason to supply false information."

"Then I ask the trial be postponed until the victim can testify."

Zeeglevarg continued patiently but becoming annoyed. "She will be unable to provide additional information, the accused has confessed. Medical evidence has proven he did the rape. There is no point in further pursuit of this matter." He turned away towards another who stood as Macau angrily sat down. "And now we will hear from Hellom, father of the victim."

"Friends of my daughter have told me that she had been approached by the accused and entered into conversation about Earth. He joined her in feasting and dancing, and they went for a walk away from the noise of the celebrations. She was not seen again. The doctor tells me if she recovers, she will suffer bad dreams and be afraid of having sex with any man in the future due to the trauma. This has been confirmed in ancient records and by our Earth officer of the court." Hellom sat down, his speech bringing him close to tears.

For a long moment the court was silent in reverence to his suffering. Macau unwisely broke the silence. "This is all hearsay, where is the proof?"

Zeeglevarg was displeased. "You will sit down, Captain! Your constant interruptions are becoming annoying. This may be how your system works but not here. Your crewman is guilty; our people have the right to hear the facts behind this evil act. An act that has confirmed what Captain Colby and her crew have told us from the beginning. Your people are dangerous and not compatible with our way of life. This Tribunal endorses the previous petition to this court that we have no association with Earth at this time. You will be sent back with a clear message of stay away. As for the fate of your crewman I need to consult with your planet's representative." He turned to me, and I approached the Tribunal, after a brief consultation Zee continued.

"Our people are unaccustomed to how to administer punishment, execution goes against our principles; imprisonment is impracticable as we have no prisons. So, we are exiling the entire crew of the Earth ship and that of the inhabitants of your planet. Any attempt to return will be met with force. Finally, your ship will be escorted back to Earth and the warning issued publicly so that your leaders cannot cover up the facts from your public. Maybe then your people may seek better leaders who may wish to talk to us as neighbours. This tribunal is ended." Zeeglevarg rose with the other Elders and they left. Macau's crew were left stunned.

The young blonde woman turned angrily on Sanchez. "So you got away with it. When we get back, I'm having you charged with sexual harassment and I'll tell the story of what happened here and how you stuffed up any chance of diplomacy with these people."

He just stared at her with a smug look; she responded by kicking him firmly in the balls and walking off.

That evening, Captain Macau's crew gathered together in the hanger housing the ship that had brought us here from Phobos. They did not appear happy and when I approached, Macau angrily walked towards me. "What happened to our ship?"

"It has been stowed away on our ship. We can travel faster that way."

"So you're going to accompany us for the next nine months for the return voyage?"

I smiled at him. "On our ship it will take only a few hours. Best get some rest; we leave early in the morning. You and your crew will remain here under guard. And if you think of escaping there is a solid energy dome surrounding you with guards waiting, should you manage it. They are all relatives of the girl your crewman raped, so don't expect any kindnesses." I turned and left them testing the invisible dome surrounding them.

Next morning the base opened its doors and the ship lurched into the sky and was gone within seconds. The village people returned to their daily tasks – problem solved.

Two hours later, we approached Earth's moon and made contact with Sentinel. "Sentinel, remain on alert while we make contact. A few moments later we were in orbit around the third planet and opening communications. "This is Captain Virginia Corby of Mars Mission 1 to NASA Mission Control. Acknowledge."

A long silence prevailed while we waited patiently for the response. "General Baker here; I'm surprised to hear from after all this time, Virginia."

"General now, congratulations," I replied as I switched a knob broadcasting the conversation to the Macau's crew and activating a view screen. The General maintained the same crusty features added to by growing bald patches. Macau's crew snapped to attention as they recognised the voice. "I was passing and thought I'd give your crew a lift home."

"You have Macau and his crew?"

"I do indeed, and I bring them back to reiterate our warning. Stay clear of the Mars! You are not welcome... as previously advised; any attempt to return will be considered a hostile invasion of our sovereign territory."

"I'm afraid the governments of Earth are a little tired of being told by you just where we can go with your mythical race of Martians. Our long-range scans find no sign of life on or within that planet! We will go where we wish!" replied the General

"I suggest you talk to your crew who have met these mythical Martians. I would also remind the General we have a Sentinel on Phobos that can attack you on orders from us as previously demonstrated. You have been warned."

"And so have you!" replied the General confidently.

It was just then that Simitar sounded an alarm. "We have a..." The sudden and violent rocking of the ship stopped his warning. "...missile..."

Before I could stop it a lightning-fast beam shot from Mars and within seconds struck the base from which the missile was launched, leaving a crater where a military base had once stood. "Damage! Simitar!" I demanded as the ship remained off balance.

"Stabilisers are down! The ship is heading for a rough landing!"

"Take her down, everyone brace for impact!" As I gave the order everyone strapped in as the ship dropped like a stone towards the ground. We watched as the ground came up at us like an oncoming fast train on a collision course. Tensely we waited to hit wondering if we'd survive the impact. Then, at the last moment the ship levelled off and glided in for a soft landing. "How did you manage that?" I asked breathlessly.

"Last minute repairs, Captain," announced Simitar proudly. "Get Baker back online."

Within minutes a red faced General was on the line. "You attacked and destroyed our base! That is a criminal offence. It's treason!"

“I don’t what scenario you think you witnessed but you attacked us which is an act of war against the Atlan people. I think you fail to realise you are dealing with a foreign interstellar government, not a renegade ship and we represent that government. Now we are releasing Macau and his crew! Once we are ready to leave, we will do so in peace. I advise you to take this warning seriously.” I cut the link. “You think he’ll listen?”

George shook his head. “Not a chance! That kind don’t like taking orders, they only like giving them.” I had to agree.

“Simitar! You recorded that entire encounter?” Simitar responded in the positive. “Then Broadcast the entire incident to every network on the planet. Interrupt existing transmissions to do it. Let’s make the public aware so they can’t hide the truth from the people.”

I arrived in the hanger where Macau’s ship was located. They had been released and now waited to enter their ship. “Captain! You are free to go. Tell them what you saw! Tell them to stay away! They have a whole galaxy to explore and corrupt. Just stay out of our playground.”

“I can’t guarantee they’ll listen, but we’ll tell the story,” replied Macau.

Sanchez stepped over into my personal space. “I hope they wipe you out!”

“You didn’t learn much did you. Maybe a court martial will wake you up. What do you say Captain?” I asked.

Macau glared at Sanchez. “Don’t tempt me.” He grabbed Sanchez and pulled him away as the others entered their ship. Shortly, they were inside powering up, the outer doors opened ready for them to depart. We all stepped back as the ship lifted off and gently drifted out of the hanger and climbed into the sky. As it did, a number of fighter jets arrived in the area.

Captain Macau caught them on his radar shortly before the message came through. “Captain! Get your ship out of the way we are initiating an air to ground strike!”

Macau hesitated. “No you’re not!” he replied and turned to his pilot. “Hover our ship over theirs and block any line of fire.”

“Sir! We have orders to open fire, whether you are on board or not. This ship is a threat to national security!”

“Whoever you are, it is your actions that threaten national security! Now stand down. It is your lives at risk if you open fire!”

On board our ship, we were listening to the conversation. “Simitar! If they fire - Sentinel will fire, am I right?”

“That is correct,” replied Simitar.

“Have him fire at those planes now but only to damage not destroy. Can he do that?”

Simitar reported that he could and moments later all five planes had flaming black smoke trails. “UFO strike command to base. We have been hit, unable to complete mission. Attempting to return to base!”

General Baker returned on screen. “You opened fire on US Aircraft...”

“...who were about to attack us. You do not listen, General, so I must advise you that all communications are being broadcast across the world. It is the people who will decide who is doing the provoking. And I’m about to announce to the world what you did to Mars Mission 1” I cut the link.

Meanwhile, Macau landed at a nearby Air Force Base and went straight to the Base Commander, a rather overfed officer who had not flown a plane in over a decade and was now officially a desk bound bureaucrat. “Get me the President on the line!” demanded Macau.

“What do you think this is... a telephone exchange? We don’t have that access and even if we did I would not authorise you to use it!”

“Every base has a direct line to the Pentagon and through them to the White House. You will activate that line as a national emergency, or I’ll break your face. Is that clear?”

“I’ll have you on charges!”

“You can court martial me after I prevent a war. Now get me that line!”

The President of the United States was listening to the broadcasts when the call came through. “Can’t anyone shut that down?” The response around the room was one of helplessness. “What do you recommend?”

“A full-scale attack on the ship! We can’t allow our forces to stand down! It would show weakness against these terrorist astronauts,” remarked the Secretary of Defence a red-faced balding man in his sixties who’d been in the position for only six months who was decked out in campaign bars on his chest and stars on his shoulders.

“Sir, I have Captain Macau on the line.” The President looked confused, his female secretary was usually more informative and knew better than to interrupt a meeting of this nature. “The Captain of the Mars mission; he says it’s urgent!”

“Put him through, maybe he can shed some light on this.” The President listened while his advisors waited. “Thank you, Captain. I’ll take that under advisement.”

“What did he say,” asked the Secretary of Defence once the President had hung up.

“He said that he’s met these Martian people and they just want to be left in peace. They are pacifists by nature but prepared to take deadly action if pushed. Their technology is also quite superior to ours.”

“Strike now while they’re on the ground,” pressed the Secretary.

“And risk an interstellar war? I think not. General, get your people to put this Captain Colby through directly to me. Now everyone get out!”

“Mr President! I think you’re making a big mistake.”

“Noted General, I’ll get back to you all.” They all left knowing better than to argue. They saw his expression of determination as they filed out. He was past listening to them. Now, he would listen to these renegades before making his final decision.

The President looked determined and angry when he appeared on screen in the traditional view of him seated at his desk in the oval office. However, this was an exclusive interview, which would be broadcast by us if it didn’t turn out well. I remained standing in the ship’s Control Room equally determined. The President opened the meeting. “If you surrender yourself and your crew we will discuss your terms. We do not negotiate under threat.”

“Not going to happen, Mr President. Firstly, we have no terms and offer no threat. We simply ask that you acknowledged the sovereignty of the Mars colony and its rights to Mars and its moons. Then we will be off.”

“You have attacked this country. As officers in our armed services that makes you traitors and we cannot acknowledge the existence of a self-made colony by you and your crew, despite your fire power.”

“Sir, you’re not listening. We encountered an ancient race of humans predating our civilisation. They established a base on Mars long before us and your governments attempts to silence us resulted in the deaths of Mission 2 crew. Your own mission Captain has confirmed these people exist. Now you attack us when we ask to be left alone. I’m advising you, Mr President... listen to our request because you don’t want to go to war with them.”

“This great country will not submit to threats. You leave me no choice.” The President cut the connection.

I turned to my crew who were staring in disbelief at the blank screen. “Arrogant prick!” I remarked. “So, what do we do now?”

It was Simitar that answered. "They have launched a number of missiles at us."

"OK, that's it. Instruct Sentinel to target every missile base on mainland United States and destroy it! Let's show them just what they are facing!"

"Won't that leave them defenceless?" asked George worried about the consequences of what they were doing, including potentially opening up the US to other nuclear powers to take advantage.

"That will force them to make friends. Besides how many ICBMs have they fired in anger in the last thirty years? Simitar! Broadcast that last exchange to the world." Simitar did not respond. "Are we able to lift off yet?" I added as an after thought thinking we were a sitting duck if a missile got through.

"Repairs would enable lift off but we would need to stop off at Sentinel base to finalise," recommended the computer. I agreed and shortly the ship climbed into the sky.

Around America, white hot energy beams struck the missile silos and other bases where the missile signature was identified by Sentinel's scanners. It didn't take long for the President to hear the news.

His advisers and the heads of all defence arms bounded into the Presidents office. "They have destroyed every missile in the country! They have also broadcast your negotiation to the world. They are making us look like the aggressors! The American people are outraged," announced the Secretary of Defence. The uniformed Chiefs of Staff remained silent allowing the politicians to panic on their own.

"What do you suggest we do?" asked the President, still seated and scanning the faces assembled in his office. No one responded. "What about you General Patterson?" The President asked turning to the senior most experienced officer in the room.

Patterson didn't move, standing his ground with the other Chiefs of the Armed Forces. "We cannot take a war to Mars, but they can bring a war to us. They seek to be left alone I think your best course is to do just that."

"You're not serious!" exploded the President, supposedly the most powerful man on the planet suddenly rendered totally impotent.

The General didn't elaborate. "That is my recommendation."

The President looked around at his advisers and saw everyone agreed with the advice. "Inform those traitorous dogs we recognise their sovereignty on condition they recognise ours and do not return." The President sounded defeated then became angry as the faces in the room waited for their leader to dismiss them. "Go on, get out of here, all of you!" he shouted, and they left. Once alone, he swept his desk clear of everything in an angry fit, his papers, phone, and laptop flying across the room to crash to the floor.

Having received news of their submission we made our way back to the Phobos base for repairs, instructed Sentinel to remain alert and notify us of scientific developments and of any ships headed our way. We knew once the Earth developed the technology they'd come looking. They'd never be satisfied with the rest of the Universe, the unattainable had to be attained and suppressed at any cost.

I returned to the Mars colony deciding to call it my new home. It was strange to think that home was no longer Earth, that I was now the Ambassador of an ancient civilisation that had its base among the stars on a previously unknown planet.

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