

1. Midnight on Mars

Even when the great dust storms blew, Mars never spoke above a whisper. The tenuous air would move at speeds inconceivable in Earth's dense, moist atmosphere, but here, it was so thin that the small sound it made was above the range of human hearing. Only the other dust, colliding with the silent features of Mars, made a slight hiss. It could strip the meat from a human in minutes, but in the ancient stillness could only sigh in futility.

When the air was still, as it was this equinoctial night, Mars was silent as death, silent as space. Nothing moved save the stars, the Milky Way sliding along the sky, changeless in human memory.

In the still clear air and utter darkness of the Martian night, a sharp-eyed observer might have noticed a new, very dim star to the south of the ecliptic. It was at the very edge of human perception, and even a trained astronomer, looking at that unremarkable patch of sky, might have failed to notice the object.

It wouldn't have been visible to the naked eye through Earth's thick, misty air, even if the Sun were not between Earth and the object, with the corona glare blocking any chance of sighting it.

That was by design. The object wasn't anxious to be noticed by Earth just yet.

Over the previous few days it had performed some remarkable maneuvers that would have provoked blaring headlines and endless, fevered speculation on Earth had there been anyone to notice. Moving toward the Solar System at over 99% of the speed of light, it had come to a halt within an hour, some twelve light hours out, well beyond the Kuiper Belt. It hung in the lonely sky, invisible and silent, for three and a half days. Our hypothetical observer might have thought it was considering, reaching a decision, and he would be right.

It then emitted signals that Earth instruments could easily detect, but Earth did not respond. The object grew suspicious.

When it resumed movement, it struck out a different course, and at a much more modest rate of speed, one that would intersect the orbit of Mars. Its trajectory led precisely to where Mars would be in five days.

It would not collide. It was big enough, and fast enough, that it would significantly damage the planet. It would slow, and go into a forced synchronous orbit, less than 50 km above the surface.

Having heard nothing from Earth, it wanted to see if it might hear voices in the silent Martian night.

Neither the object nor anyone in the Solar System noticed the much smaller object that zoomed in at nearly the speed of light, came to a sudden halt a mere two hundred kilometers above the Earth's south pole, and then dropped leisurely to the surface of the largest of the Antarctic Islands, Peary.

2. Homecoming

Daniel Vargas had wondered, from time to time, why the bridge of the RESS *Phoenix* was situated at the nose of the craft, flush against the hull. On the military ships he had flown in the war with China, the cockpit was along the vertical axis of the ship and about halfway back, as close to the center of the ship as possible. It didn't ensure survival if you lost an orbital battle. It merely changed the odds of surviving from one in a million to one in a hundred thousand. It also reduced exposure to cosmic rays for the staff, something that wasn't a significant problem on *Phoenix*.

Having the bridge against the hull seemed pointless. It permitted a window, but it was nearly 150 centimeters from the inner glass to the outer glass, and the limited view was sharply inferior to what was available on the large screens that ran around the rest of the bridge deck. The screens could zoom, pan, shift frequency reception, and replay. All the window showed was a small field of pinpoint white stars that never moved unless *Phoenix* was turning on her axis.

Ian Spencer, the ship psychiatrist, could have told Captain Vargas that in the emotional depths of humans, cameras couldn't replace "naked eye" views. It was part of why people would pay a week's wages to watch indecipherable specks on a grass field kicking a nearly invisible ball rather than stay at home and enjoy closeups of the football players that allowed you to notice if the player had shaved that morning, and if the razor was still sharp. It was why legal systems gave preference to "eyewitnesses" over a wide range of other forms of forensic evidence—all far more reliable. The small, ovoid window, easy to miss among all the giant screens, had bare-eyeball juju..

Normally the crew kept a tank of water in front of the pointless window to reduce exposure to cosmic rays. Now, the tank was removed.

As *Phoenix* came to a relative full halt and came about to face into the solar system, all eyes on the bridge were on the window. Hanging in the middle of the window was a bright star, one that nobody on board ever expected to see again other than as an anonymous point of light; Earth's sun, Sol. A camera wouldn't be enough. People wanted to look directly at it, and feel the home magic, even if it was still so distant it couldn't cast a shadow. It was safe to look at. Even if it was a bit misty because of tears.

Vargas was quite content to sit on the outermost fringes of the Solar System, several dozen AUs beyond the orbit of Neptune, and listen for signals coming from Earth. If it was possible for a space craft nearly two kilometers long and weighing over 40 million tons to sneak, then *Phoenix* sneaked into the solar system.

A century ago, under his command, the *Phoenix* had fired her main engine in the vast Dry Dock facility in order to avoid a nuclear missile aimed at her, destroying the multi-trillion dollar facility, pride of his nation and symbol of humanity's engineering prowess. In the process, two thousand people died.

Vargas feared the world might think of him as a war criminal. He also reasoned he would like to know who threw nukes at him, and if they were still interested in throwing nukes at him.

He also wanted to be sure that his ship wouldn't be slagged by whatever new weaponry humanity had devised in the past century, or that he would be executed as a traitor and mass murderer. For the rest of his crew, those not in hibernation, execution was less likely, but they shared the captain's sense of caution.

So they sat out by the Oort cloud and listened, trying to determine what sort of mood humanity was in. As they did so, the astrophysicist sat at his console, noting the positions of the planets and determining the date. When one flies for much of a century at speeds varying from .95C on up, it's easy to lose track.

There was a problem; if Earth was talking, they couldn't hear it. Scans of the entire electro-magnetic spectrum returned only the ordinary background noise of the universe going about its business. Earth wasn't even emitting the characteristic static of a civilization that used electricity and magnetism in its day-to-day affairs. People on Earth might be talking to one another, but they weren't broadcasting. The only signals they got to show life had ever existed were intermittent and distorted signals from the thousands of satellites that still orbited the planet. Humanity might be gone, but the Weather Service lived on. Seoul might be an empty ruin, but it was sunny and 21 degrees there on Tuesday.

Vargas waited for a day and a half for the ship's transponder signals to reach Earth, and two days after that for any auto-response Earth scientists may have set up to ping back. Vargas didn't really expect an electronic candle in the window; when the ship left a century earlier, nobody expected to see it again. The idea was to find a habitable planet, and establish a permanent settlement. If the first star system, nu Phoenicis, proved unsuitable for habitation, the voyagers had a list of other star systems they could explore.

Nu Phoenicis had turned out not to be suitable. There were three planets that had water and two had atmospheric oxygen. One was an ice ball, another was contaminated by a mysterious dusting of a radioactive substance, and the third...the third was somebody's construction project, and the builders let it be known that visitors could stay only at their own, fairly immediate risk.

However, the exploration had been worth the trip. They had found a tree that, while slow-growing, made for immensely strong construction material. They found a plant that could chelate toxins, and whose root structures made a rope or cloth that was virtually indestructible.

And the third item, the one that made it unthinkable not to return to earth and share with humanity, was the inertia box.

The two days passed, and then two more. On the bridge, crew listened intently for anything coming from Earth; even old AM radio transmissions. Static, or machine memories. High orbit satellites, over a century old, sputtered impotently, apparent victims of electronic dementia. More days passed. They

learned the date: Saturday, October 4th, 2414. There was a cat on board that had been born in 2306. She was pretty spry, considering.

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Ian Mann couldn't sleep. The Midshipman had put in six hours scanning the electromagnetic spectrum in a futile search for a sign that anyone on Earth was using forms of communication using a satellite that didn't exist 105 years earlier. The satellites had been designed to last a long time, and few would need replacing. But in the course of a century, there had to be new ones with their own carrier signals. That there weren't was disquieting. As he floated in his cabin, Ian found himself envisioning an Earth blasted to bare rock by nuclear weapons, or a green and fecund planet without humans, now extinct from a new plague or an old military grudge.

It gnawed at him. The idea that *Phoenix* might be all that was left of civilization left him feeling scared and lonely, especially since *Phoenix*, with most of its complement in hibernation, was a vast and echoing silence much of the time. Humanity had never seemed so rare and fragile.

His equanimity was further eroded by a discussion he had with a crewman, Ted Simmons, who doubled as the leading physicist on the ship. During the weeks that the ship was crossing the 26 light years from nu Phoenicis, Mann had happened to ask just how close to c the ship was moving at.

"We're going at 99.99998% of the speed of light," Simmons replied. Mann had been fascinated to see the man's knuckle joints twitching as he spoke. Ever the fastidious one, Simmons had been counting off the 'nines' as he spoke.

Mann considered this for a moment. "So what is our relativistic factor?"

"For each day on the ship, 790 days pass on Earth. A bit over 790 and a half days, actually."

Despite himself, Mann smiled at Simmons' obsessive love of detail. The number of 'nines' could make a big difference. The fact that they gained an extra half day on Earth wasn't particularly important. "So we're foreshortened to 1/790th of our length, and weigh 790 times as much."

"We mass 790.56 times as much. Or at least would, if it weren't for that damn box."

The Inertia Box. "Our mass hasn't increased?"

Simmons heaved an angry shrug. "I can't tell. What am I supposed to measure it with?"

"Point. No signs of increased gravitational attraction on objects on board?"

"None. And the ship isn't built for those type of stresses. We should have imploded."

"Imploded? Really?" Mann stared, unbelieving.

"This ship can't turn on its own axis at more than one degree every twenty minutes," Simmons snapped. "Do you think it could handle the lateral stresses from an increase of nearly 800-fold in

mass? Without the box, I started seeing gravitational anomalies – measurable anomalies – at .93c.” He shook his head, disgusted. “We should be dead right now.”

“This seems risky.”

“It is risky. And you didn't hear that from me.” He gave an uncharacteristic bitter smirk. “These days the Captain doesn't want to hear about risk.”

Now, the conversation haunted Mann.

Finally, with a resigned grunt, he unstrapped himself and floated to his desk. If he couldn't sleep, he might as well get something constructive done. There was a vast wealth of raw data from Hoyl to be categorized and assembled into some sort of logical order. A planet belonging to a remote and technologically superior race, it was something Terrans needed to know as much about as possible.

Ian pulled his head back and grinned at his screen. Had he really just used the old science-fiction term “Terrans”? The one used to delineate intelligent life from Earth from intelligent life...?

He had. Appropriately. They had learned little about the entities who were the true owners of Hoyl, but they now knew they existed, and that would change their perceptions of the universe forever. The “Spiders” weren't hostile, and might even be considered helpful, but a terrible gulf in communication made it impossible to ascertain their motives, or even if they had motives. Dealing with them was far too heavy a responsibility for *Phoenix* alone.

“Please, someone, be home” Ian breathed a prayer to the Earth. This was too big for their small band of explorers.

He scrolled down his list of projects. Vegetation diaspora. One pet project was to identify trees and other plants by their unique colors and use that to determine what grew where on the largely-unexplored Hoyl. It seemed like a nice, soporific project.

A globe of Hoyl sprang up, with the prime meridian, where the settlement had been, facing him. It was seen from about 60 degrees north, where the main arctic circle was. No vegetation was green...Ian shook his head and resolved to change the coloring order. Green for no vegetation was absurd.

A red light blinked in the corner of his display, a polite advisory to let him know a line officer was looking in on his display. Ian blinked in return, and tapped the red light, wondering what officer was on the bridge at this hour of the ship's night. To his surprise, the Captain's insignia appeared next to the light.

Vargas' voice came over his console. “My apologies, Mister Mann. I didn't mean to disturb you. I saw the activity and I was merely curious.”

Mann couldn't help but smile at the courtesy. Both he and Vargas had served in the Americaner military, where officers were entitled to spy on their men at any time and for any reason, without notice. “I was just doing a little work on the Hoyl data, Captain. I couldn't sleep.” Mann remembered

the prime directive for all middies “What can I do for you, Ser?”

“Well, Ian, if you're amenable, I would invite you up to the bridge for a drink.”

Another statement that would have been unthinkable in the Americaner forces. But Phoenix wasn't a military ship, and the experiences at nu Phoenicis had bonded the small group of explorers. “It would be my pleasure, Captain,” Mann said with genuine feeling. “Grant me two minutes to freshen up.” Now, Ian thought, glancing around, where is my clean tunic? He glanced in the old style mirror. He was white, freckled, with slight stubble on his scalp and cheeks. Presentable enough under the circumstances. Normally, Ian had jet-black hair, but he hated the contrast between it and his pasty “Hoyl tan” acquired by assiduously avoiding the dangerous rays of the F8 star, Tsar-Ptitsa. He was bald from the neck up.

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The bridge, ivory and maroon, was designed to be the heart and soul of *Phoenix*, the command center. It was, after all, The Bridge. Would this not be the place where the captain gave terse orders to attentive officers who with a few quick keystrokes converted the Captain's wishes to reality? Was it not the place for the leaders and luminaries to gather, to wisely course the future of humanity? The curvilinear sweeps off the bridge consoles and the arching screens, along with the flying buttresses along the sides, suggested as such.

In the end, the bridge was one of the least used areas of *Phoenix*. Many of the stations at the bridge were replicated throughout the ship, and even during ships' 'day,' it was rare for more than one or two officers to be at bridge posts. Barring tense situations, its role was more that of library than command post. At 'night' it was usually deserted.

So Ian was unsurprised to find the bridge dimly illuminated, most of the great screens dark, and nobody on the bridge save the Captain in his God Console chair, and a cat, curled up in a ball, sleeping in microgravity with an utter lack of concern about half way between the 'floor' and arching 'ceiling' The cats never seemed to get stranded in mid volume as even the most experienced crew members sometimes were. They adjusted to the lack of gravity almost instantly. The diapers they had to wear, however...

Vargas waved a languid hand at the #2 chair. “Have a seat, Mister Mann.”

Mann belted in. The seat was comfortable, but then, in zero gravity it could be made of granite and still be comfortable. Vargas gave him an inquiring look. “Brandy?”

“I wouldn't say no, Captain.” Vargas reached into a pouch at his side and pushed a bulb toward Mann. Vargas opened his own bulb. “Salut.”

“Salut.”

Vargas took a contemplative sip, gave the midshipman a grin. “I was just thinking about Thislondon.”

“The English city?”

“The very one. You've been there, right?”

“Just before we left. I didn't get to see much of it.”

“Ah. A pity. It's an amazing place.” The crew had met King Edward in a formal ceremony three days before they boarded the ship. They had been in isolation to prevent catching any diseases, which Red had compared to touring the world in a hamster cage. “You know the city was only about 250 years old when we left, right? Despite all the old buildings?”

“The old London drowned. They moved thousands of landmarks to higher ground.”

“Late twenty first century. Bad enough the oceans were rising, but the island of Great Britain was tipping southeastward into the sea. Between the two, Thatlondon is under about 50 meters of sea water. I'm sure you've seen the pictures.” Thatlondon landmarks such as the Gherkin and the Shard still poked out of the ocean—or at least still did 105 years earlier.

Vargas took a sip. “The rising water did for everything near the Thames. You go north a small way, and most of the old city is still there. But the historic part, what they call 'The City' had to be moved. So they dismantled all those old buildings and moved them about eight kilometers north to higher ground.”

“The madness of being English.”

Vargas involuntarily glanced around even as he chortled. About a eighth of the crew were from Great Britain. “They spent billions on that. Now, understand, they didn't exactly move all the buildings: mostly they took the facing and put them on new titanium skeletons and all the latest amenities. So Buckingham Palace and the Tower look pretty much like they always did, but it's superficial. Go scuba diving in Thatlondon and you'll find immense piles of ancient rubble where they once stood.”

Vargas' eyes strayed to the limning of the God Console in front of the Captain's Seat. He had been stunned to learn that it was an extravagance that cost nearly as much as the Console itself. The “wood” which he had imagined to be composite, was actually pure mahogany. He had been horrified when he learned it, since there were perhaps two dozen mature mahogany trees left in the world. Even worse was the provenance: the murderous Wasir regime of India. The deep tones reminded him of the blood of sacrificed children, an emblem of that troubled land. That it was India's only contribution to the vast world-wide project that created *Phoenix* was of little solstice.

“There was one exception. Saint Paul's Cathedral. The city elders decreed that it must be kept intact, right down to the hectares of land around it, and moved, stone by stone, with nothing to be replaced and nothing to be updated. So that's what they did. They removed it, brick by brick, stone by stone, tile by tile, pew by pew, grave by grave.” Vargas shook his head wonderingly. “It took them fifteen years to dismantle it in an organized manner, and by then they were in a frantic race against the high

tide mark.”

“What made Saint Paul's so special to them?”

“Well, part of it is a superstition that as long as the Dome was there, London would be safe. Mind you, they used to think that England's future could be secured by a flock of ravens, and the birds are long gone. And if London was safe, there was no need to move the cathedral. I guess you have to be English to understand it. Anyhow, they took another eighty years to reassemble the church. The mayor of Thislondon nearly got lynched when he joked that there were 'only three pieces left over' and the Queen—it was a queen then, Elizabeth III—declared a Jubilee, which is a protracted national holiday. All for a church that was part of a religion that included only one in twenty English.” Vargas closed one eye and peered through the clear pouch of his brandy at the wood surface of the God Console, a gesture that left Mann wondering how many the Captain had already consumed.

Vargas gave Mann an amused glance. “This story does have a point.”

Mann nodded politely. Story telling, pointless or otherwise, was a captain's prerogative.

“I went to Thislondon about a year before Departure. I spent a fortnight—um, two weeks—there, mostly as a diplomatic mission. To be perfectly honest, I was there to reassure people that an Americaner could be trusted with this mission.

“They gave me the Grand Tour, of course. Buckingham, the Tower, the Tower Bridge, the Churchill Tower, all that. It's an amazing place, truly the world capital. For a kid from Torr eon in the southern deserts, it was a stunning, exhilarating thing.

“Last on the list was St. Paul's. I had seen it as we traveled around the City, and to tell you the truth, I thought it looked kind of pathetic. It was just south of the Churchill Tower, and the Tower is fifteen times as tall. So the cathedral looked small and dingy and past its time. It's...”Vargas tapped his screen, “...the thirty eighth tallest building in Thislondon. Not very impressive.

“It gets bigger and looms as you approach, much like the US Capitol Building does. It looks ordinary, it looks ordinary, and then suddenly you realize it actually pretty big. Saint Paul's may look squat, but it's actually a hundred meters tall.

“When you go in, it's like Doctor Who's TARDIS. It's bigger inside than it is out. It's vast and open and filled with incredible grandeur. The statues are like gods, and the buttresses arch into heaven. You feel like if you were impertinent enough to shout, it would take a half an hour for your voice to echo back—and it would say what you wish you had said, rather than what you actually said.” Vargas took his bulb, crumpled it, and put in in the recycle for the Charlies to take care of later. “I think that's when I finally understood why the English felt this had to be restored exactly, piece for piece, with no modern substitutions.”

“I've seen pictures. It looks beautiful.”

“Pictures don't catch the scale. It's what the English call gobsmacking; you can only stare in awe. Do you remember when you first arrived at Gabon?”

Perhaps it was only the lateness of the hour, but Mann was unprepared for the swerve in the conversation. “Eh? Ser?”

“Gabon,” the Captain repeated with an amused tone. “Do you remember what your first impressions were?”

The huge Royal Europe/African facility occupied a swath of land traversing one of the most dramatic biological synclines on Earth. To the west, the coast, and humid, warm, dense jungle—some of the few left on Earth. The western end of the base, 50 kilometers to the east, was in deep desert, where large solar powered fans were needed to prevent dunes from drifting and forming on the runways.

The personnel and operational center of the base was right on the synclinal area, so it wasn't unusual for mornings to be very damp and warm, often foggy, and by late afternoon searing desert heat, often near fifty degrees, was the norm. At night, raging thunderstorms. And no air conditioning. The place was an odd mix of the technologically advanced—the entire shuttle fleet operated from there, along with the giant heavy-lift rockets—and what could only be described as third world.

“My first impression? I have to say that at first glance, I thought it was a disaster. I landed at Gentil, and it took three hours to get to the base, over mostly unpaved roads.”

Vargas nodded, grinning. “Fortunately the road from Libreville is paved. When I heard that the Americaner crew were coming in at Gentil, I knew they would be pretty apprehensive when they finally got here. I'm afraid we're not popular in central Africa. Everyone else came in through first world ports.”

“The base was...disconcerting.”

“Indeed. You started training in the mock bridge the next morning, if I remember.”

“I missed the bus and had to walk the two kilometers. It was miserable. Muggy, already hot. By the time I got there I was pouring sweat, and wondering if the mock bridge had air conditioning or not.”

“And what did you think when you saw the mock bridge?”

Mann considered the question. The mock bridge was a smallish rectangle of dusty blue corrugated tin, looking for all the world like one of the shanties in Gentil. “Captain, in all honesty, I wondered if the whole interstellar mission thing wasn't just an elaborate practical joke.”

“Obviously you changed your mind. What changed your mind?”

“I walked into the mock bridge. And I found...this.” Mann waved a hand, encompassing the room they were in. The Bridge. His eyes traveled up the screens to the curving ceiling, the struts running parallel to the tall back of the bridge resembling flying buttresses. The ivory and maroon colors combined to

give it a rich roseate glow. His eyes widened.

“That's why you were talking about Saint Paul's,” he murmured. “This is like that. It's bigger on the inside.”

“The ceiling is only six meters high at the back bulkhead. But it looks much higher, doesn't it?” He waved an arm expansively across the front. “The curves in front create the impression that it's much wider than it is, too. It's really only twelve meters across.”

Vargas scanned the room with a glint of proprietary wonder. “I like it here, whether we're in the middle of an emergency and every station is crewed and we're all focused on solving the problem, or now, when it's dim and deserted and the biggest threat to my peace of mind is a sleeping cat.

“This is the biggest structure ever made by humanity, this ship of ours. But everywhere else, you have a sense of being inside, with no easy way out. Even the main mess. But this feels spacious.”

Mann nodded, understanding the Captain's point. He wasn't sure what to say in response. A nod, he hoped, was adequate.

Apparently it was. The captain leaned against his straps toward Mann. His striking green eyes speared Mann, and suddenly Mann realized the captain was not tipsy, and not maudlin.

“Mister Mann, like everyone aboard who is awake right now, I have to entertain the possibility that there are no humans left alive on Earth. Just the fifteen hundred of us on *Phoenix*.

“Of course, we've known that was a possibility from the day we left. King Edward called us 'humanity's last best hope' and he was right.

“This place...” he waved his hand at the Bridge, “reminds me that we may be all that is left of humankind. But we are bigger on the inside than out.”

“Yes Ser.” The thing is, Mann thought, he did get it. The possible loss of humanity made Phoenix seem a very small and fragile thing, but what was in the ship—the fifteen hundred—were the key to ensuring humanity would carry on. Bigger on the inside.

Later, as Phoenix drifted above Earth, Mann looked to see what engineer designed the bridge. The main man was someone named Chris Wren. Mann wondered if he had designed other things.

3. Life on Mars

Nobody planned on the *Phoenix* encountering a new technology that made returning to Earth about as demanding and time-consuming as a trans-Atlantic voyage was in 1900, or that the crew would feel duty-bound enough to want to share this technology with Earth.

Captain Vargas and the 15 members of the crew not presently in hibernation came prepared for any sort of reception, ranging from delirious joy to homicidal rage.

What they weren't prepared for was silence.

Phoenix was originally designed to hold four thousand people for hundreds of years. When it launched, it had a complement of just 1,508 people. Four were now dead, and eight more had elected to remain on Hoyle, the planet *Phoenix* had unsuccessfully tried to settle.

The sixteen who had spent the past two weeks, ship's time, guiding the *Phoenix* back to Earth crouched in the outer reaches of the Sol System, drifting about the *Phoenix* like wraiths in a mausoleum, growing more apprehensive and dispirited by the day.

That major war had broken out on Earth as they were leaving wasn't unexpected, and even though nuclear weapons were deployed, it was the fourth time in 300 years a war had involved nukes. The results were horrible, to be certain, but humanity as a whole had survived the previous wars.

Captain Vargas turned to Gordon Lassiter and said quietly, "Why don't we visit the station on Mars first? Perhaps there we can find clues as to what happened." Gordon only nodded, not trusting his voice to be steady.

Over several days, they drifted into the inner system, watching carefully for anything floating in the inner reaches that showed signs of intent, or being under power. The slow approach wasn't in the P&P manual; *Phoenix* originally would need over a year to decelerate from cruising speed, and so a long, gradual approach to an inner star system was unavoidable. Now that approach was governed, not by physics, but by caution.

Phoenix pulled into an unnaturally low orbit around Mars. The Inertia Box nullified all demands of orbital mechanics. They tried hailing the station. Silence. On-board cameras spotted the station, apparently intact. Vargas, upon viewing it, had grinned and shook his head and declared, "That's a relief. I was worried that we were at the wrong Mars." The laughter in response to this was thin, strained. A surprising number of the transponders on satellites orbiting Mars still worked. *Phoenix* could maintain contact with the station from anywhere in orbit.

Lassiter and Red Farnsworth flew down to the Amazonis station, Bradbury. Landing using conventional shuttle power, they hiked the half kilometer to the portal of the semi-buried station in which a crew of

8 to 12 men and women had put in shifts of one Hohlman orbital transverse to the next.

Red, a veteran of the first team at Bradbury, marveled at how little things had changed. The ice dome was gone, ablated away by the winds. Radiation would have killed off anyone living there, but the electronics were shielded. The landscape was bleak and barren and monotonous, of course, but the station appeared the same. It huddled in the Martian sands at the base of the crater, clearly a visitor to this world. Disturbingly, none of the expansions planned at the time *Phoenix* departed had been implemented. Certainly no Space Elevator towered behind the station, the dream of the Mars Project.

Red pushed the button on the panel that should have engaged the airlock. Nothing happened. He exchanged a silent glance with Lassiter, and walked around the side of the station, and climbed the gentle slope to the berm around the station. Clucking his tongue sadly at the state of the solar power cells, he retrieved a large cannister of compressed air and blew the dust from the black glass eyes of the solar collectors.

Hopping back down, he said to Lassiter, "This doesn't look good. I don't think anyone's home. Keeping those panels dust free was a weekly task. If the main power is down, that means there's nobody alive."

Lassiter didn't reply.

Red knew the station was derelict before they even landed. He looked around at the Martian landscape. To the north, the giant plain the base was officially named for extended away, a sob of brown. Behind him was the rubble-strewn rim of Nicholson Crater, once touted as the center of a future Martian economy. Billion year-old rocks lay implacable in the wan Martian sunshine. A century was plenty of time for new development, and Red had the uneasy feeling that humanity had hit a kind of high-water mark a century ago and never recovered.

Lassiter was peering at the control panel to the airlock. Dimly, lights were beginning to glow. "It's still getting power, Red. How long do you think it'll need to charge up enough to open the airlock?"

Red considered. Thinking back, he remembered that during dust storms, reserves dropped to 70% and needed a full clear day to come back. These looked like the same solar collectors he had worked with over a century before. "At least two days, I should think. Captain?"

"I'm here, Red," crackled a voice from above. "You might as well come home until then. Unless you want to sleep rough on the surface of Mars, of course."

Red looked around, at the rusty flatness and salmon colored sky, watched a tiny dust eddy sweep by. As far as he knew, Amazonis was the only station on Mars. Spending a night here clad only in a ship landing suit would turn him into Red, the Amazing Mancunian with the Glowing Balls. Last of his line. Died young, such a shame.

The shuttle was perfectly comfortable, but it just didn't have the amenities of *Phoenix*.

They clambered back into the shuttle for the short trip to the ship.

Lassiter gave Red a direct look. "Shut down your data pad."

Red did so, making sure it wasn't recording.

Lassiter glanced at the broadcast display, and gave a satisfied grunt. "Red, we're not having this conversation"

At Red's slightly confused nod, he continued, "Remember when those missiles were fired at us?"

Red shrugged. "I was in the Charlie room at the time, and had no idea what was going on until after it was over. But yeah, I remember it OK."

"The missiles came from the Americas. One of the north central states, we think."

"Yeah. The Captain said."

"Ian Mann is from that area. A place called Churchill, in Manitoba. Big Hudson's Bay port. He tells me there's a strong underground movement in the central part of the Americas by a group calling themselves "The Real Americans." They are descendants of sympathizers of the original United States of America, and never did much like the new Parliament in Washington, and blamed it for the decades the nation spent as an isolated backwater, even though the worst came before The Americas was formed by the Treaty of San Miguel de Allende." Red nodded, a bit impatiently. He had little patience for pedantry. Besides, they taught history in RE schools, he thought, a trifle resentfully.

Lassiter elected to ignore Red's pout. "They weren't real big in Ian's home area, since Manitoba had never been part of the United States. But when he upped, he got stationed in North Dakota, which did once belong to the US. Now, the two states are right next to one another, and so he could pass as a Dakotan without much trouble; he sounded like them, and he had the same interests and hobbies. So the locals assumed he was a home boy, and would thus share their politics."

"Are you saying Mann's a government informer?" Red was aghast. He worked closely with Mann, day in and day out. Red believed that sort of nationalist nonsense lay behind them.

"No! Ian's no Fibbie! But he went to college...hell, we all did. He is a xenobiologist, but they don't have that as a major at college, for obvious reasons. So he majored in cultural and physical anthropology instead. He wanted to be the go-to guy if *Phoenix* encountered intelligent alien life, and be on the front lines if *Phoenix* came across life that might be intelligent and needed analysis to tell.

"So he was trained when encountering other cultures or beliefs to keep his yap shut and observe. So he would sit in on the bull sessions and lose money in the poker games and listen as the American rebels vented about Washington, and how good it was back in the days of the Bush dynasty and President Reed."

"But..."

Lassiter held up a hand to forestall the objection.

“He studied history too, and he knew those guys were full of crap. The Americas was a major improvement over the United States in its dying days, and wouldn't have existed in the first place if the Vast Depression of the early 22nd century hadn't totally destroyed the western economy. Only by forming a league with Mexico and Canada could they even stave off invasion or even starvation. Then things got even worse during the Greenland Melt, as tsunamis created by massive abrupt glacial slides pummeled the entire east coast of North America. The Americas was a Supernation, but one that had to overcome deficits, man-made and natural. It was a bad time, these 'good old days'.

“So the people Mann was listening to were blustering, ignorant clowns, but he was trained to listen to them respectfully and to carefully choose questions that showed attentiveness, rather than nosiness. And be alert to any societal taboo pitfalls. At least, that's my take on it; Ian's a bit more modest and attributes the fact that he gained their trust due to the fact that they were moronic assholes.”

Red laughed. As a former yob, he knew the type. He ran an eye down the checklist for takeoff. Lassiter had been running down the list as he spoke, and it was a well-practiced routine for both men. At Red's nod, Lassiter fired the thrusters. The craft rose, turned ponderously, raising the nose to a point about 60 degrees above the horizon, and the main thrusters fired. They were headed for orbit.

The thin Martian atmosphere offered little in the way of take-off challenges, and after a couple of minutes, Lassiter leaned back. Red commed *Phoenix* to let them know they were on their way and an ETA, a transmission that was more of a courtesy than a necessity, since *Phoenix* would track their movements.

Lassiter continued, “Mann, despite, or maybe because he was lacking any political or patriotic motivations, learned a lot about these 'Americans'. What he had realized was that normally they were greeted with ridicule and contempt. Nobody in their right mind wanted to return to the twenty-first century. Just by listening and not talking, he was giving them a sense of validation and self worth, and they opened up to him. As I said, a bunch of dumb assholes.

“If Mann wasn't afraid that getting in the middle of a political pissing match might queer his chances to get on the *Phoenix*—a reasonable concern, I would say—then he might have talked about some of the stuff he heard with his superior officers. He was genuinely shocked at the sway and influence these clowns had in the military. It was history repeating itself, like the Dominionist uprising two centuries earlier. People in that part of the world were always so busy adoring their military they never stopped to consider that it was a very dangerous tool in the wrong hands.

“Mann considered them potentially dangerous, but more crackpot than a genuine threat. He may have underestimated them. But then he got the call from Trapp to come in for interviews for the interstellar project, and suddenly the Real Americans seemed a lot less important to him.”

“Did Ian try to warn Trapp or anyone else about these guys?”

“No, because he had no reason to think they were a threat of any kind to the project. Oh, he mentioned them to Vargas once he decided that Vargas wasn't one of them, but it was just a bull session, and they both just shook their heads over the nuttiness of the Dust Bowl. Neither had any reason to think the Real American rebels hated the project—they even gave Ian a celebratory going-away party—or that they would be anything more than a potential destabilizing force in Americas' politics.”

Red nodded, unsurprised. Vargas often had informal chats with the middies, a good way to keep a finger on the pulse of the crew. Red suspected the captain had genuine affection for both of them, as well.

“It wasn't until after we got to Hoyl that he even stopped to realize that they were the only people he could think of who could even have the ability to lob a nuke at us from the prairies. Aside from the Americas government itself, of course.”

“Of course. If they're anything like our rebels, then they aren't to be taken seriously. Ours would show up at the pubs, get pissed, shout curses about King Edward in Gaelic which nobody else understood, and then go out in the alleyways and throw up on the alley cats. They never were very impressive. Does Ian really think these Real American rebels might have been behind the attack?”

“He's not sold on the notion. From the time that he told them he had applied for the mission, he had their solid support. I guess some of them even helped him prepare for some of the tests. He can't square that with them planning to destroy the mission.”

“Maybe a different faction?”

Lassiter shrugged.

* * *

The two men watched the red barrens recede beneath them for a minute each looking out at the side windows away from one another. Then Red said, “How come he told you all this, anyway? I mean, I work with the guy every day, and he didn't say boo about it.”

“Part of it is that I'm a Kiwi, I think. Americaners like us.

“Then there's the matter of the first voyage to Hoyl.” Lassiter paused, watching Red's reaction. Red had been several hundred million kilometers away at the time, on Disappointment. But he had to know about how Lassiter fell apart as leader on that expedition and wound up abandoning the two doctors in a hostile and unknown environment. “Ian was on that expedition with me, and he knows that what happened...well, that it wasn't something I would do normally.”

People hadn't reckoned on the effect the eldritch light of Hō-ō would have on them, given the fragile state of their psyches. The day following that full Hō-ō night, Lassiter had a sort of a paranoiac episode, and at his orders, the team had abandoned the doctors on the surface. Mann had both been

pilot on the mission, and co-pilot on the two man rescue mission a couple of hours later. The doctors were safely rescued, and Lassiter was cashiered for his actions, a punishment that actually gave the man the opportunity to redeem himself and become, once again, a valuable member of the expedition, only now as a civilian.

"Afterward, once the settlement gave us off-ship roles, we became friends, partly because it was something we shared together, even as adversaries." Lassiter chuckled,

"So does Ian think these people fired on us or not?"

"He says there are other groups – including Dominionists."

Red stared at Lassiter, mouth agape. "Dominionists? Actual execute-the-infidels Dominionists? And he didn't report them?"

"He never met any directly, he says. The rebels he did know didn't like the Dominionists, refused to have anything to do with them."

"I don't blame them!" The crazed ultra-orthodox Christian cult had turned the United States into a Hitler-style nightmare, complete with such horrors as hanging women who spontaneously miscarried, executing children in public for disobedience to their parents, and death penalties for anyone who questioned holy writ with contradictory science. The regime had lasted for fifteen bloody years and killed three million people, and the old United States never did recover. History viewed them as part and parcel with other episodes of madness in history such as Cromwell's England, Hitler's Germany, Pol Pot's Cambodia and the murderous regimes in India and Brazil of the previous century. Dominionists were seen as extinct nightmares, like the Nazis. Gorden had been shocked at the thought that not only did Dominionists exist, but were in the land most hideously scarred by their cruelty in the past. It was a bit like learning that Vargas had Nazis or Orcs on the bridge of the *Phoenix*. It was easy to understand Red's vehemence.

Red stared at Lassiter accusingly. "The Captain doesn't know about this, does he? That's why the secrecy! Fucks' sake, man: why *hide* it? You should shout it from the God Console!"

"When we were on Hoyl, it was very much a back burner item. After all, none of us expected to see Earth again. Ian was going to mention it to the Captain eventually, just because he knew the Captain was mystified by it.

"But now he doesn't want to."

"Why on Earth—literally—not?"

"Heard any transmissions from Earth? No? Ian thinks it's still a moot point."

"Well why haven't you...oh, wait." Red felt irritated and slightly disgusted. *Once brass, always brass.* "You've already tried to get him to talk to Vargas, and he isn't having any of it. So you thought you would just lean on Ian's old drinking buddy Red and see if he could shake things loose, right?"

Lassiter squirmed, gave Red a beseeching look. "That's about it, yes." He suddenly grinned. "Red, did anyone ever tell you how smart you are?"

"Oh, fuck you. OK, I'll talk to him. But only because I really fucking hate Dominionists, OK?"

"OK. Let's hope they're just a moot point now." Lassiter glanced sun-ward, the direction of the silent Earth. Silently, he added, "and let's hope humanity isn't a moot point now."