

JETT SMITH

AND THE ALIEN GRAVE



Andy Orr

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By Andy Orr

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Through adversity to the stars

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Chapter 1

MARS

I was the first human born on Mars. Like most babies, I came into the world kicking and screaming with the terror of new life. But my birth was unique. It proved the dangers of colonizing the Red Planet wouldn't stop humans from producing young. We would continue making tiny carbon copies of ourselves. We would go on.

My name is Samuel Jett Smith. Everyone calls me *Jett* for short, a proper Martian name if you ask me. I'm one of a few thousand humans on the Red Planet. We live on Colony X, a settlement near the equator so named because its massive walls form the shape of a giant X.

The Colony Xers are all that's left of the human race, the lucky ones who escaped the Rupture of 2041, which destroyed old-Earth and everything on it—a total extinction event.

My mom and dad traveled to Mars only a year before the Rupture, in 2040, and I was born not long after their arrival. They were both brilliant scientists; mom, a geologist, and dad, an astrophysicist. To operate a Martian settlement like Colony X, you needed daredevil scientists capable of adapting to the rigors of frontier life. Mom and dad fit the bill perfectly.

When my parents reached Mars, mom had no idea she was pregnant with me. Not long after their giant tin can of a space barge touched down on the planet's surface, mom went on a spacewalk to study minerals in the regolith. She experienced a sudden fit of nausea and threw up in the helmet of her pressure suit. The mess splattered over the inside of her visor so that she couldn't see out. A pair of technicians had to suit up and escort her back into the hangar, where she could clean herself up. It was pretty disgusting.

Turns out she had morning sickness from being pregnant with me. That's when mom learned, to her great surprise, she was going to have a baby. That baby would be the first human born on Mars. That baby, of course, was me.

Dad loves telling the story. He laughs when recalling just how stunned mom was to learn she was pregnant with me. But his laughter always fades into a prolonged silence. His lips quiver and his clear blue eyes glaze over with a film of tears.

It's just dad and me now. Mom died due to complications giving birth to me. My coming out caused her insides to bleed and she passed not long after I was born. While she never got to hold me, mom lived just long enough after the delivery to tell my dad she wanted me called, "Samuel Jett," after her father. Those were her last words.

Dad tells me mom was absolutely brilliant—"a sterling thinker, a meticulous scientist, and a tireless dreamer," in his words—but the thing he is most proud of her for, is bringing me into this world, as hard, as empty, and as dangerous as it is.

"Partner, you're her greatest accomplishment," he says. I'd like to believe that. It's a nice thought

But *I* was responsible for mom's death, and the nagging feeling of guilt that goes along with that is something I've never quite been able to shake.

I reflect on it often and wish mom was still around. I think about the pain she went through to bring me to life and most of the time, thinking about her pain keeps me from complaining about things. And believe me, there are plenty of things to complain about on Mars.

The Red Planet's a dangerous place—obviously. Subzero temperatures, cosmic radiation, meteor showers, dust storms, and the vacuum of space threaten our day-to-day survival. With no breathable air and no liquid water outside, life can only exist inside the colony's cramped gray walls. When we go outside, it's only for a few hours at a time in the protection of a pressure suit.

Mars, in other words, will squash you out of existence the first chance it gets, a ruthless red desert millions and millions of kilometers from the far-away sun. If you want to make it here, you have to keep your head up and your eyes open, just like dad says, and never let your guard down.

But in spite of everything, Mars is still home—my home—the only planet I've ever known and loved. Dad taught me to respect the danger of this place but also to appreciate its beauty. I share an electron bond with the Red Planet and often sense an elemental oneness with it, like I'm made from the same red dirt that composes its flatlands, volcanoes, and craters. I guess that's how everyone feels about home, on whatever planet home happens to be.

Gravity is weaker here than it was on old-Earth. There's no atmosphere on the outside. Time is different, too; Martian days, months, and years are longer. But the same scientific laws that governed life on old-Earth govern life on Mars. Example: bodies in motion stay in motion until acted upon by an outside force. Take me.

My life as a Colony Xer followed a normal course until the night of my twelfth birthday. Turning twelve might not sound life altering but in my case, it was. It changed everything. That's when I started having the dream.

DREAM

“Jett, let’s go partner. Time to get up.”

The sound of dad’s voice wakes me. He’s calling to me from the other room of our living module. I crack my eyes a few millimeters and let them adjust to the gray light. I’d sleep until noon if I could, but there’s work to do.

I sit up in the top bunk and rub the crusts out of my eyes. The sun is just beginning to rise. Through a small rectangular window, I can see morning light falling over the red terrain outside.

I jump down from the bunk, groggy and yawning, and walk over to a small closet, where I pull out a black jumpsuit. It fits tightly over my body and is padded with metal sheets along the arms, legs, chest, and up the spine. The jumpsuit adds mass and imposes resistance. The extra weight and resistance makes my muscles work a little harder than they normally would under Martian gravity. My name is stitched across the jumpsuit’s fabric in small letters, across the heart. The stitching reads “Smith, Samuel J.”

By now, my mind is alert and awake. I mentally replay last night’s dream.

I was standing at the mouth of dark cave, somewhere on Mars. I walked in, cylinder beams of white light from my utility lights guiding the way. It was cold; my boots crunched in frost. I walked until the cave dead-ended in a blue wall of ice. The ice was clear—not filled with dirt and grime like the water ice we sometimes dig for—but transparent and beautiful. On the other side of the wall was a dark figure draped in shadows, shaped like a human but much taller, with gangly arms and legs. I backed away, and at that point, the dream ended.

I’ve had this dream every night for the last one hundred nights. It all started on my twelfth birthday. Turning twelve triggered the dream and I’ve had it ever since, one hundred nights—no, one hundred and one nights—in a row.

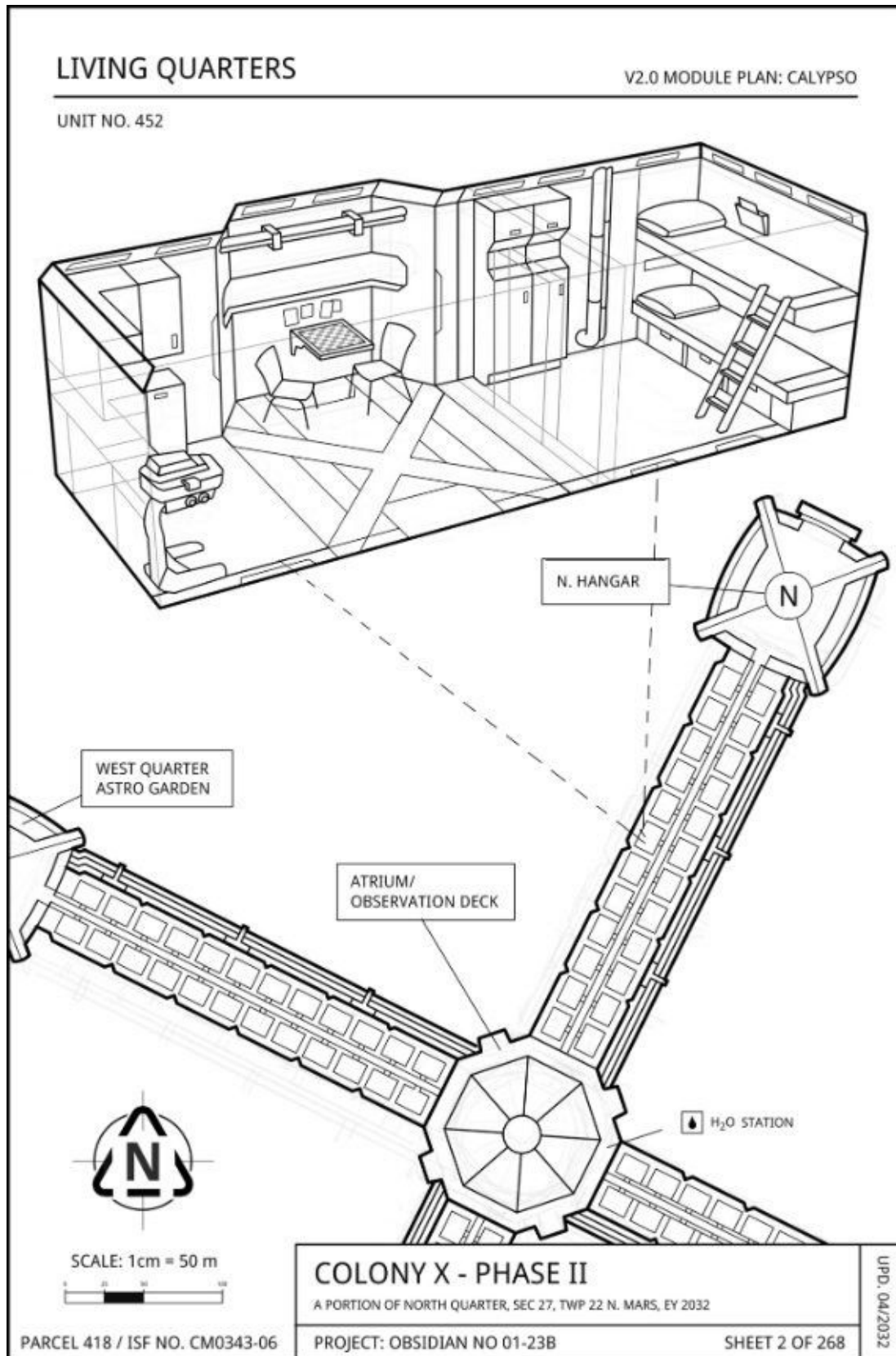
Why do I keep having the same dream? What does it mean? Is there something wrong with me? These are the questions I usually grapple with every morning.

For now, I put the dream out of my mind and walk into the main room of our living module. The walls of the module are dull and gray, but dad has pinned up an assortment of color photos to make the place feel like home.

There are shining blue satellite images of old-Earth before the Rupture; massive supply rockets blasting off in explosions of yellow and orange; even an old glossy photo of mom in a white space suit, flashing a big smile, her reddish blond hair blowing free.

Along one wall of the living module is a grid of windows. Sunlight pours in and fills everything with a red glow. Looking out, I can see the distant outline of a lunar tractor outside plowing a tract of regolith.

The module doesn't provide dad and me with much space, but we make do. Colony life, after all, means learning how to exist in tight places.



Dad's at the table eating a breakfast ration and reading his morning reports.

"Sleep well?" he asks, looking up as I walk into the room.

"Yeah," I say flatly. My lips are chapped and my mouth is dry. I could go for a water ration about now.

"Did you have it again?" dad inquires. He's talking about the dream. It's a "phenomenon" (his

word) that I've discussed with him before.

"Yep, the same dream," I say.

"With the cave, the wall of blue ice, and the shadowy figure inside?" he goes on.

"Yes."

"That's, what, nearly a hundred nights in a row?" He asks, adopting a scientific tone of voice. Dad isn't poking fun when he asks me this. He's genuinely interested.

"A hundred and one," I answer, frowning.

Dad detects the worry in my expression. "Jett," he says, "it's nothing to worry about. It's a dream—meaningless neural noise." By now, he's smiling. "You're a strong, healthy, twelve-year-old Martian with a good head on his shoulders. Relax and try to forget about it. Maybe that's precisely why you keep having the dream: because you obsess about it so much in your waking hours."

I shrug my shoulders. Maybe he's right. Dad nods and turns back to reading his reports. I walk over to the cupboard and pull out a standard issue breakfast ration: eggs packed in a small tin container. I break the seal, peel back the lid, and look at the yellow-gray substance inside. It's what I've had for breakfast for as long as I can remember.

It only takes me a minute or two to eat up the eggs. They don't have a lot of taste to them, and chewing on them feels like chewing on rubber. Just as I finish my rubbery eggs, Al wakes up and steps off his charging station.

"Good Morning, Jett," he says in a friendly automated voice. His eyes glow a bright red.

"Morning, Al," I answer, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Did you have a good re-charge?"

"My battery is fully charged," Al responds factually.

I turn to dad. "Do you think it's possible for a bot like Al to dream?"

"Why don't you ask him?" dad replies, not bothering to look up.

"What about it, Al. Do you dream?"

"No, Jett," Al answers in a neutral tone. "Dreams are a byproduct of the human brain as it organizes and consolidates information. They are a symptom of consciousness, and not something an artificial intelligence like me experiences."

While Al says this, the red lights of his eyes blink, almost as if he's secretly telling me that he does, in fact, dream but doesn't want dad to know about it.

You've probably guessed it already: Al isn't a person. He's a bot dad built for me. As dad puts it, Al is "a crude artificial intelligence." He interacts with people using pre-programmed responses called *algorithms*, which means he's not intelligent and self-aware like humans.

This doesn't mean Al isn't smart. He's actually the smartest person—I mean bot—I know because he has a ton of memory in his computer processor. He can store vast amounts of information and recite facts about pretty much everything.

Al was a present to me when I turned five. At the time dad gave him to me, the bot didn't yet have a name. Dad said I had to come up with one. I liked how shiny the bot's frame was, so I asked what it

was made of. Dad said, "He's fabricated from an element called Aluminum." So I started calling the bot *Al* and the name just stuck.

We spend so much time together that I forget about the algorithms and the fact that Al's not really truly alive. He's a bot, but he's also my best friend. I think he's as self-aware and alive as the next person on Mars, circuit boards, servomotors and all.

"It's time I got going," I say, lacing up my boots.

"Where are you off to today?" dad asks.

"On assignment to the north."

"Oh?"

"An orbital magnetic survey discovered what appears to be a new nickel-iron deposit. I'm going out to have a look. The hangar manager wants me to obtain samples, see if it's worth drilling. I was gonna bring Al along." I turn to Al and ask, "What do you say, Al? You want to come, don't you?"

"Yes, Jett. I would like to accompany you on your assignment today," Al says mechanically.

"We'd better get going, then," I say, heading for the door.

"Be careful," dad says, just as Al and I are about to leave. "Head up, eyes open..."

"...Never let my guard down," I shrug, completing his sentence. Dad says the same thing to me every morning. "Don't worry, I'll be careful."

The door swooshes closed behind me.

Chapter 3

OUT

Al and I navigate a maze of narrow corridors en route to the hangar, which is where the rovers, tractors, and heavy rigs are parked. It's also where scouts like me deploy for the out.

We zip down a flimsy staircase then hang a left. It's hard not to rub shoulders with other Colony Xers hurrying in the opposite direction. There aren't any hellos or good mornings as we pass each other. Instead, we shoot darting sidelong glances, as if to say, "Move aside, I've got a job to do."

Lines of white LED bulbs overhead light the way. You can hear the hum of ventilation generators in the background, pumping the corridor with purified air.

I stop at a water kiosk. There's a line of people, outfitted in black jumpsuits, waiting for their morning water ration. I get in line; Al waits patiently to the side. It's dry as a Martian desert inside my mouth. After a minute or so, my turn comes.

I step up to the kiosk and press my hand against a biometric scanner that analyzes my fingerprints. Once the scan is finished, a toneless mechanical voice says, "Good morning, Smith, Samuel J."

"It's Jett to you," I tell the kiosk, removing my hand from the screen, but the kiosk does not respond. It isn't wired for conversation.

A small plastic cup slides down a chute and the kiosk starts making a loud gurgling sound. It dispenses twelve ounces of water—the morning ration. Six water rations every day, no more, no less.

I finish the ration and drop the empty cup in a nearby recycle bin, where it will be chemically sanitized, then re-used.

Meanwhile, Al's been staring at me the whole time. Even though a bot can't feel emotion or wear an expression, I sense amusement on the screen of his face.

"What?" I ask him.

"It is nothing, Jett," Al replies, blinking his electric eyes. "I was merely about to point out the human need for water is analogous to my robotic need for electricity. Without electricity to recharge my battery, I would cease all functions, just as you would cease all functions without water. In this, you and I are not so different."

Al oftentimes puts things in funny, overly technical ways. For example: "Cease all functions" is botspeak for "die." Good old Al. I look down at him.

"I don't think it's quite the same thing, Al," I say matter-of-factly. "You simply wind down. You don't feel thirst like I do. Thirst is a kind of pain, and pain isn't something you can process. You're a bot. Bots don't feel."

"You are correct, Jett, I do not feel," Al says, and his eyes seem to dim a little. I feel bad for telling

him so. “But I agree,” I add, “we’re not all that different from each other. Besides, Al, you’re my best friend.”

Al doesn’t reply. He just cocks his head a little to one side, and looks at me with the red lights of his eyes.

We arrive at the hangar. It’s an enormous warehouse with a high ceiling. Narrow staircases zigzag up and down the otherwise featureless gray walls. Construction rigs, tractors, cranes, hoists, movers, and rovers are parked meticulously in neat rows across the polished cement floor. Floodlights above fill the hangar with a bright, bluish-white light, so bright that Al’s aluminum frame shimmers with a silver glow.

The hangar is swarming with activity: workers hauling components back and forth in small electrical carts; techs suiting up for spacewalks; drillers tuning their equipment; and various foremen barking commands. I notice a rover undergoing repairs in one corner, perched on a lift, with two mechanics inspecting its underbelly and arguing in heated voices.

“Should I prepare the rover for launch?” Al asks me. He has to raise the volume of his mechanical voice for me to hear him over the clamor and noise.

“Sure, thanks Al. I’ll need a few minutes to suit up.”

The door to the changing room slides open as its sensors detect my approach. Inside I see Cruz, another scout, putting on a pressure suit. He looks up.

“Hey-ya Cruz.”

“Hi Jett,” Cruz says, toneless. Then silence. Cruz isn’t exactly a chatterbox. Like talking to a kiosk—it usually goes one-way. He’s focused on adjusting a cuff on his wrist that apparently refuses to tighten properly.

Cruz is around my age, almost seven Martian years, or twelve old-Earth years, however you’re counting. He’s dependable but keeps to himself. We don’t talk much, and when we do, our conversations don’t go beyond mentioning what we’ve seen scouting.

A few months ago, when I’d first started having the dream, I told Cruz about it to get his reaction, and to see if he’d ever experienced anything similar. *After all, I remember thinking at the time, we’re nearly the same age, both Martian born, both scouts; we have some things in common.*

However, when I described my recurring dream, Cruz shrugged his shoulders, and just said it was a strange thing to dream the same dream that many nights in a row. That was that.

Even so, I guess you could call us friends. We sort of have to be. There are only thirty Martian-borns scattered across Colony X, after all. Cruz is a good scout, I’ll give him that. He works hard and always completes his assignments, just like I do. He was the second human born on the Red Planet, so that makes us both authentic Martian.

By this time, Cruz is fully suited. He’s tapping away at a small computer keypad mounted on his left sleeve to make sure the suit’s pressure systems and oxygen tanks are functioning correctly.

“I’m headed south,” Cruz says abruptly. “To the highlands.”

“What for?” I ask.

“To look for the remains of a fallen meteorite. There might be iron fragments. Or titanium.”

Hunting for precious metals from a fallen meteorite sounds a lot more exciting than digging samples from some nickel-iron deposit.

“Hmm,” I grunt, pressing my lips together to hide the fact that I’d rather be working his assignment. “Tell me how it goes.”

“Will do,” Cruz mumbles. The door slides shut behind him.

I walk over to an alcove cut into the wall where a rack of pressure suits is hanging. Some are red, some are blue, and others are yellow and green. The one I pull out is silver and shiny, like Al’s aluminum frame.

Working on the out means wearing a pressure suit equipped with oxygen tanks. Suits protect you from the vacuum of space, subzero temperatures, fine toxic silt in the air, and ultraviolet radiation. Without a good pressure suit, a sturdy helmet, and a tank of oxygen on your back, the thin, practically non-existent Martian atmosphere will squeeze the life right out of you.

Say you decided to take a stroll outside, unprotected. No suit, no helmet, no air tank, nothing. Since there’s no outside pressure to hold water molecules in a liquid state, the saliva on your tongue would start to boil. Then your eyes would inflate and pop like balloons. A scalding fire on your tongue and the excruciating pain of your eyes exploding is just the beginning.

Next, you’d collapse in the dirt from oxygen deprivation. Your bodily fluids would boil to gas. Your limbs would freeze hard as rock in the ruthless subzero temperatures. And with no atmosphere as a buffer, ultraviolet rays from the sun would burn your skin a deep red. You’d wind up a sunburnt glob of hideous flesh. Like I said, Mars will squash you out of existence the first chance it gets.

I spend a few minutes putting on my pressure suit, methodically adjusting the legs and arms, and tightening the cuffs. Next, I lock a helmet that looks like a big soap bubble into place. The visor’s been polished and I can see through the clear, radiation-proof plastic. I’m snugly sealed in.

Al has prepared my rover for launch. His aluminum frame is sitting in the passenger seat, buckled in, with the red lights of his eyes glowing bright.

I do a quick walk-around before grabbing the roll bar and climbing into the driver’s seat. By the way Al’s fidgeting in his seat next to me, I’d swear he’s happy to tag along today, and perhaps a little impatient to get moving.

The rover sits high up on four giant, heavily studded wheels. It’s built to endure the subzero cold and the rugged Martian terrain. I can feel the pull of its powerful engine, as if the rover is just itching and begging me to hit the accelerator.

I pull the rover forward, slowly, into the exit bay, and bring it to an idle. The engine purrs quietly, awaiting my command. A bay door closes behind me, sealing my rover off and keeping the atmosphere in the hangar from rushing into space.

I punch in a code on my keypad to activate the flow of oxygen. Cool, sweet-smelling air fills my helmet. The first few breaths of pure O₂ fine-tune the senses, and produce a heightened awareness of my environment. The rover’s lines and carefully machined angles come into sharp focus. My gloved hands firmly grip the steering wheel. I take another deep breath, arms and legs tingling.

A voice suddenly blares over my radio headset: “You’re clear to go, Jett. Is your O₂ on?” It’s Yur

the hangar manager.

Yuri's tall and thin, and has a large crooked nose that looks like a big chunk of asteroid. While he speaks English, his voice carries a strong accent. When he says my name, he pronounces it, "Gee-utt."

Unlike my mom and dad, Yuri was an early arriver who lived on Mars during the Outpost Era, when humans were new to the planet. This was before the founding of Colony X. For years, he lived on a rickety Martian outpost. Get him going, and Yuri will talk endlessly about his Red Planet adventures. Of course, his adventures predated the accident.

Several years ago, Yuri crashed his rover while speeding along the edge of a crater. At the time, he was driving an old, boxy model: prone to breakdowns and bolted clumsily together, completely unlike the rovers we drive today. In Yuri's case, a power steering malfunction made him lose control. He flipped that boxy old rover end over end in spectacular fashion, and wound up pinned beneath a heap of twisted wreckage at the bottom of a crater. It was a grisly scene and it took a team of astronauts several hours to pry him free.

One of Yuri's arms was shattered to pieces as a result. He had to have it amputated at the shoulder joint. As if that weren't enough, Yuri also suffered a spinal cord injury—a broken C4 vertebra. The accident nearly took his life and left Yuri a quadriplegic, meaning he could no longer move his remaining arm and legs. In fact, Yuri lost all feeling and movement from the neck down.

Yuri has an artificial titanium arm now. He also wears an *exoskeleton*, a system of robotic limbs that power the movement of his legs. A tiny chip in his brain sends electrical signals to the artificial arm and exoskeleton—serious tech. Yuri's lived on the inside ever since, half man, half machine.

"Oxygen's on, ready to roll," I reply to Yuri over the radio. The hangar door begins to creak and opens slowly. I flip on the headlights and inch the rover forward a few meters. Once I'm free and clear, the hangar door closes behind me.

Al and I are alone now, the protective walls of Colony X behind us. It's still and quiet outside, so quiet that my thoughts fade to silence—even my concern over the dream. There's nothing but empty red flatland all around, with dead volcanoes in the distance. Their ancient peaks create sharp angles against the orange horizon. The sun is overhead, white and small, pelting the planet with deadly ultraviolet radiation. Martian dust in the air gives the sky an appearance of having rusted over. Dad tells me the sky of old-Earth was once a bright blue, but it's red on Mars, always red and never blue.

My pulse quickens, and the nerve endings in my fingers and toes light up with excitement.

"Ready Al?" I ask, but I hit the accelerator before he can answer.

VOICE

It takes a lot of work to sustain life on Colony X. Every man, every woman, and every child over the age of ten has a clear role within the larger group.

Take my dad, for example. As an astrophysicist and head of special projects, he spends most of his time inside the colony walls, perched on the Observation Deck with the other scientists.

A title like “astrophysicist” might conjure up an image of a number cruncher hunched over a worktable, mumbling formulas and cramming equations. But not in dad’s case. Sure, he spends a lot of time inside, but he also ventures out as often as he can, whether he’s supervising the operation of a new communication satellite or overseeing the launch of a test rocket. “The out clears my head,” he once put it to me, “and besides, I love getting my hands dirty.”

As for me, I’m a scout. I roam the surrounding desert in search of metals, mineral aggregates, or pockets of water ice. Colony X can use just about anything in one way or another.

Scouting is dangerous—at least it can be. It’s a solitary job that requires titanium nerves. Working on the out within the snug confines of a pressure suit can also take a severe toll on the mind and body. Claustrophobia, dizziness, nausea, a sense of isolation, and loss of mental function can set in and create panic. *Spacecraze*, as we call it.

Martian-borns like Cruz and I make excellent outside workers. We seem better able to spend extended time in a suit. I think it’s because we’ve grown up in tight spaces, unlike native Earthlings who grew up in open-air, oxygen-rich environments.

It may sound strange, but sometimes I feel more at home in a pressure suit than I do in my own skin.

Not all Martian-borns, however, take the same path. At the age of five, the young are rigorously assessed. Their traits, aptitudes, and strengths are inventoried and graphed. Based on those graphs and inventories, every boy and every girl is trained to fill a job on Colony X. Maybe that means learning how to fix rovers or how to cultivate plants. As for me, my destiny lay on the out.

Al and I are making our way around the rim of an enormous crater—Gale Crater. The opposite rim of the crater is so far away it merges with the horizon. It’d take a day, maybe two, to drive the circumference at top speed.

Gale Crater was created billions of years ago when a colossal meteor crashed into the planet. Dad tells me stories about visiting the Grand Canyon (one of old-Earth’s most majestic landmarks). He says a dozen Grand Canyons could easily fit into Gale Crater. It’s that wide and that deep.

In the center of Gale Crater stands a mountain called *Aeolis Mons*. Dad describes *Aeolis Mons* as Martian Mount Everest (another old-Earth landmark). It’s a gigantic mound of sediment and debris that compacted over time into rock. The meteor strike that created Gale Crater ejected a trillion metr

tons of dust into the sky. Over time, the dust settled, and was sculpted by the winds into the shape of the mountain we see today.

Gale Crater, and the mountain at its heart, is my favorite place on Mars. I'm running ahead of schedule—the nickel-iron deposit I'm headed to isn't far off—so I decide to park the rover and stretch my legs. Technically, I shouldn't be making an unscheduled stop like this, but no one'll know except Al.

I shut off the engine, flip off the headlights, and turn to Al. A small transmitter wired into his cranial unit lets us talk over radio.

“Come on, Al,” I say. “Let's get out and have a look at old Gale Crater. I'll race you to the edge.”

The gravity on Mars is weak enough that you can skip and float over the surface, so I skip my way towards the crater's edge, leaving deep boot prints in the dirt along the way. Al hurries behind me as fast as his motorized legs will carry him.

We reach the edge and look out over the crater. I pick up a lump of Martian rock, wind up, and heave it into the air. It sails through the rust sky, then plummets into the crater. It falls and falls and falls until it becomes a speck and then disappears from sight altogether. It's a good five-kilometer drop to the bottom.

“What do you think of it, Al?” I ask over the radio.

Al's electric red eyes study the scene before us. After a few moments he launches into a technical description—more botspeak.

“Gale Crater,” he reports, “is one hundred and fifty four kilometers in diameter, and is located near the northwestern part of the Aeolis quadrangle. It is named after the nineteenth century old-Earth astronomer Walter Frederick Gale, who—”

“That's not what I meant, Al,” I interrupt him. “What is your opinion of Gale Crater? What do you think about when you look at it?”

Al processes the question. “Gale Crater is spectacular,” he finally replies.

“It sure is,” I laugh, resting my gloved hand on top of his aluminum head.

I squint my eyes and study the tip of Aeolis Mons. A broken down robotic rover called *Curiosity* sits somewhere at the peak. Curiosity was sent to Mars in the old-Earth year 2012. It operated in the region and eventually made the slow, ambitious climb up the mountain, periodically stabbing the surface with a tiny automated drill to gather soil samples. Eventually the rover's nuclear battery ran down. It became a relic. For some reason, I get sad imagining that obsolete robot sitting on top of Aeolis Mons, all alone.

A gust of wind scatters red dust in the air and blows me slightly off balance. Following the gust, something strange happens.

I feel a twinge. It's an odd tingle in the center of my forehead. The twinge is followed by a whispering voice—barely audible. I freeze on the spot and stand perfectly still, straining my ears.

“Jett,” a voice whispers.

The hairs on my arm stand straight up; I can feel them poking the sleeves of my pressure suit. The

voice is so clear, it's almost as if it speaks from inside my helmet, directly into my eardrum. It isn't my voice and it definitely didn't come over a radio channel. There's no crackle to it like there normally is when exchanging radio transmissions.

I shake my head and blink my eyes, wondering if it could be my imagination or a trick of the wind. I spin around to see if anyone is behind me, but there's only empty flatland as far as the eye can see.

"Did you hear something, Al?" I ask over the radio.

Al looks up at me. "No, Jett," he replies calmly.

"Are you sure? I thought I just heard someone whisper my name."

"I am sure, Jett," he says.

"No radio activity, other than our own?"

"Affirmative," says Al. "There is no radio activity other than our own."

"Hmmm, I could swear I heard something." Al stares at me and blinks his electric eyes. I look at the keypad on my forearm. Its bright display says I have three and a half hours of oxygen in the tank. I've got plenty of air and my suit is fully pressurized. No cause for spacecraze.

"Come on, Al," I finally say. "We should get going."

We skip back to the rover. I press on the accelerator and the tires spin for a split second until they grip the rock underneath.

STORM

I have recurring dreams and now I'm hearing voices, I think to myself. Great, just great.

Al's mechanical voice interrupts my train of thought. "We are close to the nickel-iron deposit, Jett," he says while studying the navigation screen on the rover's dashboard.

"Thanks Al," I reply, glancing at the screen. We're practically on top of the coordinates Yuri gave us.

I drive over a small ridge and park the rover next to a large boulder. The sun is a small white disk directly overhead. Rows of dormant volcanoes rise to the north.

From a rear storage compartment, I remove a small drill. I have to attach a long slender bit. Due to the thickness of my gloves, it takes me a few tries before I'm able to lock the bit into place. The drill eats into the red clay. I begin extracting samples.

I keep thinking about the whisper I heard at Gale Crater. *I'm certain I heard it; I'm certain it wasn't a trick of the wind.*

As Al and I make our way back to Colony X, I suddenly get a message over the radio headset in my helmet. It's Yuri calling to me in his heavily accented voice.

"Hangar to Jett. Do you read me?"

"Jett to hangar. Yes, I'm here," I radio back.

"We've got an emergency. A disabled scouting rover about ten kilometers from your present location. It's Maggie. She's stuck and running low on O2. Can you pick her up on your way in?"

"Sure thing," I reply.

Maggie's a scout, like Cruz and me. She's older, around sixteen old-Earth years, and came to Mars as a toddler. Unlike Cruz and me, she has blurry childhood memories of old-Earth before the Rupture.

"Are you sure you have enough O2 to make a detour?" Yuri asks worriedly, but I'm confident I have enough oxygen to pick up Maggie and make it back to the hangar.

Breakdowns, malfunctions, and mechanical problems are more common than you think. Glitches occur all the time. In the face of an equipment problem or a rover breakdown, you have to remain calm, fend off panic, and remember the safety protocols you've been taught. Above all, don't run out of air. Suffocating in a pressure suit is an ugly way to go.

"Don't worry," I radio back, glancing at the keypad on my forearm. "I've got an hour and a half of O2, plus an emergency tank on board."

"Okay," Yuri replies. "But be careful. Sending you Maggie's coordinates now. And hurry. We're

detecting heavy winds to the north. There could be a dust storm developing.”

“Coordinates received. We’re on our way.”

“Keep me posted,” Yuri adds before closing the channel.

“Better hang on,” I tell Al. “It’s gonna get a little bumpy.”

Al lifts his arm and grips the roll bar overhead to keep his aluminum frame from bouncing around in the seat.

It takes me twenty minutes at max speed to reach Maggie. I see her rover nose down in a sinkhole. Its rear tires point straight in the air. I can see the underside of the rover and sure enough, there’s a busted axle.

I don’t want to get too close because I don’t want to hit a sinkhole, so I park my rover several meters away. Just as I’m doing this Yuri radios me. I can hear the ring of Doppler alarms in the background.

“Jett, hurry up! We’re detecting strong winds. A storm’s coming. Dust will likely impact radio communication. We’ve been trying to radio Maggie but she isn’t answering.”

“I’m here. I don’t see Maggie yet. Her rover’s definitely busted.”

“Ok...y...rov...er...she...bu...ett...whe.....” Yuri’s voice crackles over the radio.

“Hangar, this is Jett, do you copy? Can. You. Hear. Me?”

“Ro...ett...sig.....quic...r....or....” Yuri tries to respond but the radio signal’s even worse now. There’s nothing but the maddening buzz of static.

Winds are picking up. I look over my shoulder. To the north, I see something every scout dreads: a giant red dust cloud tumbling along the surface, like the crashing of a monstrous wave. It’s at least a kilometer tall and headed my direction.

I have to hurry. The dust cloud is so dense it’ll blacken out the sun once it overtakes me. I’ll lose all visibility; my rover’s nav equipment will cut out; radio signals will become a jumble of static; and with only one emergency air tank on board, I’ll deplete my oxygen supply within a few hours and suffocate to death in my suit, Maggie too.

I jump out of the rover but leave the engine running. I take advantage of low gravity and skip as fast as I can, floating a few meters between each skip. Exerting extra work on my muscles gets my heart beating faster, which means I have to inhale oxygen at a faster rate. I look down at my keypad: an hour of air left.

I try radioing Maggie but she doesn’t answer. I nervously wonder if she’s all right. Finally, I reach the busted rover. As I skip around to the other side, I see Maggie in a bright yellow pressure suit, sitting on the ground, hunched over.

Her helmet looks up at me, and I breathe a sigh of relief to see that she’s alive and moving. I kneel down beside her and look into her eyes. They’re open. She points to the keypad on her forearm, which shows that she has only five minutes worth of air in her tank.

I immediately gather that Maggie's sitting here conserving what's left of her O2 by using as little energy as possible. I pull her up by the arm and lead her back to my rover. The sky's getting dustier and we're losing visibility. The dust cloud in the distance is picking up momentum and barreling down in our direction.

I can feel Maggie's body growing limp. It takes more effort on my part to drag her towards the rover. She must be running out of air.

"Move over Al!" I holler, out of breath. Fortunately, our radios work at close range.

Al scoots out of the passenger seat and into the rear while I pull Maggie up and push her into the seat. It takes a lot of work because she's taller and heavier than I am. I look at her keypad and see she's going on fumes, maybe about to lose consciousness.

I pull out the emergency air tank and plug it into a port on the side of Maggie's suit. With its seal broken, the tank instantly releases a flow of oxygen. Through her visor, I see her eyes open and blink repeatedly. She stretches her arms and legs. Maggie's okay.

She points to her helmet and shakes her head from side to side, a sign which means her radio headset isn't working. I give her a thumbs-up and skip as fast as I can to the other side of the rover.

Once in, I stomp on the accelerator. The studded wheels spin repeatedly before finally gripping the rocky surface underneath. The rover bolts forward.

I look over my shoulder at swirling clouds of Martian dust. The storm is gaining. I can feel the vortex of its hundred-kilometer-an-hour winds behind us. I know the terrain of Mars well enough to know which direction the colony is in, a good thing, because my nav screen is cutting in and out.

Maggie reaches over and grabs my left wrist so that she can read the keypad on my forearm. She wants to see how much air I have left since I gave her *my* emergency tank. It reads twenty minutes. Maggie shoots me a worried look. Twenty minutes should be enough time to make it back. But I cross my fingers and try to slow down my breathing. *Focus Jett. You can do this. Just stay calm.*



Now it's red and hazy all around us, and the storm is right on our backs. Rocky particles in the air collide and produce friction, creating electrostatic bursts and flashes of white—jagged pillars of Martian lightning.

I can see the faint outline of Colony X ahead, but the picture's blurry. My hands and feet tingle, and I get a fuzzy lightheaded feeling that makes it hard to concentrate. My lungs are burning and my brain is starving for oxygen. I'm having trouble driving in a straight line.

The rover's veering off course, but I see Maggie's yellow-gloved hand reach over and grab the steering wheel. The colony's directly ahead. I can make out the hangar. The front door is open, waiting for us. Just a few more seconds. I look down at my keypad. It's blinking a bright red warning light. I'm out of air.

Maggie's clutching the wheel. We speed into the hangar and I try to muster strength to push down on the brake. There's a huge thud and I feel my body crunch into the steering wheel before I lose consciousness.

Then everything goes black.

PRIDE

I'm standing at the mouth of a giant cave. The subzero's unbearable. I'm shivering violently and my teeth are chattering. I start walking and feel the crunch of frost underfoot. Where am I?

I walk into the cave. It's pitch-black. I input a code on my keypad to activate the utility lights on either side of my helmet. Cylinder beams of light help me navigate my way deeper and deeper into the cave.

I stumble along until I reach a wall of blue ice, smooth and polished—like glass. I can see my own outline reflected in its surface.

On the other side, a form appears. It's thin and gangly, and unusually tall, with long arms and curling fingers. I inch forward for a closer look. That's when I hear a whisper, clear and distinct.

“Jett,” the whisper says.

A shiver runs down my spine. I inch even closer. Suddenly, two oval-shaped eyes fly open, bright and glowing green. The form...it's alive!

I start awake and nearly roll off the cot. *The dream*. Except it was different this time. It was more vivid. And the shadowy figure inside—it whispered my name, opened its eyes. It's never done that before, not in hundred and one nights. I look down at my arms. The light brown hairs are standing on end as if charged with static electricity. I'm cold too. My teeth are chattering.

I note my surroundings. I'm in a small medical module with gray featureless walls, and lying on a lumpy cot. There's a blanket over me. A ventilation generator hums quietly in the background. I close my eyes and think.

It's coming back to me now. Maggie's busted rover. The dust storm. My tank running out of air. There was a thud and a crash as we sped into the hangar. But my memory trails off from there.

A door opens and I see my dad. He walks over to my cot and kneels down, relief on his face. Behind him is Dr. Lani Lakhani, in a white lab coat.

“That was a close one, partner,” dad says. He leans in and hugs me with both arms. I can tell how happy and how scared he is by how hard he's hugging. He leans back and takes a good look at me. “How are you?” he asks.

I clear my throat. “Tired and achy. I feel like my insides have been rearranged. What happened?”

“You crashed into the side of lunar tractor. That was yesterday. You've been under sedation for the last twenty-four hours. Dr. Lakhani, here, would like to do a quick examination before releasing you. Lani?”

Dr. Lakhani kneels down. She has a thin pointy nose and kind brown eyes. She peers at me through

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