

S T A S I S



R R M O R R I S

Welcome and I hope you enjoy your two complimentary chapters.

Thanks!

The Year 2106: A Mars Earth Colony Outpost:

Six decades of tireless Martian terraforming yielded promising advancements, yet fell short of rendering the surface habitable. Amidst the desolate landscape, an underground oasis thrived within the area known as *Arcadia Planitia*. Beneath the crimson soil, nonstop tunneling construction bored far below the surface where a bustling society took root. A lifeline stretching from Earth sustained colonists, supplying a depot with sustenance, medicines, and materials essential for survival.

A dome-shield the size of a football field made of *silica aerogel* mimicked the Earth's atmospheric greenhouse effect. This technology achieved the melting point of water-ice inches below the surface. An in-ground aqueduct delivered water to cisterns buried deep beneath the soil, fulfilling diverse needs for human use. As progress took hold, the essence of life blossomed, following the customs of Earth. Marriages formed the cornerstone of family bonds, careers flourished, and children embarked on their generation of education while forging friendships in the community.

To fuel their existence, electric and atmospheric generators hummed without limits, bestowing upon the colonists the vital energies of survival. Yet, as the colony burgeoned with each passing year, the demands of its populace swelled. More tunnels were bored, more habitats erected, as the relentless march of progress dictated an ever-increasing necessity for the fundamental elements of life: energy, oxygen, and space...

"Mr. Clevenger, wait up," a voice yelled over the noise from the Tunnel Boring Machine.

Barry Clevenger, a middle-aged gray-haired Director of Operations, glanced over his shoulder to see who was calling. He halted with some hesitancy; a deep groan transitioned into a frustrated sigh, preparing to be on the receiving end of some expected BS. "Yeah Mr. Spencer, what

can I do for you, today?" he said, raising his voice to a shout over thunderous MegaTon dump trucks hauling soil.

"You're three days behind. The Wayfield Company is gearing up to install the decking and you still have a hundred twenty-one feet to go. We were expecting this bypass route to breakthrough to the newly expanded southern warehouse by now. Mr. Eastman is not very happy."

"When they gave me these coordinates, my chief engineer ran the numbers on several ground penetrating radar scans in the area. I told Mr. Taylor in your engineering department we would have to cut through a thick vein of abrasive volcanic rock. They had to replace the disc cutters. It's a labor-intensive job and you know what that means, the machine becomes idle. You'll find it in the contract, page two, paragraph four."

"The CEO doesn't want to hear excuses; he expects results."

"Kindly inform Mr. Eastman that we've achieved a drilling and soil expulsion efficiency of ninety-two percent; that exceeds standard benchmarks. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm in the middle of something important." With a dismissive shake of his head, he pivoted and strode away, muttering the expletive 'jackass.' Spencer was a constant source of irritation, nitpicking about adherence to contractual stipulations. Working in a remote location was challenging enough without the added frustration of material constraints and Spencer's incessant micromanagement. He started walking toward his office when TBM foreman Jacob Jefferson trotted up to him.

He moved close to his ear, raising his voice, "Barry, our inventory of concrete lining segments is low. I'm concerned we won't have enough to finish. Have you heard anything about the shipment we ordered six months ago?"

"A freighter came out of hyper-speed last night and is in low Mars orbit. The shipment was delayed because Pakistan didn't have the bolts to secure the lining segments. They are preparing for delivery as we speak." Clevenger's two-way radio vibrated on his pant-belt. He unclipped it,

pressed the transmit button, and put it to his ear. “Yes. Where? I’m on my way.”

“Anything wrong?”

“They found something unusual in Sector 16.”

“The excavated TBM assembly site?”

“Yeah, it appears artificial.”

“My God, did they say what it might be? The last time we ran into something like that, it was an old Russian fuel tank filled with liquid hydrogen. When we tried to drain the damn thing, it exploded and tore Phillip’s little robot all to pieces.”

“That was just below the surface; this is way deeper.” He shook his head in thought and looked at Jefferson. “Keep the TBM drilling; you’ll hear from me if I need you to shut down. I’ll get the tunnel lining-segments to you ASAP.” He hurried to his Polaris Ranger ATV and drove down the unfinished tunnel, turning right into Sector 16. There, he saw several blue hardhats standing around the vicinity in question. As Clevenger approached, one hardhat broke from the group and headed his way. He stopped the ATV and jumped out.

“Mr. Clevenger, Mr. Clevenger,” the man shouted, panting from running toward him. “We were digging footers when the backhoe’s bucket scraped across something metallic. It made the most horrific screeching sound,”

“Calm down Sid, what do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, sir. It’s artificial, that I can tell you... and it’s hollow.”

“Hollow?” Clevenger walked toward the site with the supervisor beside him.

“Yes sir, it sounds like an empty fuel tank or something.”

“Really...”

“This is strange considering we are sixty-five feet below the sealed ceiling. Then there’s another ten feet of surface soil on top of that, and three feet of footer excavation down here. That means someone buried

the unidentified object seventy-eight feet below the surface. It's weird, very weird."

Floodlights cast a warm glow over the excavation site at the unearthed section of the mysterious artifact gleaming with a bronzed hue. It was a stark contrast against the rough rusty Martian soil, giving a sense of anticipation that hung in the air. As the crew carefully worked to uncover more of the surface, their action highlighted the mystery and intrigue of the buried object even more.

It was a moment that sent shivers down the spines of those present, a tangible reminder of the unknown and the possibilities that lay within the depths of the rust-colored soil. This one aside, each Martian discovery brought them one step closer to unraveling the secrets of Mars' past and perhaps even shedding light on the origins of life beyond Earth.

Sid smacked the three-by-five-foot area of the bronze-looking surface with a hammer and it rang out like a gong. Clevenger knelt to stroke it, to run his hand over the section untouched by the backhoe. "Get a man with a Hanover Atmospheric Sensing Device, a drill and a snake inspection camera, pronto."

Sid bent over next to him, looking at the bare metal. "Got one on the way, sir."

Fifteen minutes had passed when a thirty-ish looking man standing six foot, dark brown eyes, and medium length brown hair approached the group. With instruments and tools in hand, he wore an Advanced Bomb Suit. It permitted a degree of protection from explosive pressure, shrapnel, and the blazing heat that followed a blast. He turned to set his tools on the ground and Clevenger saw a silk-screened sign on the back of his armor. *I'm a bomb disposal expert. If you see me running away fast, try to catch up!* He chuckled.

"Hello, Mr. Clevenger, my name is Jason Riggs. I was an Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist. This is one of several job descriptions I brought with me to Mars." As a seasoned multitasker, Jason eagerly signed up for the hazardous munitions position, recognizing the im-

mense challenge of soil excavation on the Red Planet. From a young age, he had dreamed of going to Mars, and after a lengthy application process, he endured over a year of anticipation before securing a job that matched his qualifications.

“I thought they used androids to disarm explosives.”

“Only in instances where there is no potential collateral damage. Down here, tunnels will contain most of the force which can weaken structural walls.”

“What’s your approach here, Mr. Riggs?”

“With unknown objects like this, instruments cannot sense whether it is or isn’t dangerous. There could be volatile liquid or gaseous fumes floating inside there. In order to be exploratory, I have to take this slow and easy. I’m going to drill a hole large enough to fit the quarter-inch camera lens, take air samples to test, and then we can snake the camera down the hole to see what’s inside.

“How do you know it’s not filled with some explosive liquid?”

“Sid said it sounds hollow. If it’s filled with any type of liquid, it won’t ring out which means there is air space inside. If there is liquid, the snake will let me know about how deep it is and how to get a sample. I have to drill slowly and keep the area wet with oil. If I go too fast, it can cause frictional heat and a spark which could set off an explosion if the interior contains combustible material.”

“Carry on...”

“I suggest clearing the area of people until it’s time to insert the snake. You can hear me through your two-way radios on frequency G.” He glanced at Sid. “Cover my head with the face shield and lock it down.”

“You got it, bubba.” When done, Sid tapped him on the helmet and joined the others.

Riggs picked up a tool. “Okay, I’m using a sensor that gives me a location of the thinnest area of metal to drill. The ideal place shouldn’t have thicker metal like attached brackets or some type of reinforcement. I’m

tapping the surface with a six-inch hammer so the sensor can pick up vibration.” After a few taps, he stopped. “I found a place and am preparing to drill. Here we go.”

With firm hand pressure, the drill bit had little effect on penetrating the metal, so after oiling the area, he put his weight into it. As he drilled to a depth of three-sixteenths of an inch, the bit dulled. He worked it for six minutes, going through four bits when he finally punched through. He exhaled in relief. “I’m still here.”

“I’m checking the atmosphere — Carbon dioxide is at 94% — there’s molecular nitrogen, argon, ammonia, hydrogen, methane, sulfur dioxide with traces of oxygen and carbon monoxide. It’s very Martian-esque. I detect no traces of any volatile, combustible elements.” He removed the sensor. “All clear, it’s safe now.” He hooked up the lens-snake to the camera and monitor, feeding it through the drilled hole.

Since there was no threat of danger to the tunnel, Clevenger sent everyone back to work and knelt next to the monitor. LEDs on the lens-head exposed the area with significant illumination.

“What the hell?” Riggs said at a near whisper, studying the monitor.

“My God, is that what I think it is?”

“It appears to be a compartment.”

“Pan to the right — there’s a doorless entryway! What we’re looking at here denotes intelligence, sentience, and cultural development.”

“Mr. Clevenger, considering how deep this find is, it might be thousands of years old. There’s no way this came from Earth. What I drilled through is a quarter-inch of tempered composite metal of some kind and I dulled four bits doing it. I’ve never run across any material having the tensile strength of this metal. If this is what I think it is, there may be a lot of technology attached to it. This is an astounding find!”

“And what do you think it is?”

“An alien spaceship, sir,” he said in a low tone, gazing around to see if anyone was near enough to hear. “Man, what I wouldn’t give to be on

the scientific team that tears into this baby... the guidance and propulsion systems, how they dealt with relativity and inertia and —”

“My thoughts exactly, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We don’t know what it is yet.”

“I’d bet dollars to donuts my hunch is spot on.”

“How do you know so much about science?”

“Studied it all my life; my dad was a scientist at NASA.”

“What exactly is your job here on Mars?”

“I’m a security liaison between Earth and this colony.” He chuckled. “It was the main job opening they had that allowed me to come here. After leaving the bomb squad in the Army Rangers, I joined a Los Angeles SWAT team. My military and educational background helped get my Mars’ pursuit.”

Since his earliest memories, Riggs was captivated by tales of heroes in uniform. He spent countless hours absorbed in movies that depicted the valiant efforts of law enforcement and military personnel. His father recognized his passion and took it upon himself to teach the boy the intricacies of handling firearms, instilling in him a deep respect for discipline and precision.

Riggs eagerly enrolled in the ROTC program, ready to refine his skills and serve his country. When he eventually joined the Army, he dreamt of someday serving on Mars, protecting its budding colonies and upholding justice in the uncharted territory. Although his initial assignment was not what he had envisioned, Riggs embraced his role as a liaison with unwavering determination, knowing that his commitment to duty would help shape the destiny of the Martian frontier.

Clevenger stood, thought for a moment and looked at Riggs. “This could be the biggest discovery ever found... or it could be the biggest dud. This needs to be kept top secret until we know what we’re dealing with here. A scientific exploratory survey needs to be done. Starting now, I am designating this *Operation Phoenix*.”

“Ah, the symbol of resurrection, immortality, and the life after death kind of thing — great pick.”

“Since you know so much already, I’m reassigning you to be head of security on Operation Phoenix. You will guard over it; protect its secrecy with commitment, loyalty and to the best of your ability. Just to be clear, your position may only last a few days. Do you accept these terms?”

“Absolutely, sir; I want to choose two officers to work under my command.”

“Let me know who. In the meantime, have someone stand guard here around the clock. Let’s get to work. We’ll need to cut an opening to get inside.”

“I know just the department. They have a computer controlled plasma cutter. I’m on it.”

“I’ll call the head-office to let them know what we discovered and my plan to take a team of scientists inside the chamber. Get your security detail prepped. I want to go ASAP.”

Two Days later, 9 AM:

Jason Riggs walked toward the unidentified-object followed by two armed officers. “Mr. Clevenger, this is Marilyn Blaine from Canada and James Brinkley from the UK. They both have security clearances, and I’ve thoroughly briefed them on their duties.”

Clevenger nodded. “Allow me to introduce you to Professor Ali Hassan from Algeria, Anthropologist-Archaeologist Emerson, and Archival Photographer Kelly, both from the U.S.” Clevenger turned to the group. “Our sole purpose today is to survey the inside of this object... to take samples and photos only.”

“There’s an entryway down there that leads to who-knows-where. It could be just another closed compartment or it may lead to an untold number of spaces.

If the area is expansive, we will stay together during this reconnaissance, regardless. Mr. Riggs will lead, followed by Professor Hassan, me, Emerson, Kelly and the security detail.” Clevenger looked at the plasma cutting operator and nodded to begin.

They turned their backs to avoid the intense light, listening to the sizzling sound of metal being displaced in the predetermined four by six-foot area. The operator beveled the cut so the panel wouldn’t fall through the hole when placed back on. After a few minutes, the operator turned off the thermal cutting machine and his assistant helped lift the plug off the access. The two officers guarding the object helped lower a ladder down into the compartment and resumed their security position.

Riggs strapped his oxygen mask firmly over his face, the cool rush of air filling his lungs as he descended into the unknown depths first. He tested the wireless communication to the team and everyone responded with an A-OK. A surge of exhilaration coursed through him, knowing he was about to set foot in what could potentially be alien territory. The

rest of the team followed suit, their flashlights piercing the darkness, revealing a cavernous space that seemed to serve as a storage area.

Dustless metal shelves lined the walls, devoid of any contents, hinting at a past purpose long forgotten. Whispers of wonder and speculation floated among the group, but Riggs remained focused on the uncharted path ahead rather than dwelling on an obscure past.

They approached an opening identified by the snake camera, and as Riggs peered inside with anticipation, his eyes widened in awe at the sight before him. “A door!” he said with edgy excitement, his voice transmitting wirelessly to the rest of the team. His teammates gathered around him, camera flashes casting eerie shadows against the brass-colored walls, momentarily blinding Riggs.

“Kelly, hold off on photography until I secure this door,” said Jason with caution. “All bets aside, we must be prepared for the possibility of stumbling upon an underground ET facility, or this may be an abandoned spacecraft. Blaine, Brinkley — arm yourselves, everyone else, stay clear.”

He pulled his Colt 9 MM handgun with his left hand and fumbled with a round hole in the door with his right. There was no familiar knob to grasp and turn. He studied the inside of the hole and saw a tiny lever sticking out. With two fingers, he applied light pressure and felt a click. They held their collective breaths as the door self-actuated to the fully opened position. Their flashlights flooded the area outside the door, startled by four skulls hanging on a wall with sharp fangs and needle-like teeth protruding from boney jaws.

Riggs and his security detail moved forward with caution, their weapons scanning in all directions like heat seeking radar. Emerson moved toward the faunal skeletal specimens to study them. “Could be some form of reptile or something similar to a dinosaur.”

“Snip off a sample,” Hassan said. He stood a head shorter than Riggs’ six-foot-one stature. He aged with dignity, showing a modest portly bulge at the midsection. Medium brown hair grayed near the temples

and over the ears, his thick brown eyebrows were covered by a pair of wire-rim glasses.

His adventurist enthusiasm for the operation didn't show outwardly, but more so through his voice and the sparkle in his eyes. Having journeyed from Algeria to America at the age of twenty-nine, his academic achievements swiftly secured him a position at Stanford University, delving into the depths of advanced scientific teachings.

After a decade, his dedication culminated in a prestigious professorship, and at fifty-seven, the government summoned him for the new frontier — Mars. Now, at sixty-years-of-age, he is tasked in an advisory role and due to his profound expertise, this seasoned professor now commands one of the most incredible finds of the century.

Kelly aimed his camera at the unnerving sight, an icy chill coursing through him. "Can I take my pictures now?"

"Go ahead," Clevenger said.

Riggs shined his light down a long darkened hallway. "I'm going to scout up ahead. Professor, you're with me."

"Don't go too far. Remember my number one rule," Clevenger said.

"Riggs nodded. As they crept along the wall, he sensed uneasiness in Hassan, his breathing shallow and fast, almost to the point of panting. He turned to him, holding a light under their face-shields, illuminating their faces. "How're you doing, Professor?"

"This place is creeping me out," he groaned in his Algerian accent.

"Relax and take slow, deep breaths. Everything will be okay, just stay behind me." He turned and continued on. "How do you say *scared stiff* in Algerian?" he said in a whisper.

"What is the meaning, scared stiff?"

"You know... frightened, terrified — you pick."

"*Madheur aghast.*"

"Yes, *madheur aghast*... that's me..."

Hassan gasped with a meek, nervous chuckle, his thumb fidgeting with the switch on the flashlight, feeling the utter blackness closing in

outside the glow of their lights. While not typically inclined toward danger and adventure, his insatiable scientific curiosity regarding an advanced other-worldly civilization fueled his determination. As he watched Riggs forge ahead with unwavering confidence and courage, traits he found himself sorely lacking, he resolved to push through his own doubts and fears to follow his lead.

Riggs glanced back at the group still opining over the alien remains and stopped at the next opening in the corridor. He peered in, shining the flashlight over the room. “Oh my God, this is getting more interesting by the second.”

“What is it? What do you see?” Hassan crooned with eagerness. He moved to the doorway to see what excited Riggs and gasped. “It appears to be a laboratory. Those strange looking mechanisms bolted to the ceiling might be some type of scanning machines or maybe they are surgical lasers. And look at the medical grade tools and instruments laid out on the carts. Those aren’t supposed to be left out like that. Could be whoever was here, left in a hurry. Let’s go in and take a look.”

“Not yet, Professor; we have strict orders to stay within sight of each other.”

“Young man, do you realize we are looking at technology from another world?” he said with clinched fists in front of his face, emphasizing his point. “Think of the implications and the gravity of such a discovery. What we might learn for the betterment of mankind could be groundbreaking.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Professor. Don’t worry, this is a recon mission. We’ll be back to dig into whatever is here.” He walked to the room opening on the opposite side of the hall and shined his light into the darkness. “Looks like another medical facility. Not much here — nothing to write home to momma about.

As they cautiously advanced through the dimly lit corridor, Hassan’s senses were on high alert. The stressful tension in the air marked a silent reminder of the lurking dangers within the mystifying structure they

were exploring. With each step, uncertainty pressed down on them, amplifying every creak and rustle that echoed through the desolate hall. Riggs whispered over the eerie silence that enveloped them. We're still within sight of the group. Let's see what's in the next room ahead."

Hassan trailed behind, his movements hesitant and tentative. Suddenly, a glint of red light danced across Riggs' silhouette, a menacing laser dot fixated on its target. Hassan's instincts kicked in, a surge of adrenaline propelling him into action. "Look out!" he shouted, his voice sharp with urgency. In a split second decision, he pushed Riggs out of the way, the sound of their bodies colliding with the wall, reverberating through the corridor. As Riggs scrambled to his feet, his first concern was for Hassan's safety.

Hassan lay where he fell, training his flashlight back towards the doorway they had just passed through. A fleeting glimpse of a bizarre creature darting across the hall caught his eye, its movements so swift it blurred into a mere shadow before vanishing into the darkness of an adjacent room.

Riggs extended a hand to help Hassan up, his voice laced with worry. "Are you alright, Professor? What just happened?"

Breathless and shaken, Hassan rose to his feet, his gaze focused on the doorway across from the lab. "Something targeted you with a laser. When I fell, I caught it with my flashlight for only a moment. It dashed into that room," he said, pointing.

"What did it look like?"

"It moved so fast, it was hard to tell. Seemed insect-like, and it made a mild rickety sound as it crossed the hall. The creature reflected light like chrome."

With some hesitancy, Riggs approached the open doorway and peered over the edge, aiming his flashlight around the room, seeing nothing that Hassan described.

The group hurried toward them. "What happened? I saw you guys fall to the floor," Clevenger said.

“He saw something rush from the lab into the room across from it.” Riggs looked at his two security officers. “I saw nothing moving around in there, but you two better check it out anyway. We don’t need to be surprised by something aggressive coming up behind us.”

Brinkley nodded as Blaine followed him into the room, vigilant, preparing for a confrontation.

“Now that we are all here, let us check out the lab,” Hassan said.

“Lab?” Clevenger said with surprise.

“Follow me,” Riggs said.

As they moved into the lab area, the enthusiasm turned electric. They were like kids in a toy store. Flashes from Kelly’s camera shot in rapid fire; questions and observations flew from the lips of the scientists in total disregard for everything experienced so far. They were captured by the moment, all except for Riggs. In his gut, he sensed there was something here more groundbreaking, technically seminal, and so unorthodox it would turn the scientific community upside down; he wanted to find it.

While everyone studied the unusual instruments mounted from the ceiling, he searched for smaller things, something to spawn his curiosity. His father told him once that *curiosity* was the engine that generated the energy to learn, to grow, and to achieve. It helped feed the *imagination* and drive *creativity* to new heights of *progress*.

Brinkley and Blaine came through the door with their assault rifles strapped over their shoulders and approached Riggs. “Jason, we didn’t see anything considered a threat, but we found this,” Brinkley said, handing him an unusual object. “We picked this up lying on a counter.”

“Mr. Clevenger,” Riggs said, transmitting his voice through the masks communication system. They walked toward each other and met in the center of the lab. “They found this in the other room.”

Clevenger studied it and handed it to Hassan, who looked it over. The object was about the size and shape of a Smartphone, silver toned with what looked like spaghetti size ridges wrapping around its rectangular shape. Hassan dumped it in a plastic bag, sealed it, and laid it next

to a few other items of interest. They left their stash there to pick up on the way back to the tunnel.

The team was about to move ahead when a two foot by four-foot brass plate on the wall stimulated Riggs' interest. He studied it for a few moments and realized the etching in the metal conveyed something of importance. "Over here," he said. The others gathered, illuminating it with their lights.

Jason put his finger on the right side, saying, "It's a little hard to see through these full faced masks, but I believe this is a floor-plan for whatever this is we're in. Here is where we entered from the tunnel, came through to the next compartment, through the door, and turned left down the hall to this lab. There's the room across from us. If we follow this hall, we should come to many more compartments, like maybe crew quarters, a weapon's bay, or an engine room. And look, we could construe this area as the bridge of a ship." His eyes scrutinized the plaque, feeling even more certain this may be a starship.

Further examination revealed a peculiar circular symbol with delicate lines extending outward, resembling a celestial body. At its center intersected two symbols culminating in a cryptic pictograph reminiscent of a human figure. Jason sought insight into this enigmatic discovery and turned to the archaeologist of their group. "Emerson, what do you make of this intriguing illustration?" he eagerly asked.

He pulled a magnifying glass out of pouch and moved close to the etchings. "Hmm, not knowing anything about it, my first impression is... light versus dark or life versus death. There's definitely a conflict between opposites. You can see a depiction of what looks like a star at the top here and then there's the quarter circle on the bottom. This might represent the surface of a planet with four sets of straight to squiggly lines inside it. These could be elements — earth, water, wind, and fire and in the center two human-like bodies, maybe a male and female," he said, pointing at each one. "Now, this elaborate drawing of a floating rectangular object

between the heavens and a planetary body reminds me of a... sarcophagus.”

Riggs’ interest steeped to a boiling point and gasped. “You could be dead on — pardon the pun. We should go there next. It’s close, only the third entrance on the right. Turn down this hall and do an immediate left.”

“I concur,” Hassan said.

“That’s my vote,” Emerson said.

“Clevenger stared at Kelly and growled. “Well, don’t just stand there like a deer caught in the headlights; take some damn pictures for Christ’s sake.”

“Sure, sure.”

“We have about forty minutes of oxygen left. Let’s move out,” Clevenger said.

Within a few minutes, the team approached an empty room with twelve strange looking devices attached to the wall. Riggs glanced at his smart-watch sampling the ambient temperature. “It’s sixty- four degrees Fahrenheit, noticeably warmer from where we came from.”

Hassan speculated the devices may be some type of monitoring equipment. Unlike everything else they ran across so far, these had one flashing blue light from each device; the assumption being the electronic gear had power and was in standby mode. There appeared to be an open elevator on the opposite side of the room.

“Found something,” Riggs said. He knelt in the middle of the room, studying a two-foot metal grate with a pictogram in its center. “This is the same symbol as the two human bodies on the metal plaque in the lab.” He looked down through the bars in the grate and noticed something strange. “There’s a dull green glow at the end of this pipe. If I had to guess... it’s about fifteen feet down. Maybe there’s a lower level. Look around for a way down there.”

The team spread out in groups of twos and after a few minutes they met back at the metal grate with no solution to a way down. Riggs

climbed in an elevator, studying the controls, but there was no power to operate it. He looked around for an access panel in the ceiling and found one. After pushing it up and out of the way, he pulled himself on top, shining his light down a shaft with an attached ladder next to the elevator. He looked down through the access panel at Clevenger. "I found a way there. Send Blaine and Brinkley. We'll clear the area before bringing everyone else in."

Clevenger nodded and helped the two officers climb up through the access. They turned on their helmet lights. As Riggs, Brinkley, and Blaine descended into the lower level, the atmosphere grew more ominous with each step. The air felt heavier, thick with an unknown tension that seemed to seep from the walls themselves. Brinkley's grip on his assault rifle tightened, his senses on high alert as they approached a heavy metal door.

With a coerced shove, Brinkley breached the threshold, stepping into what could only be described as a vestibule leading to a chamber with greenish vapor swirling through the air. The dim glow emanating from the room cast eerie shadows, their eyes scanning every corner for potential threats. Inside the chamber, their gazes fell upon two metallic sarcophagi, standing silent vigil amidst the walls and ceilings adorned with silver pyramidal shapes, their geometric patterns mesmerizing yet foreboding. A fine vapor drifted from the apex of each pyramid, dissolving into the air with an almost ethereal quality.

Brinkley checked his oxygen meter. "Twenty-five minutes left on my O2."

"Roger," Riggs said as he walked to a rectangular box on his right. "Hmm, there's a glass shield covering the top third. Something is in there... if only there wasn't so much fog swirling around inside this thing. Jim, watch our backs."

"Gotcha covered, boss."

"My God, it appears to be some type of life form," Blaine said. "It looks black and crusty."

“It’s dead. Look here, there’s a crack in the glass at the edge of this corner. Whatever process preserved that thing, it chemically broke down or maybe diluted by the invasion of the Mars atmosphere.” Riggs turned toward the other metal container. Just below the glass on the outside of the casing, they saw flashing lights with a digital bar-graph rising and falling. They approached it when suddenly something jumped on top of the glass shield the size of a large rat, giving off an aggressive sounding hiss.

“Xeno-bug!” Blaine yelled and backed away, focusing her aim on the alien creature. Blaine’s brisk warning, followed by the creature’s menacing hiss, heightened their sense of danger. Riggs and Brinkley spread out and readied their weapons. “What the hell is that thing?” Blaine whispered in a forceful tone.

Riggs disengaged the safety on his handgun. “Everybody take a deep breath and back away easy-like. Let’s not piss it off anymore than it already seems.”

“It’s metallic, looks like octopus tentacles attached to an egg-shaped body — strange. Maybe that’s what the professor saw skittering across the hall,” Brinkley said.

The room fell into an unsettling silence as the atmosphere grew increasingly tense. They backed away in slow metered steps, its alien physiology defying rational explanation as it rose up, enlarging four times its size, rendering several convulsive lurches with its tentacles.

They stopped in their tracks, unsure if it interpreted their movement as threatening. A soft white glow encompassed the creature as its six thin limbs undulated in slow, graceful motions, the top two growing, stretching toward Blaine. The creature went airborne.

“Get the hell out of my face, you bitch!” She cut loose with her automatic assault rifle, firing down on the creature’s tentacles. Bullets tore off several limbs as its white glow turned fiery red. In one simultaneous whipping motion, the left tentacle stretched out and sliced through the barrel of her weapon. At the same instance, the right one tore through

her ballistic fibrous Kevlar vest, sinking its sharp tentacle deep into her chest. Blaine screamed in pain and collapsed to the floor.

Riggs and Brinkley opened up on it and backed out of the entryway when Brinkley received a fatal stab to the chest and fell. Riggs fought to regain his composure after watching his two comrades fall and continued to back-step through the metal door, slamming it into the locked position. He went to one knee, sucking in heavy breaths, trying to sort out what had just happened.



Without warning, a thunderous slam startled Riggs, projecting a dent in the door, penetrating into his space. He fell backward, wide-eyed, pointing his weapon at the protrusion. The second one came, and then another in relentless succession as the denting grew larger. Each impact felt like a sledgehammer crashing into his senses, jolting him out of his momentary stupor.

His hand trembled as he struggled to maintain a steady grip on his weapon, the weight of it suddenly feeling heavier than before. Riggs could feel the hairs standing on the back of his neck as he braced himself for whatever horror awaited on the other side of that battered door.

And then, just as suddenly as it began, the onslaught ceased. The room fell into an eerie state of quiescence, broken only by the sound of his ragged breaths. For a moment, he dared to hope that perhaps it was over, that whatever had been lurking outside had given up and moved on.

But then, with a final resounding crash, the door locking mechanism rattled loose shattering under the force of the determined alien creature. Riggs jumped on the fourth rung of the ladder, climbing in a feverish quickness, yelling to the team, "Run, run, get the hell out of here!" When he made it to the top of the elevator, he heard the door below give way with an alarming sound of tearing metal. Then there came the clattering of something climbing the ladder. It was after him.

He folded his arms tight to his chest and dropped through the ceiling access hole of the elevator, landed and ran toward the hall. He turned and shot the creature behind him several times, but it had developed a defense against bullets. He had to rely solely on his ability to outrun it.

The sound of its tapping, thumping limbs against the metal deck seemed closer than what felt comfortable. He turned right, pushing through the door leading to the surface, slammed it behind him, and rushed past the opening into the storage room. Clevenger was at the top of the ladder, climbing through the opening to the tunnel. The door behind him burst open with an explosive thud. As Riggs reached the top of the ladder, he felt its tentacle trying to wrap around his ankle. He glanced down, witnessing it about to pull him to the floor. "Jesus!"

Pain in his arms from soldiers pulling on him felt as if his shoulders were about to separate from his body. As they freed him from the clutch of the threatening life form, Riggs scooted away from the hole, hearing Clevenger's shout. "Shoot it!"

Both guards open fired, strobes of reddish-orange fiery light flashed from the muzzles, reflecting off their grimacing faces. Riggs stood, pulling his 9MM pistol and joined in, remembering that bullets couldn't harm it, but pressure from their ballistics opposing its advance, kept it from entering the tunnel.

Two of its appendages grasped the outside edge of the hole about to pull itself through when Hassan grabbed a CO2 fire extinguisher from Clevenger's ATV. He released a thick, freezing fog that covered the hole. The creature screeched, retreated down the ladder and disappeared. After gunfire ceased and the fog dissipated, no one budged from their concentration on the access, their eyes wide with trepidation, taking in gulps of deep breaths.

"Where's Blaine and Brinkley," Hassan asked.

"Dead," Riggs said, his gaze at the access hole going distant.

"Shouldn't someone go back to get them?"

“We will, Professor.” He turned to the two guards. “Get the ladder up, and tack weld the cap back on the hole.”

As the ladder came out and the cap was about to be welded, Clevenger held up his hand. “Not yet.” He faced Riggs. “We have to go back down there and finish our surveillance. Maybe we can figure out a way to destroy that thing.”

“You put me in charge of security; it’s my job to maintain the safety of the team and the colony,” he said with a growl.

“Your authority does not supersede mine. What I say goes!”

“That thing survived a hail of bullets and still almost made it into this tunnel. If it escapes out here, we don’t know how many lives we will lose or the damage it might cause. We need to slow down and discuss what happened before going back in. We need a mission plan.”

“The ladder is out and we have guards posted. Why weld the cap on? What makes you think it *can* get out?”

“I lost two irreplaceable people down there, Rangers I trusted with my life and the lives of the team. That thing has capabilities we know nothing about. It busted through a reinforced metal door like a cracker box. Is that a risk you’re willing to take?”

Clevenger paced in front of Riggs a few times, stopped, gazed at the ground for a moment, and frowned at him. “Okay, let’s meet in my office in two hours.” He turned, climbed into his ATV, and drove off.

Riggs ordered the guards to put the cover back on and tack-weld it in place. He gazed at Emerson, Kelly and Hassan, who wore weary, drained expressions. “Everyone take some time to wind down. Bring your A-game to the meeting. I want to hear everybody’s thoughts on this. See you in two hours.”



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