

The Fifth Man

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Part 1: The Fifth Day

“Sometimes I fancied it must be the devil, and reason joined in with me upon this supposition, for how should any other thing in human shape come into the place? Where was the vessel that brought them? What marks were there of any other footstep? And how was it possible a man should come there?”

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*

Chapter 1

Monday, March 16, 2015, 3:45 p.m., Mars Local Time

Valkerie

Water. Valkerie Jansen forced one foot in front of the other, a weary survivor on a death march across a dry and barren planet. *Water.* Valkerie's soul cried out for it. A patch of frost. A dark stain in the dust. Subterranean ice ...

Dry dust coated her visor—red streaks across a blur of powder-white scuffs. The grit was everywhere. Valkerie could taste it, acrid and dry in the filtered air she breathed. She could feel it grinding in the joints of her EVA suit, eating deeper and deeper into the fragile seals that stood between her and death.

She plodded to the edge of a deep canyon and scanned the rocky walls below. Heavily shadowed grooves started at a point a hundred meters below her and snaked their way down the rocky walls, dividing into smaller and smaller subbranches. Weeping fissures. They looked so promising, so much like erosion gullies back on Earth. But where was the water? She and Lex had searched hundreds of fissures, but they were all dry. Dry as ... the rest of Mars.

“Okay, Lex. Here's another one.” Valkerie bit into the butterfly valve of her water bag and took a reluctant swallow of sweat-sock-flavored water.

“How's it look?” Geologist Alexis Ohta's voice crackled over the comm speakers.

“Good enough. Pull the rover all the way up.” Valkerie pointed to a line two meters back from the four-hundred-meter drop-off. The six-ton rover inched forward, climbing over rocks and small boulders like a monster truck at a redneck fair. Only in this case the rover was more of a monster minivan—with a laboratory, airlock, and bunks to sleep four. “Okay, that's good.” Valkerie waved at the rover's gold-tinted windshield.

The rover shuddered to a halt and sank down on its hydraulic suspension. “I've got this one.” Lex's voice sounded in Valkerie's helmet, followed by bumpings and thumpings as she made her way to the back of the rover. “Out in a second.”

Valkerie flipped open an external storage hatch and pulled out a tool bag. The pattering of the compressor motors faded to nothing as Lex evacuated the airlock. Nine months on Mars and already the pump valves were wheezing. She'd have to mention that to Bob—

No. Valkerie took a deep breath. She could look at them herself. Bob had enough to worry about right now. The last thing he needed was more whining from her. She'd caused him enough pain already.

A gloved hand clasped Valkerie's shoulder. "You okay?"

Valkerie rocked back and forth in a slow nod. "Want the MoleBot?"

Lex shrugged. "Let's get it out, just in case."

The two women hoisted the badgerlike digging robot from its bin and eased it to the ground. On Earth, it weighed almost sixty pounds. Here on Mars, barely twenty. Lex strapped the winch controller to her wrist while Valkerie attached the cable to Lex's rappelling harness.

"Okay, go." Lex backed toward the drop-off, pulling the line from the rover's winch taut.

Valkerie flipped a switch and watched Lex disappear backward over the edge. She stayed by the winch controls, not bothering to watch Lex's progress. She would call if she needed anything.

Valkerie shifted her weight from one leg to the other and, using the mirror on her wrist, checked the gauge on her chest. One more hour and they'd call it a day. Then home for an obligatory evening of awkwardness and the whole thing would start back over again. Two hundred and ninety-six days to go. How was she ever going to make it? Bob was so ...

She stomped her foot to shake out a cramp. Didn't he know what he was doing to her? They were astronauts. They had a job to do. The whole world was watching. NASA hadn't paid fifty billion dollars so she could ... so she could let her guard down. What a—

"Val!" Lex's frantic voice blared in Valkerie's helmet.

Startled, Valkerie peered over the edge. "What's wrong? Hit another patch of—"

"Send down the mole! And a bigger pick!"

"What? Did you find something?" Valkerie squinted at her friend. "What is it? More sedimentary rock?"

"Salt deposits. I can't believe it! In a depression. This is ... I mean, it's a ledge, really. Not very big, but it's ... Val, I need the brush set and—"

"A depression?" Valkerie's heart slammed into overdrive. "At the top of the fissure?"

"It only goes back a couple of feet, but it's crusted with salt deposits and—Val, we don't have much time. Send down the tools."

Valkerie scrambled to the side of the rover and pulled out the remote control for the mole. She strapped it to her arm with trembling fingers and worked the miniature joysticks to guide the small robot to the edge of the canyon. A torch, a brush set, more sample bags ... She buckled them to her tool belt and attached lines to her harness ring and the mole. Guiding the robot over the edge, she hit the remote winch controls and followed it down.

“Val, what are you doing? You’re supposed to stay with the rover. If Bob finds out—”

“Bob’s not here.” Valkerie maneuvered the mole alongside Lex and toggled off its winch control. She let herself continue down a few feet farther and stopped her descent. Lex moved aside to let Valkerie see. A small basaltic overhang overshadowed a scree-filled depression in the canyon wall. Thick, powdery deposits caked the rocks that filled the shallow groove. Layer upon layer of tan-and-rust-smearred white.

“Did you touch it?” Valkerie searched the deposits for evidence that they had been disturbed.

“I don’t think so. Does it matter?”

“Probably not.” Valkerie pulled the torch off her belt and heated a platinum scoop in its flame until its edges glowed a dull red. She waved it in the thin Martian atmosphere, waiting impatiently for it to cool.

Valkerie extended her arm to Lex. “Get the mole ready. We’re running out of time.”

“What channel is it on?” Lex unfastened the robot controller from Valkerie’s arm and transferred it to her own.

“Three.” Valkerie scooped up a sample of crust and slid it into a collection bottle, then snapped the pen cap off the back of the scoop handle and labeled the bottle. There wouldn’t be anything alive out in the open, exposed to all the peroxide dust and UV radiation, but maybe back behind the loose rubble ... She worked her way back under the overhanging rock, collecting and labeling samples as she went.

“Ready to start digging?” Lex’s voice sounded tense, eager.

“How much time?” Valkerie took the offered pick and started digging back into the loose gravel.

“Thirty-five minutes ... to zero ...”

And thirty minutes of reserve beyond that. Valkerie completed Lex's thought and swung the pick harder, pulling out the loose debris with her left hand. She scooped a sample into a vial and kept on digging. If there was anything interesting it would be deeper inside.

"We'll have to wait until tomorrow. There's not enough time." Lex's voice hung with an unspoken question.

Valkerie dug furiously through the rubble with her shovel. "We'll use the mole. We've got to get behind this regolith." She swung around on her tether and pulled the dangling robot toward the ledge. "More line."

Lex lowered the robot and helped Valkerie detach the winch line and position it on the edge. "Okay, stand clear." Lex flipped a switch on the remote control panel, and the robot churned forward, biting into the mound of loose gravel, pushing the debris backward between its heavy metal treads. Valkerie inched along after the robot, scooping out the rocks that mounded in its wake.

"It's going to take forever to—"

The robot surged forward and disappeared.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" Valkerie yelled into her mike while Lex whooped in triumph. A cavity. It *had* to be. The MoleBot had broken through to some kind of cave. She aimed her light into the gloom. The walls and floor of the small tunnel were crusted with glittering white. She couldn't even see the back. "We've got to go in now while it's fresh. Help me dig out the opening. I've got to sterilize." Valkerie backed out and torched her pick and scoop while Lex dug furiously to enlarge the opening.

Valkerie looked at her watch. Eighteen minutes to zero. Forty-eight with their reserves. They didn't have much time. "That's enough. I've got to go in."

Lex raked aside two more scoops of scree and moved aside. "Val...?"

"Okay, give me some line." Valkerie stretched out and wormed her way into the constricting tunnel, holding her flashlight and collection kit out in front of her. She took two quick scrapings and wriggled on her belly, working her backpack through the narrow passage.

When she came to the mole, she pushed it aside and pointed her flashlight down the dark vent. She sucked in her breath. Something had moved at the end of the tunnel. Something big.

"Val, what's wrong?"

Valkerie probed the darkness, training the trembling beam of light on the point where the passage curved out of view. Nothing. She held her breath, afraid to blink. What had she seen? A rolling rock? She raised the flashlight, and a dark shadow leaped down from a protruding rock.

“Val, are you okay? What’s happening?”

“Sorry, I’m okay. Got spooked by a shadow, that’s all.” Valkerie forced a laugh.

“Well, you’d better hurry. We’re running out of time. Fifteen minutes to reserves.”

“Okay. Copy.” Valkerie pushed the mole ahead of her and wormed her way forward. The best samples would be deeper. She swept the walls with her light, but her eyes kept darting back to the end of the vent. Then she saw it—milky pink striations on an outcropping of white, just beyond the overhanging rock. She tried to duck beneath the jagged protrusion, but her helmet was too big.

“Thirteen minutes, Val!”

“I found something. Just a little bit farther.” Valkerie reached out, stretching as far as she could reach with her pick. Too far. She tried to back up and a surge of electric panic shot down her spine. Stuck! She pushed harder. Harder. “Lex!”

“Val, what’s wrong?”

The alarm in Lex’s voice shamed Valkerie to stillness. She squeezed her eyes tight and forced herself to take a deep breath. Then, undulating gently from side to side, she inched her way backward. Just enough to let her get a good shot at the stony spike that barred her way.

“Talk to me, Val. I want to hear you talking right now.”

“It’s okay now. I’m fine.” Valkerie swung at the protrusion. Her pick only struck a glancing blow, but the rock seemed to move. Maybe it was loose. She swung again, this time higher up, where it disappeared into the ceiling. The pick embedded itself into soft dirt. She pried her fingers into the scar and pulled on the rock with all her might. It swung down reluctantly with a drizzle of dirt and sand.

Then, with a shudder, a shower of gravel pelted her body, pinning her to the ground.

She was trapped.

Monday, March 16, 2015, 4:15 p.m., Mars Local Time

Bob

Heavy breathing—at first faint and irregular, then swelling to fill his helmet—sounded in Bob Kaganovski’s earphones, washing away the sound of his own breathing with its insistent roar. Bob ran his fingers along a row of long, irregular scratches in one of the struts at the base of the Mars Ascent Vehicle. Where had those marks come from?

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye—a white flash against the rust-colored backdrop of low hills.

“Kennedy?” Bob spun around and searched the Martian terrain, squinting through his dust-streaked visor. Nothing. *Great, I’m going nuts. Seeing things.*

“Commander?” Bob shook his head. Where could Kennedy Hampton have gone? He had been standing next to Bob just a second ago—or had it been more like half an hour? Repairs to the ISRU fuel factory had taken longer than expected. He tried to think back, but couldn’t say for sure when he’d seen Kennedy last. Could he have gone back to the Hab? Icy fingers crawled up Bob’s spine.

Something was watching him. Bob whirled to look behind him.

Nothing.

His pulse began notching upward. *Relax, Kaggo. You can’t afford another panic attack.* He began pacing around the Mars Ascent Vehicle, desperate to ward off the nameless fear that was settling around him like thick fog.

It didn’t work. The tension ratcheted up second by second. Raw fear raced through Bob’s veins—like he was a hobbit facing all nine Nazgul. His heart hammered at his ribs, and the sound of his breathing roared in his helmet. *Father, help me. I can’t take this.*

An unholy terror grabbed his guts and squeezed. Bob started to run, tripped, and fell in the dust. He lay there, clutching the cold regolith, gasping.

The fear peaked in one awful *Psycho*-shower-scene burst and then receded.

Slowly, the adrenaline rush ebbed. Bob lay on the ground until his heart had slowed to a decent *clackety-clack*. It was his third panic attack this month. There was no reason for it. None at all. If he told anyone ...

But what if he didn’t tell anyone? What if it got worse? What if he did something crazy? What if he went stark-barking mad and walked off a cliff?

The chill of the Martian surface penetrated to his marrow. Bob pushed himself to all fours, then staggered to his feet.

He had to tell someone.

He didn't dare tell anyone.

"Hey, Kennedy, where are you?" Bob's voice sounded weak inside his helmet. *Get a grip, Kaggo.*

"I'm up in the MAV doing a systems check. I told you that."

You did not. Bob bit his tongue. The last thing he wanted to do was to get in an argument with the Hampster.

"So what seems to be the problem down there?" Kennedy's Southern-gentleman voice. If that was supposed to be reassuring, it wasn't working.

"I, uh ... I need you to look at something down here." Bob forced the tension from his voice. "It's kind of important."

"All right. All right. You'd think I could leave you alone for five minutes without the world coming to an end."

Bob clenched his teeth to keep from screaming at Kennedy and checked his watch. 4:30. Only two more hours of oxygen left in his backpack. Pacing back and forth, he tried to stamp some warmth into his toes. The heat in his EVA suit was turned up to max, but his feet were freezing. He glanced up at the sky. A too small, too yellow sun pierced the peach-colored haze. It was almost minus twenty degrees Celsius outside—balmy by Mars standards. Why was he still so cold?

"See? That wasn't so bad." Kennedy's voice blared in Bob's ears.

Bob turned to look up at the MAV. Kennedy was standing at the top of the stairs, just outside the small capsule, spinning the wheel that locked down the hatch. Come January, they'd all climb in there and blast off into Mars orbit, where they'd link up with the Earth Return Vehicle for their long trip home. It couldn't happen soon enough.

Kennedy clomped down the metal stairs. "Okay. What's wrong now?"

Bob led Kennedy around to the scratched strut at the base of the MAV. "Listen, it's not a big deal, but I was wondering if you might have brushed up against the base unit here when you drove the rover in to refuel yesterday."

"You said it was important." Kennedy had switched to his innocent, injured tone.

“It is important.”

“Kaggo, basic logic lesson. You said it was important. Then you said it’s not a big deal. It can’t be both. Now, which is it?”

“It’s ...” Bob took a deep breath. “Listen, Kennedy. You decide. The MAV is our bus ticket home—our only bus ticket, since the backup crashed and burned eight months ago. We’ve only got twenty-two tonnes of fuel left and we need eighteen to get us off the planet. So you tell me—is it important that we all try to drive the rover carefully when we’re refueling?” He pointed at the fresh scratches on the steel frame.

Kennedy inspected them for a moment. “Why, sure it’s important,” he drawled. “But it doesn’t make a lot of sense to blame me. What did you do, Kaggo? Hit it with the MuleBot?” He pointed at the half-ton cargo robot that Bob had left near the fuel factory. Bob’s tool chest lay open on the mule’s broad, flat back.

“Hamster, don’t be ridiculous. The scratches are too high up. You—”

“So maybe you did it with the rover. But it’s kind of silly to be quizzing me about it. I didn’t have nothing to do with it.” Kennedy took a step toward Bob, his eyes puffy and bloodshot behind the gold-tinted visor of his helmet.

Bob stepped back. “Uh, Kennedy? You filled up the rover’s tank yesterday, remember? It’s even on our schedule back at the Hab.”

“Of course I did.” Kennedy spoke in calm and slow tones, as if Bob were some kind of moron. “And you filled the rover before me. But I didn’t hit the MAV with it. I’m the pilot, remember? You’re the one who drives a Texas block to avoid having to parallel park.”

“Look, just because I’m cautious doesn’t mean I can’t drive. I’d know if I hit the MAV. I never even got close.”

“And you don’t think I’d know? I lost an eye—not a brain.”

A hiss of static broke through on the CommSat emergency channel. “Bob! This is Lex. Valkerie’s in trouble!”

Bob spun around, fumbling with his Transmit switch.

“Bob, are you there? Come in.”

Bob’s pulse hammered in his ears. He cranked the gain all the way up. “Loud and clear, Lex. What’s wrong with Valkerie?”

“She was exploring a cave. The whole thing collapsed. I need you to get—” A burst of static cut through the signal.

Bob spun around and bolted for the Hab. “Lex! You’re breaking up! Please repeat!” He ran faster, ignoring the rocks that tipped and turned beneath his feet. *Faster*. He leaped over a boulder and switched gait to the peculiar bounding skip that was the fastest way to hoof around on Mars. The Hab was a quarter mile away. If they’d lost the signal cone from the CommSat ...

“Lex—please repeat.” He adjusted his comm controls, focusing on the static through the rush of his gulping breath. “Lex—can you—hear me?” The static seemed to fluctuate in a regular rhythm. Three beats per second. One for each beat of his pounding heart.

The Hab loomed nearer.

“—Valkerie, are you—” Lex’s voice cut through the static.

Bob tripped and sprawled on his face in the dusty regolith. An instant later, he was up and running again. Fifty meters to go.

Twenty.

Five.

Bob reached the hatch of the airlock, yanked it open, and leaped inside. In one fluid motion, he pulled it shut again and hit the buttons to pressurize. The pressure gauge needle swung to the right. Bob was already spinning the wheel to the inner door. He threw open the hatch and raced inside, up the stairs three at a time.

Tearing off his helmet and gloves, he raced to the CommConsole and flipped to the CommSat channel. “Lex, this is Bob! I’m in the Hab, now talk to me! What’s wrong with Valkerie?” The Hab’s comm system was way more powerful than EVA comm. It had to work.

Static. Three-beats-per-second static.

Could it be interference from Kennedy’s radio? Bob hammered the keyboard with a flurry of commands. *Valkerie*. His gut turned to ice. He should have gone with her. If only he’d made more of an effort to work things out ... He brought up the comm diagnostics and checked the gain and antenna bearing. CommSat 1 sat a million kilometers above the Martian surface at the day-side Lagrange point, the stable position where the gravitational tug from Mars and the sun balanced. If the antenna wasn’t locked on—

Bob slumped onto a stool and stared at the controls. The antenna bearing was perfect, but he still couldn't hear Lex. All he could hear was that weird, pulsing static that sounded like ... like ...

But that was impossible. Kennedy's radio didn't have a strong enough transmitter. And there was nobody else on Mars who could be jamming his radio signals. Nobody.

Chapter 2

Monday, March 16, 2015, 4:40 p.m., Mars Local Time

Valkerie

“Lex! Can you hear me?” Valkerie struggled in her suit, desperate to move—her shoulders, legs, toes—anything. “Lex?” She groped forward in the darkness. At least her hands were still free. She tried to push herself backward, but she might as well have tried to move Olympus Mons.

“Stay cool, Val. I’m right here behind you.”

“I can’t move!” Valkerie knew she was shouting, but she couldn’t help it. “You’ll have to dig me out.”

“Working on that right now. Give me a few minutes.”

Valkerie felt clacking vibrations behind her feet. “How are we doing on oxygen, Lex? I can’t see my gauge.”

“Don’t worry. We’ve got plenty of time ... almost forty minutes.” Valkerie felt a weight lift off her boot. “I’ve got you. Hang on. I’m almost there.”

Valkerie lay silent, trying to still her breathing. Minute by minute, rock by rock, she felt the weight lifted from her legs.

“How about now? Can you get out?”

Valkerie pushed backward with all her might. “Pull my feet. Use the winch.”

Valkerie felt her feet lifted and a cable being attached.

“Okay, I’m going to put it on superslow speed and see what happens. We don’t want to rip you apart.”

The tension built up slowly in Valkerie’s knees. Harder. Harder. “Stop!”

The force released instantly.

“Okay, Val, we need a Plan B. Any ideas?”

“It feels like there’s loose gravel wedged between my backpack and the top of the tunnel. Think you can clean it out?”

Quick, strong hands burrowed along Valkerie's hips and lower back. "The tunnel's too narrow. I can't get all the way up." Lex's voice sounded edgy with the first traces of fear.

"Okay, can you push me farther in? The tunnel opens up enough ahead that I should be able to shake some of the rocks off."

"I'll brace your feet so you'll have something to push against. Are your hands free? Can you pull yourself forward?"

"There's nothing to grab on to." Valkerie pushed off against Lex and felt the rocks slip, but strain as she might, she couldn't push herself through. "Bad news, Lex. I'm stuck." Her breath was coming faster now. How much more time? She didn't dare ask. "If I just had something to grab on to, I think I could pull ... The MoleBot! Move the mole backward. About two feet."

There was a long pause. "I ... can't. I unstrapped the remote so I could dig, and while I was digging I must have stepped ... It's crushed. Val, I'm so sorry."

"Lex, it's okay. Listen. Call Bob and tell him to tele-operate the mole from the Hab. Tell him straight backward on slow for about a second."

"I've been trying to get through to him, but there's some kind of interference—"

"Then contact Houston. They can tele-operate it from there just as well. Just make sure they move the mole and not the rover."

"But the time delay. We've already switched to reserves—"

"Lex, please ..."

Minutes passed. Suddenly the mole's motor began vibrating. It pushed its way backward—right into Valkerie's hands.

"Val, did it work? I finally got through to Bob."

Valkerie grabbed the linking ring with both hands and held on tight. "Thanks, Lex. I'll do it manually from here." She hit the control to activate the coring tool. The machine vibrated in her hands as a powerful drill began boring straight down into the hard floor. When it had bored in several inches, Valkerie stopped the drill and tugged on it. Good—well anchored. "Wedge my feet again, Lex. I'm gonna push and pull at the same time."

"Okay ..."

“On my mark. Three, two, one, mark!” Valkerie pulled as hard as she could; Lex’s powerful legs shoved on Valkerie’s feet.

Nothing.

“Try again.” Lex’s fighter-pilot drawl. “Three, two, one, mark!”

This time, Valkerie felt something above her slip. “I’m moving! Let’s do it again.”

She edged forward, inch by precious inch.

And then she was free. “Got it, Lex! Go back to the rover! I’ll be out in a minute.” Valkerie squirmed forward, reversed the mole’s drill, and backed the auger up out of the hole it had made.

“Val, are you okay?”

Valkerie shined her flashlight into the narrow chamber. The pink striated rock was inches from her faceplate. She examined it carefully—filmy pink layers in a salt white slag. Her heart pounded in her throat. It was absolutely certain. She had seen it a million times on Earth, but never on Mars.

Until now.

“Val, get out of there!” Lex’s voice snapped her back to reality. “I’ve dug the tunnel clear.”

“Go back to the rover. I’ll be right behind you.” Valkerie dug a frantic hand through her kit. She had to have a clean sample bag somewhere!

“I’m not leaving until you’re out. Hurry! We’ve only got fourteen minutes of reserve!”

“But I’ve found it!”

“Found *what?*”

“What we’ve been looking for since we got here. *Life!*” Even as she spoke the word, awe skittered across her overloaded nerves. “Life, Lex! It looks like some sort of halobacteria.”

“I don’t care! Get out of there *now!*”

The rock shimmered hypnotically in the trembling light. *Life!* She’d always hoped, of course, but never dreamed it would really happen.

“Val, are you listening? *Move!*”

But here it was. Right in front of her. Was it alive or dead? It might not matter. For this kind of bug, there wasn't a whole lot of difference.

Monday, March 16, 2015, 4:55 p.m., Mars Local Time

Bob

“Lex ... Valkerie ... was that enough? Should I move the MoleBot any more?”

Bob pounded his fist on the table. This didn't make sense. The CommSat was sitting right in the middle of the acquisition cone. Signal strength was high, and he couldn't hear a thing but the *hiss-hiss-hiss* of static. Downstairs, the airlock door slammed. An instant later, the sound of Kennedy's cursing echoed through the cylindrical metal stairwell at the center of the Hab. Kennedy wasn't bothering to wash down his suit—he was coming upstairs, bellowing like a wounded bull.

Bob stood.

The stairwell hatch blasted open.

Kennedy stormed in, waving his helmet. “What'd you do that for? You could have killed me! I ought to have you court-martialed! Look at this!” He shoved the helmet into Bob's solar plexus.

Bob staggered back. What was Kennedy yammering about? “Didn't you hear Lex's message? Valkerie may be in trouble.”

Kennedy flipped the helmet over and jabbed a finger at a long, wicked scratch streaking up the faceplate of the helmet. “I'll have your head for this!”

Bob stared at it, wondering what in the world he could have done. “How did that happen?”

Kennedy blasted him with a raging stream of curses.

Bob stepped back, raising his free hand. “Whoa! Whoa! I can't understand a word you're saying. Now slow down and start over—and this time try English. How did that scratch get there?”

“You pushed me!” Kennedy spat out the words. “Knocked me onto my face from behind. You could have killed me!”

Bob narrowed his eyes and studied the Hampster. *Pushed?* He'd been over five feet away from Kennedy when Lex's call came in. "Hey, buddy, I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't push you."

Kennedy's eyes flared. "Well, *somebody* pushed me. And since Uncle Martin's back on Earth—" Bob flinched at Kennedy's spitting sarcasm—"I want to know why you did it. Trying to get rid of me so you'll be the last man on the planet? Is that the only way you can get a woman, you pathetic—"

Bob slammed the helmet onto the floor. "Shut up, Kennedy."

"—such a loser, you—"

Bob felt the heat rise in his neck and face. "I said shut up."

"—no wonder she dumped you—"

Bob grabbed the DCM unit of Kennedy's suit and yanked it forward. Hard. He glowered down at Kennedy, rage pounding in his veins.

Terror washed across Kennedy's face. Bob relaxed his grip. *Easy, big guy. Don't let him push your buttons. Don't play his game—whatever it is. Valkerie needs you. Focus ...*

Without a word, Bob released Kennedy and turned back to the comm diagnostics. He had to find out if Valkerie was okay. Kennedy wasn't, that was for sure, but he'd had a few loose wires ever since launch. When they reached Mars, it had looked for a while like he was doing better. But lately ...

Lately something rotten had hit the fan. *Is it him who's losing it, or me?*

Bob shook his head, desperate to focus on the problem. A jumble of meaningless graphs and numbers joggled on the display. *Focus, Kaggo.*

Kennedy's labored breathing sounded close behind him, jittering up and down his gridlocked nerves. The floor creaked.

Bob wheeled around. "Would you mind?"

Kennedy jumped backward, like he'd been shot, and stood rigid, both hands clasped across his chest.

Bob forced himself to speak calmly. "Valkerie's in trouble, and I can't get comm working." He pushed past Kennedy and headed for the stairwell. "Stay on comm. I'm going after them."

“What, on foot? That’s insane.”

“I’ve got to do something. Just stay on comm!” He ducked through the lower-level hatch.

“Request denied. You’re staying right here. That’s an order!” Kennedy’s voice pursued him to the suit room.

Bob pulled a fresh oxygen bottle out of his locker and swapped it with the one on the back of his suit. He checked the charges on the battery packs lined up by the wall.

“That’s a direct order, Kaggo. Take one step out of this Hab, and I won’t be held responsible for the consequences.”

Bob turned in the direction of Kennedy’s voice. The Hamster was nowhere to be seen. “Kennedy, listen,” Bob shouted back toward the stairwell. “Lex told me to move the MoleBot. Maybe it got wedged under the rover, I don’t know. Maybe they had a breakdown on their way back to the Hab. If I can’t find them in two hours, I’ll head back. But you need to stay by the radio in case they call. Okay?”

Silence.

“Kennedy?” *Great. Not again.* Bob stormed up the stairs with clenched fists. Okay, so they’d all been a little irritable lately, but Kennedy was really starting to lose his glue.

“You knocked me onto my face from behind.”

Right. Bob checked the command center. No sign of Kennedy. Then circled back to Kennedy’s room. The Hamster must have tripped and whacked his helmet on a rock. Sure. That would explain the scratched helmet ... and the odd behavior.

Bob frowned. *But why blame me? Why would Kennedy say I pushed him?* For that matter, why the big outrage act? He tripped and scratched his helmet, but it hadn’t cracked. That Plexiglas was practically unbreakable. Why make a mountain out of a molecule?

Frustration escaped Bob in a long, exasperated breath. *I don’t have time for this.* He threw open the door to Kennedy’s room, ready to slap some reason into him. “Kennedy, didn’t I ask you to stay—”

The room was empty.

Chapter 3

Monday, March 16, 2015, 5:10 p.m., Mars Local Time

Valkerie

“Get out of there! Right now!” Lex’s voice screeched over Valkerie’s earphones. The tether attached to Valkerie’s harness spun her around in the underground chamber, drawing her through the narrowing tunnel.

“Lex, stop! Turn off the winch. I’m coming out.” Valkerie chipped the halobacteria fossil from the wall with her pick and wormed her way back into the narrow vent, pushing the loose gravel and grit ahead of her.

“Ten minutes, thirty seconds. This isn’t funny, Val.”

“I’m on my way.” She wriggled forward. “Turn on the winch ... on my ... mark!”

The rover’s powerful winch jerked her the last few feet through the tunnel and swept her out into the dizzying void.

“I’ve got—” Valkerie’s words were lost as she slammed into the face of the cliff. She clung to the fossil with both hands, twisting around, trying to get her feet against the moving wall. “Can’t you slow this thing down?”

“No time!” Lex’s voice was tight and controlled—too controlled.

Valkerie caught sight of her twenty feet up, bounding up the face of the cliff with staccato skips and jumps. If Lex could do it, so could she. She swung her legs around in an attempt to push off the face of the cliff, but her feet slipped out from under her, and her chest pack smashed into the rock wall. A protruding shelf slammed into her shoulder and spun her around, dissolving her world into a blur.

Terror swept through her, and a desperate prayer flew from her heart. “God ... help me.” She gritted her teeth, waiting for the rush of vacuum—the first and last sign she’d get of a torn suit. Her left side thudded against a rock and spun her around onto her back. A chilling, metallic scrape ran down her spine as her backpack slid across biting stone. She hugged the fossil to her chest, clinging to it with aching, trembling hands. For a long minute she slid, wondering if the lumps rolling across her back were rocks or torn pieces of her pack. And then ...

Silence.

The canyon that stretched out below her had rattled to a sudden stop, throbbing and swaying to the rhythm of her wildly beating heart.

“Valkerie, come *on!*”

A tug on her shoulder. Valkerie sucked in her breath as she started to tip sideways.

“Help me get you turned around. I can’t get you around the bend with the winch.”

“Bend?” Valkerie’s mind snapped into focus. Oh right, she was already at the top. Valkerie threw her weight to the side and kicked herself around to face the cliff. Slowly, still cupping the fossil in both hands, she clambered over the edge of the ledge as the winch drew her slowly toward the rover.

“Go!” Lex unhitched Valkerie from the cable, yanked her to her feet, and pulled her into the airlock at the rear of the rover. The hatch swung shut and the airlock light glowed halogen orange.

“Lex, I’ve found it!” Valkerie opened her hands a crack. Still there. All of it. It hadn’t even broken. “Life, Lex. Mars had life!” Valkerie looked up. Lex was slumped against the wall of the airlock, checking her DCM panel with her wrist mirror.

“Two minutes. I only had two minutes left. You had five.” Lex pulled off her helmet and shook her head to dislodge the glistening tendrils of black silk that clung to her olive skin. She spun open the hatch that led into the rover.

“Lex!” Valkerie took off her helmet and followed Lex through the hatch. “Don’t you even want to see it?”

Lex whirled and turned smoldering eyes on Valkerie. “Don’t you even *care* you almost got us killed?”

Valkerie took a backward step. “Lex, we found it. You and me. The two of us together.”

“Two minutes. We were home free, but you had to stay inside dinking around. Do you have any idea how long you were in there?”

“I told you to get back to the rover.”

Valkerie winced. The look on Lex’s face told her what a monomaniacal idiot she’d been.

“You could have been ... killed.” Lex’s voice broke. “I was so afraid you ... weren’t going to get out.”

Valkerie set the fossil on the lab bench and took a step toward her friend. *Me. She was worried about me, and I was worried about a stupid fossil. She's not the same Lex who started this trip.* "I'm sorry. I was wrong." She pulled Lex into an awkward embrace—the best they could do in their bulky suits. "I ... When I saw the fossil ... I just didn't think. Can you forgive me?"

"We could have come back for it tomorrow."

"I can't believe I was so stupid. As it is, I just ended up contaminating it."

Lex hesitated, and some of the old fighter-pilot intensity flared in her eyes. Then it flickered out and she grinned. "So much for the history books. I guess we both mucked things up pretty bad."

"We?"

"I stepped on the MoleBot remote. I couldn't even get comm to work. If anything had happened to you ... Bob!" Lex broke away and clambered to the front of the rover. "Bob still thinks you're trapped. Our comm went haywire." She flipped a switch on the dash, and a strange rhythmic static filled the rover.

Valkerie climbed forward and watched Lex work the controls. "What is it? Sunspots?"

Lex shook her head. "Too regular. Probably a transmitter malfunction at the Hab. Buckle in. We've got to get back before Bob has an aneurysm."

Valkerie hurried to the back and eased the fossil into a sample bag. So much for her sterile technique. She sank back into one of the oversized bench seats and buckled her harness. Some friend she was. She hadn't even considered that Bob might be worried. And Lex. She'd actually endangered Lex's life. And for what? A pink rock. A simple halobacteria fossil. Lex had really been upset, and she'd tossed her concerns aside like a chunk of common regolith. The rover's engines whirred to life, and Lex set off at top speed for the Hab. Valkerie stared out the window, watching a dead, barren planet transform itself before her eyes. Mars. It had once been a home. The rocks and dust ... Could they be just a blanket—Mars's way of tucking her children in at night?

Could some of those children still be alive?

The rover became suddenly quiet. Valkerie leaned forward. "Hey, Lex, what's up?" She unbelted herself and walked forward, bracing herself against the lurch and sway of the rover.

“The static’s gone. Bob must have fixed something.” Lex flipped the transmitter switch. “Bob, this is Lex calling from the rover. Val and I are both okay and on our way home.”

Bob’s voice burst from the speakers. “Thank God! What happened? Is Valkerie okay?”

The relief in his voice raised a lump in Valkerie’s throat. Bob was such a—

“Hang on. She can tell you herself. In fact, I’m patching Houston in on this too. Val has an announcement to make, and I think they might be interested.”

Lex stopped the rover and held out the microphone. Valkerie just stared at it. All this time she’d been searching ... she’d never even considered what to say if she actually *found* something. Whatever she said, it needed to be big. Significant. Poetic. *What hath God wrought? A giant leap for mankind?* How many generations would remember her words?

Lex pushed the mike into her hand. “Val, go.”

“Um ... Houston, this is Valkerie Jansen and Alexis Ohta calling from the rover. We have just discovered the fossilized remains of some halobacteria. The sample is approximately ten by five by three centimeters, milky white with pink striations. It was located in what appears to be an old thermal vent at the top of weeping fissure 342 of canyon 13. Um ... we are now heading back to the Hab, where we’ll do a complete analysis and send you our results. Over.”

Valkerie lowered the microphone and shrugged. Cold, hard science. It didn’t capture the grandeur of the universe, but it was always an easy fallback when you didn’t have time to think.

Monday, March 16, 2015, 4:05 p.m., CST

Josh

Flight Director Josh Bennett felt like an army of ants had invaded his central nervous system. *Life on Mars!*

“We are now heading back to the Hab, where we’ll do a complete analysis and send you our results. Over.”

The Flight Control Room, which had been an oasis of quiet sixty seconds ago, erupted into cheers. Shouting. Dancing. Handshaking all around. The doors flung open and a stream of engineers and managers flooded into the room. EECOM bustled up the aisle and wrapped Josh in a hug. Josh planted a big kiss on her forehead and let loose

with a whoop. Life! After nine months of labor they had finally found it! The big payoff. Mars was back on the map.

And the crowd kept growing. Where had all the people come from? Nate Harrington, the Mars Mission Director, strode into the FCR, grinning like he'd just bought a van Gogh at a garage sale.

Josh pushed his way through the reveling throng. A slap on the back from the Capcom, Jake Hunter. A high five from CATO. Josh turned and almost collided with Cathe Willison, the up-and-coming young engineer who had saved the crew's lives barely a year earlier on the outbound journey. Josh raised his hand for another high five, but she stepped back to let one of the flight docs pass between them.

"You okay?" He had to raise his voice to be heard.

"Better than okay. I just can't wrap my mind around it all." She scanned the crowd, an amused grin lighting up her eyes. "It's amazing the difference a single fossil can make."

"Not just a fossil. It's another mission. And another, and another ... As long as we keep finding reasons to go back."

"And you want to be on one of those missions, don't you?" Her rosebud lips were pressed together in a childish pout.

"Absolutely! But that's not for me to—"

Cathe turned with a shrug and pushed her way down the aisle, swaying like a slender reed in a gentle breeze. He stared after her, wondering what that was about. She seemed almost sad, like she—

"Okay, everybody, ice your jets! This ain't Mardi Gras!" Nate Harrington was bellowing in Josh's face. "Josh, I hope you haven't forgotten you're the Flight Director right now. Anyone who doesn't belong in FCR needs to be out of here five minutes ago, or I start bowling heads. We've got a mission to run here, and God just upped the ante. Who's Capcom?"

"Jake Hunter." Josh reached over and whacked Jake on the shoulder. "Jake, we need you!"

Nate was swabbing his glistening forehead with a tissue. "Okay, Jake, you need to get on the horn to our boys and girls right now and *remind* them that there are some procedures to follow. Valkerie needs to keep that fossil in a glove box and follow sterile interface protocols to the semicolon."

Hunter nodded and pushed his way to the Capcom station.

Josh put two fingers in his mouth and whistled a long, piercing shriek that got everyone's attention. "Okay, people, we're all excited. We just made the science breakthrough of the century. Anyone who wants to party, I'm buying drinks tonight at The Outpost. But right now, we've got a mission to run, and Nate's promising to tickle anyone who doesn't belong in here with a red-hot poker. So take the party outside."

The room cleared almost as fast as it had filled up. Josh looked back at the big, soundproof glass wall that separated the tourist section from the Flight Control Room. Forty-odd people in Bermuda shorts and sunglasses were giving them all a standing ovation.

Nate grabbed Josh's arm. "The Outpost is gonna have to wait for another day. Tonight, we're doing the biggest press conference since Orson Welles did his *War of the Worlds* shtick. And tomorrow, we're going to Congress to get back all that money they took out of our hide. Maybe we *will* fly the Ares 14 someday."

Josh nodded and reached for his phone. "I'm calling the networks now."

Monday, March 16, 2015, 5:45 p.m., Mars Local Time

Bob

Bob paced the length of the suit room floor. What was taking the girls so long? They should have been back five minutes ago. He started to turn around, but his foot shot out from under him on the wet floor.

Bob picked himself up and turned to the door. "Kennedy, you left a mess in here!"

A metallic rattle sounded from the supply room they'd converted into a greenhouse. That was where Bob had found Kennedy hiding after Lex's call. He'd claimed to be watering the flowers, but Bob had checked. The soil was dry in every pot but one. Watering the flowers—oh sure. When Valkerie and Lex were in trouble. Right after Bob had supposedly tried to kill him.

Made perfect sense.

Bob shook his head and pulled a towel from the lockers to swab up the water. It gritted across the floor like semi-fine sandpaper. So far the Martian dust was the biggest problem they had faced on the mission. Micron sized, laced with peroxides, the stuff worked its way into every nook and cranny of the human body, every seal on an EVA suit. They'd all developed painful rashes and had gone through their first set of suits in a month before they realized what was chewing everything up. Now every EVA had to end with a wet scrub.

Another metallic clang rang through the Hab—the sound of the rover hot-docking. *Valkerie!* Bob jumped to his feet and tossed the wet towel into a bin. He wiped his hands on his coveralls and hurried out to the airlock. He spun open the hatch wheel and pulled open the inner hatch.

The exterior hatch swung open, and Valkerie stepped into the airlock. Her dark blond hair was matted to her head in a profusion of damp curls. Her shoulders sagged with fatigue, but her eyes looked radiant. Bob had never seen her so excited.

“Valkerie.” He took a step toward her, then stopped. “I was so worried.”

Valkerie’s grin put the flutters in Bob’s chest. “Thanks for sending back the Mole. You saved my life.” She took a tentative step toward him.

Bob desperately wanted to throw his arms around her, but he didn’t dare. He’d almost scared her off completely. Why had he given in to that impulse to propose when they landed on Mars? Lousy timing—his specialty. He couldn’t blame her for backing away.

Well, that was then, this was now. He wasn’t going to blow it again. They’d been getting along pretty well lately, and he wasn’t going to do anything to change that.

“Valkerie!” Kennedy squeezed past Bob and wrapped Valkerie in a big hug. “You had us worried sick. Don’t ever do that to me again.”

Bob felt the heat rise in his face. “Don’t do that to *you*? I was the one who wanted to go out after them. You were watering flowers in the supply room.” Bob reached over Kennedy to put a hand on Valkerie’s shoulder.

Her eyes narrowed. “Um ... what’s going on?”

Bob tried to figure out how to explain it. *Real simple, Valkerie. Kennedy says I pushed him over and then I got mad and almost hit him and then he went and hid in the greenhouse.* Talk about childish. They had both weirded out. It wouldn’t help to start an “I said/he said” match with the Hamper. You wrestle with a pig—you just get mud in your eye. “Nothing much. We both got pretty worried about you.”

Lex poked her head into the airlock. “Okay, guys. We’re both fine. Quit clogging up the works.”

Valkerie shook off Bob’s hand and started toward the suit room, but Bob bent over and whispered in her ear. “We need to talk. Soon.”

“Hold it, ladies.” Kennedy herded Lex and Valkerie back into the airlock. “Need to do a scrub down.” He stepped into the airlock with Lex and Valkerie and swung the hatch shut.

“Wait a minute!” Bob stood outside the hatch peering in through the small window. Kennedy was spraying Valkerie’s suit, the water flying out at full pressure. A streak of mud blasted the window. Bob jumped back. “Hey! Turn down the pressure a little, will you?”

Bob banged on the hatch. Kennedy was going to make a swamp in there if he didn’t take it easy. What was it with Kennedy and water? What was it with Kennedy, period? Bob cracked open the hatch. “Turn down the—”

The flow of water stopped.

“Do you have any idea how much water you just wasted?” Bob tried to sound reasonable, but it wasn’t easy.

“Had to.” Kennedy stepped out of the airlock and headed for the corridor. “You saw how dirty Valkerie was. I couldn’t ignore the risk of contamination.”

“Right.” The only thing contaminating Mars was Kennedy.

“Bob, what’s gotten into you?” Lex stepped out of the airlock and started shucking off her wet EVA suit. “Every time Valkerie and I leave you and Kennedy alone, the two of you fight like gamecocks.”

“It’s not me. It’s him.” Bob checked the corridor to make sure Kennedy wasn’t skulking about. “He disappeared on me while I was working on the fuel factory. Didn’t say anything. Didn’t even answer comm. Just that awful breathing thing he does.”

“So where was he?” Valkerie’s muffled voice filtered out from the middle of her EVA suit as she wriggled her way out of it.

“In the ascent vehicle. He said he was doing *maintenance* on it. Whatever that means. Oh yeah, and then I found scratches on one of the MAV’s support struts—like somebody ran into it with the rover. And guess who tried to blame it on me, even though he was the last one to refuel?” Bob helped Lex hoist her suit back into her locker. “And then he claims I pushed him from behind and tried to kill him.” Bob held up Kennedy’s helmet for the women to inspect.

Lex took the helmet from Bob and ran her finger down the scratched Plexiglas. “So did you? Push him, I mean?”

“No!” He turned to Valkerie for support, but she was looking back toward the airlock, her expression a million miles away.

Bob felt uneasy. “Valkerie, I think we need to talk. Alone.” He looked to Lex with what he hoped was an apologetic expression and received an encouraging nod.

“I’ll be upstairs changing for the press conference.” Lex stood and made for the door.

“Press conference?” Bob said. “Oh, right. For the bacteria thing. Where is it? Can I see it?”

Valkerie just sat there. Staring.

“Valkerie?”

“Yes?” She stood suddenly and started to move about the suit room.

“Uh ... I was so worried about you today. It scared me to death.” *Careful, Kaggo. Don’t crowd her.* “I thought I was going to lose you and ... I couldn’t bear it if—”

“Bob, I wish I could talk. I really do, but I *have* to figure out what to say for the press conference. I have so much work to do, I don’t even know where to start.” She ducked into the airlock hatch and disappeared into the rover.

Bob turned to follow her but stopped and sank back against the wall, tracing the long scratch in Kennedy’s visor with cold, wet fingertips.

Monday, March 16, 2015, 11:30 p.m., CST

Nate

Nate Harrington rubbed his sweaty palms on his pant legs. Two more minutes till Mr. Dog introduced Mr. Pony.

It was 11:30 at night. Normally the Johnson Space Center would be quiet at this hour. The parking lots would be mostly empty—just the night crews for the Space Station and the Ares Mission and a few engineers who never seemed to sleep. Nate would be getting some actual work done in his office.

But not tonight. Not after Valkerie’s discovery. The rock that rocked the world. He’d never seen such a media feeding frenzy. *NASA Discovers Life on Mars*. The six-o’clock news hour had lasted four hours. A live video feed with voice-over from Valkerie. A question-and-answer session with the whole crew—carefully choreographed to work around the forty-minute radio time delay. By 10:00, there were photomicrographs of the new halobacteria on the JSC Web site and on every TV set in the world. At 11:00, they’d put together a full media show here in Teague Auditorium,

and the place was swimming with news-droids. Nate hadn't seen anything like it since they'd run the memorial service for the Ares 10 crew last July.

The half-hour science briefing was over now. Time for a few questions.

Steven Perez stepped carefully to the podium. Watching him, Nate winced. Perez had looked run-down all last summer. They all had, of course. Way too many sixteen-hour days. But once the mission on the Martian surface began, they all started getting some rest and feeling better. All but Perez. By late fall, Perez finally took some time off to see his doctor.

The news was bad. Real bad.

Perez had Parkinson's disease. He wasn't going to die anytime soon, but he wasn't going to get better either. And so NASA, in its infinite wisdom, was looking for a replacement for the Director of Johnson Space Center. Crazy. If Perez was careful, he would be good for another five or ten years. But somebody up high wanted Perez out within twenty-four months. And Nate didn't want the job. He wanted to retire as soon as this sorry mission was over so he could go fly ultralights in Colorado, where he belonged. That didn't stop the water-fountain experts around JSC from speculating, though. Everyone thought Nate was just playing hard to get. Bunch of morons. What did they know, anyway?

"Good evening." Perez's voice rasped over the PA system. "This is an extraordinary day in the history of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. We'll now move into the press conference. I'm sure many of you know Nate Harrington, the Mars Mission Director. Mr. Harrington will take questions from the floor."

Applause. Perez stepped back to his chair. The spotlight zoomed over to Nate.

Nate smiled and leaned toward his mike on the table in front of him. "Good evening. It's nice to see a few new faces around here this late at night." He peered into the sea of frantically waving hands and pointed to a clean-cut young guy in the front row. He looked safe enough.

The guy stood, and one of the sound techs hurried over to him with a cordless mike on the end of a four-foot boom. "Ron Sanders, religion editor of the *Houston Chronicle*." He waited while the TV cameras zoomed in on him.

Nate swallowed hard. *Religion editor?*

"Mr. Harrington, how does today's discovery impact the question of creation versus evolution?"

Oh good. A nuclear bomb in my face on the first question. Nate cleared his throat while he tried to figure out what to say. There were still people in America who thought

that question hadn't been resolved. As far as Nate could see, it was answered a hundred years ago. "Thanks for that insightful question, Mr. ... um, Sanders. As you know, I'm not a biologist, but I do have a pretty good handle on the science mission we're trying to accomplish here. While today's discovery is a remarkable one that opens up a large number of new questions, it really doesn't change anything in that particular arena you just mentioned." A nice ambiguous answer. Sanders would probably read it one way, while people who had a clue would read it the exact opposite.

Sanders raised his eyebrows, and his jaw dropped open. He reached for the mike, but Nate pointed at a graying woman in the third row. "Next question."

The tech took the mike around to her. "Michelle Owens, *New York Times* science editor." Short pause for the cameras again. Nate wondered if she'd hopped the first plane to Houston or if she'd somehow been in town already. "Mr. Harrington, I'm sure you're aware that a sample of halophilic bacteria here on Earth was brought back to life after being encased in a salt crystal for two hundred and fifty million years. Will there be any efforts to revive the halobacteria Ms. Jansen discovered today?"

Nate felt his gut relaxing. Nice to get a pro. "That's an excellent question, Ms. Owens. We're not sure at this time that the fossil contains DNA, but even if it did, it's very likely that the DNA would be damaged beyond repair. The issue is pretty simple. The sample you mentioned was found deep underground, where it was well shielded from cosmic rays. Those spores were able to last hundreds of millions of years with minimal damage to their DNA, which is the genetic information that encodes life processes. That's not likely to be the case on Mars. Today's sample was found underground, but not all that deep. And as you know, the Martian atmosphere is less than one percent the density of ours, so it provides little protection from ionizing radiation. We don't have a firm age yet for Valkerie's discovery. It was partially protected by its underground location, but if it's more than a few thousand years old, I'd be doubtful it can be revived. You can be sure we'll be looking at that question very closely in the coming weeks."

Nate leaned back a little. As long as they kept to science, this wasn't going to be too bad. "Next question." He pointed toward a sea of hands in the fifth row. Let the fittest of them grab the mike.

"Liz Proust, author of the Nebula Award-winning novel *Bactamination*."

Nate's pulse quickened a notch. He'd never met this Proust woman, but she was supposed to be a regular Ms. Loose Cannon on the *Titanic*. "Yes, Ms. Proust. Go ahead."

"Mr. Harrington, there are some serious issues that need to be addressed here. As you know, back-contamination of Earth by Martian microbes is a question that has long been feared."

Nate cleared his throat. *Right, ever since your stupid book came out.*

“Mr. Harrington, what are the odds that this bacterium you’ve discovered might be dangerous to humans?”

The auditorium began buzzing.

Nate leaned toward his mike. The answer, of course, was zero. “That’s—”

“Along those same lines, what procedures have you put in place for a quarantine, in case this Martian bacterium turns out to be toxic?”

The buzz in the room became a rumble.

Nate’s knuckles were white, he was clenching the mike so hard. This was ridiculous. “As I was say—”

“And finally, if there turns out to be a problem in your procedures, have you considered the knotty ethical question of whether it would be right to bring the crew back to planet Earth? In short, have you considered the very dangerous possibility of bactamination?”

Idiot. Nate yanked his mike directly up to his mouth. “We have considered—”

The room exploded into a foaming sea of frantically waving hands, a roar of shouted questions. Somebody grabbed the cordless mike and bellowed “What—” before the sound technician in the back cut him off.

Nate stood up and raised his hands for silence. Several of the journalists in the front row stepped toward him, waving their arms and screeching questions.

The thing to do was to say nothing. *Just wait the morons out.* Nate grabbed the mike off the table and started tapping it with his finger, over and over and over. It took a couple of minutes, but the place calmed down. “Ms. Proust, it’s pretty clear your strength is writing fantasy. If you ever chance to read a book on evolutionary biology, you might ask yourself how any bacterium, evolving on another planet, probably using different DNA base pairs, different codons, different proteins, and different cellular structures, could possibly adapt itself, sheerly by chance, in just such a way as to infect a species on a different planet. Life is extraordinarily complex, and disease-causing bacteria are adapted to their hosts. Humans don’t get the same diseases hamsters do, and—”

“Mr. Harrington, you haven’t answered any of my questions.”

“Ms. Proust, you haven’t understood any of my answers. Now, if there are any other questions from *intelligent* life-forms ...” Nate glared around the room, daring anyone to ask something.

No takers. “Thank you all, and good night.” Nate turned and walked away toward the center of the stage to join Perez. He looked at the enormous video screen behind the podium. The TV camera had zoomed in on Liz Proust’s face.

She was talking to a dozen reporters and holding aloft a copy of *Bactamination*. And smiling.

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