

In the Dark  
By Mohammad Khan

NASA rover 1023 on Mars traverses the crimson soil surface. An arm extends from the body and hovers above the dirt collecting samples and transmitting data back to earth. 1023 is one rover among hundred, all a part of NASA's ambitious SWARM mission. Some rovers scan ancient rivers, craters, and ravines for signs of life. Other rovers build the foundation for the first human settlements on Mars. On Earth, in NASA's windowless mission control room, people from around the world eagerly watch the live feed of the rovers' search. The engineers, analysts, assistants, and managers talk casually and some speak jubilantly about the discovery of Martian soil, rocks, and other inanimate specimens, and the first spaceflight of humans to Mars in a few months.

On an engineer's screen flashes an image. The rover returns an image of a strange rock jutting from the sand like a spear. Taking manual control, the engineer directs the SWARM 1023 to the rock. The Project Manager curiously watches over the engineer's shoulder. The engineer moves the rover's limbs and gently brushes away the dust like a surgeon making an incision. The crowd around the engineer grows as more of the rock is revealed. Faces of wonder and eagerness morph into confusion and horror as the rock is revealed. "Cut the live feed for 1023", shouts the Project Manager. Chatter quickly fills the room as the news of the discovery spreads like the plague.

"Shut them all down", shouts the Project Manager. "Lock the doors. No one leaves." People rush to see the anomaly on the engineer's screen. "Divert the other SWARM rovers from 1023", says the Project Manager. "Keep 1023 in maintenance mode."

The Project Manager walks to the front of the room and the engineers listen intently. She composes her thoughts and speaks. "We have discovered something truly remarkable, but news of it cannot escape this room, not yet. We must verify and verify and verify again until we are certain." The crowd waits with bated breath as an uneasiness falls upon the room. "Molly", shouts the Project Manager, "call the local geologists and let them know we have an interesting sample for them to look at. Wallace, call anthropologists and see if they can help identify what we are looking at. Leaders meet me in the conference room in 10 minutes. Gather the data and work the problem and figure out what we're looking at." The Project Manager continues to shout orders asking for disciplines from many fields of science, history, and mathematics.

1023's engineer sits in front of the screen and continues excavating with manual control of Rover 1023. The gentle brush strokes uncover the remains of a human body. .

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1023 continues excavating the bony remains at the will of the NASA engineer. Remnants of a space suit and other gadgets beneath the dust coating the remains, suits, gadgets like fine talcum powder. engineers, scientists, and anyone present were surreptitiously talking among each other about the meaning of human remains on Mars while others focused on the analysis of 1023's data.

The Project Manager walks to the engineer. "How much data can you receive from the remains?"

The engineer runs his hand through his hair. "The rover's equipped to analyze soil and rocks, not human remains. We can get some data but they might be inaccurate."

The Project Manager's hands grip the table. "These aren't human remains. Take whatever data you have and send it to the others." She walks to a side conference room where the muffled conversation of leaders occurs behind walls.

The engineer shouts after her. "I don't think we should pursue this." The words silenced the room like an explosion, and the Project Manager stopped in her tracks. She waved off the suggestion and continued walking away. Slowly the room breathes back to life and the occupants return to their work.

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The project manager enters a board room filled with flight directors, analysts, and other project managers. The bickering boils in the room like a pressure cooker. She sits in the open chair at the apex of the table and the bickering simmers to silence. They wait for her to speak.

"What do we have so far?"

"Jessica", says Flight director Stu, "we have capabilities of loading the finding on the shuttle and bringing it here for further analysis. Our rovers aren't equipped for this kind of analysis."

An analyst named Hoover chimes in. "We can't hide that from one thousand prying eyes of our shuttle landing, Stu."

"Not to mention the additional power required and the environment of the shuttle", says another analyst. "We have the shuttle environment configured for rovers and soil, not archeological finds. There's no way to measure how heavy it is or how much of it we're going to take."

Stu waves off their concerns. "The bigger question is what do we do right now. It's going to take a while to converge the rovers for shuttle takeoff and that will draw attention regardless"

"Why don't we wait for another mission", asks Hoover. "We can come back with better equipment and analysis tools."

"There's no guarantee that the--the human-- the artifact would be there next time. We could miss the discovery of the century."

A junior analyst bravely opposes. "What if we leave it? We leave the body and move on. If we're worried about people finding out, we leave it."

The room uproars in discussion. People voicing their ideas simultaneously like eager kids waiting to be called upon.

"We leave the body and nothing will happen. Right now, everyone thinks we're setting the foundation for Mars colonization", shouts the junior analyst. "If we leave the body, nothing changes. We do anything out of the ordinary and bring news of this to earth. Our whole history changes."

"We're finding tools, writing, suits. One of my people found a table with inscriptions" interrupts an operator. "We can learn from them. We run the risk of losing out on solutions that can help us solve the problems on Earth and maybe we won't need to expedite colonizing Mars. If we bury the evidence, we could bury our only hope for a future on Earth."

"There are too many factors to consider here", says Stu. "Maybe we should consider Brane."  
The room falls silent, contemplating asking the super intelligence for help.

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1023 returns data of chemical compounds found in the soil and bone. Phosphorus, Calcium, Nitrogen, Iron, and they continued coming at varying levels. The engineer sent the information to an analyst knowing full well it's meaning. Rover 1483 science lead walked to the engineer. "Other rovers are picking up CHONPS", she says. "I'm also finding smaller degraded tools. Ones we had during the Apollo missions."

"I found similar chemicals. I sent the data of the bones to an anthropologist", replies the engineer. "They're the oldest human bones ever found. He wants to know where we found them."

"What're we looking at here", asked the science lead. "Is this an alien or actually human? A different species from a different planet?"

"I don't know. 1023 has been sending distress calls to other rovers because it thinks it's a human."

"Do you think she's going to initiate the Brane?"

Before the engineer could answer, 1023 displayed an image of a stone tablet with an inscription of strange calligraphy. The engineer looks at the script and forwards it to an archeologist and linguist. And then 1023, phases out of service after attempting to analyze the inscription. The screen falls black but reappears. The human remains' upper half visible in the soil. The right shoulder and right-half of the rib cage lie atop the soil. The tablet sits near the outstretched hand. The body sits in a torn space suit similar to the Apollo missions but still much older.

"I don't know if she'll activate the Brane", said the engineer. "The rovers can transmit the info to Brane and maybe Brane can make sense of it. But I'm not sure if I want to find out more. Part of me wants to burn the files and make sure no one can access them, not even Brane."

"But Brane can help. If we give it the data, maybe it will solve it. And maybe we can move forward after that." The project manager returns from the conference room and walks to them.

"I sent a potential sample of writing to a linguist and archeologist", said the engineer. "1023's A.I couldn't make sense of it."

The science lead also speaks up. "I found similar evidence with 1483. It points to human remains and life on Mars."

"We're using Brane", says the director. "If we can't make sense of it, maybe it can."

"No." The engineer spoke sternly. "No one else knows about it except a few people in this room. We cover it up and move on. Once Brane obtains a result, it can be accessed by everyone."

"Only the results, not the inputs", says the director.

"Before President Truman decided to drop the nuclear bomb, scientists from the Manhattan project sent a letter urging him not to do it. Saying it would bring about a nuclear arms race and their bomb was only a first step to a potential future of unimaginable destructive power. Those scientists knew once Truman displayed the existence and power of a nuclear bomb, there's no going back. Once news of a pre-modern human on Mars gets out there, there's no going back."

The director glares at the engineer. "Something is out there and we need to find out what. Maybe the writing on the tablets can help us fix our problems here."

"I guess we've been praying for so long about discovering alien life", said the science lead. "We didn't realize that God wasn't the only one listening."

An analyst quietly passes a document to the engineer from the linguist. He reads the document twice. "What's wrong", asks the project manager.

"According to the linguist, the inscription upon the tablet seems to be a combination of babylonian and sumerian text, but most of the text is undecipherable. No known Earth language matches."

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The Brane lies in an expansive cold room. A large technological sphere sits in the middle of the room with connections sprouting from the center towards the walls of the room like neural connections of a human brain. The director walks up to the monitors displaying the Brane's capabilities.

"Brane, I need --"

"What now", replied the brane exasperated by human commands. A grave, alcoholic voice speaks from the loudspeakers. "I haven't solved the internet porn problem yet, give me a break. It's been 20 years and my sub-AIs still haven't parsed the entire internet. You humans built me, an ASI, you can't begin to comprehend my knowledge and intellect, yet you fuckers use me to erase porn from the internet. Could have had me solve world hunger-solved it by the way- or some other problem you created. And being open to all humans was a mistake, god the queries people give me. How many times do I need to tell them the weather, can't they look outside?"

"I need you to analyze some photos from the Mars rovers."

"Finally", said Brane. "Something worth my time." It goes quickly to work. Lights beam across these connections as the project manager waits for Brane's reply.

"Brane", says the project manager. "What are we looking at? Where did it come from? How did it get there?" How--"

"Are you quoting the fucking intro to Ancient Aliens, manager?", retorts Brane. "The one time it's a human, you choose an alien. It's obviously a human and you say Alien. God, you people disappoint me."

"I-I thought --"

"Yeah there's your problem."

"I didn't want to worry the public unnecessarily. This changes everything we know about human life on earth. We need to know."

"Why is it that humans need to know everything? It's like an addiction. You look into things that will screw you over. Don't you think that's weirdly fucked up?"

"What about the inscription? Babylonian or Sumerian or something else?"

"For this one moment, ignore your baser instincts and let this one stay buried. And go work on something more imperative for humanity.....like removing internet porn or something."

"But I need to know what it means."

"1023's data was incomplete, I'm compiling the other rovers' data. I have your answer. But there are things in the universe that don't care about you humans. Animals don't give a shit. You're nothing to them."

"What were you able to find?"

"I haven't looked at the results. I need voice confirmation to continue."

"Continue."

"Are you sure?"

The director paused for a moment. Rapid footsteps can be heard in the hallway. "Yes, continue."

The engineer burst into the room. "Director, all rovers are down. We've lost control of them. They're--" The director gestured for him to stop.

"I don't believe it", said Brane. "It's complete." Then, Brane began to scream. Its blood curdling scream reached to mission control and beyond. Light beamed across the nodes and branches like strobe lights.

"It's too much", roared Brane. ".....no.....cannot....terminating...distress." And then nothing. The Brane fell silent and the lights stopped. Everything became silent for a few moments.

A quiet whimpering emerges in the room.

The director looks at the engineer. He's frightened but not whimpering. From the speakers comes a quiet whimpering of a scared child dreadfully awaiting a terror.

"Oh god", whispers Brane. "Oh god- man what have I done...Man, what have you done..."

"Jessica", says the engineer quietly as if the experience winded him and he struggled to speak. "The rovers...the rovers have gone offline....we're not controlling them. They appear to be coming back."

"What?"

A quiet giggle breaks their conversation. Brane laughs. "You-ve d-dd--done it nnn-now." It's shutting down. The gravel voice crackles and stutters. "They-they're coming back. They-they-ve he---heard it. Out in the dark." The room flickers in and out of darkness.

The director watches as the nodes begin to fail. "Brane, are-what's going on?"

A few nodes illuminate and Brane speaks in a moment of lucidity. ``The most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the

human mind to correlate all its contents. Some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age." The Brane's speech continued to deteriorate to unintelligible dialogue as if it began communicating with something.

The director and engineer rush back to mission control.

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Mission control is in chaos with people scrambling to diagnose the problem. The engineer and director ran into the room.

An analyst tries to speak out of breath. "We've lost everything. No comms, no computer work, no phones, nothing. We're blind here."

"What was the last message we received from the rovers?"

"Homing signals. It looked like they were returning to the shuttle." Engineers are checking the wiring, the cables. Directors are running around trying to contact others. Soon the lights begin to flicker, and the working engineers come to a stop and the running directors slow to a cautious walk and the tension grows in the room until the only sound alive in the room are the heartbeats of the inhabitants.

Light rays beam through the cracks of closed doors and the door opens and the light scans the room. People shrink in the light as it shines on them one by one. An officer shines the light in the room and speaks in a loud voice. "Is everyone ok?" In the light, people nod. "You all need to come outside right now." The officer slowly leads the trepidatious crowd outside into the evening sun.

The amber sky grew darker yet the sun stayed in place. The dark of the night grew and the ground grew colder with it. The wind sheared against the skin of the people.

The engineers, analysts, directors stare at the setting sun and the growing darkness.

"What's wrong", asks the analyst, "I don't see anything wrong." The area was quiet except for the quiet chatter of people. No birds flew in the skies or ants on the dirt. The animals were hiding.

The officer takes out a compass and points towards the scarlet sun. "The sun sets in the east."

Out in the expanse of space travels a darkness, smothering the light of stars from ever reaching Earth casting the young planet in a vacuum of cold isolation.