

Veteran of the Red Soil

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Part I

Earth

Martha, my love, I'm so glad you're here. I'll be fine now. They don't let you have visitors unless you're going to be fine. It's so heavy here—I must be back on Earth? It feels like a lifetime since we last saw one another. I've missed you.

Do you remember when we found out I was leaving? It was a Thursday, I think. I'd just arrived home from the office, and you had champagne on ice. All that effort: the simulations, the exercises, the months of training. It had finally paid off—I'd been deployed! And to the red planet itself! It seemed like the chance of a lifetime, but I wish I'd known then what I know now. Mars is not what we thought, Martha, and neither is the war against the Sheens.

The weeks on the transport were uneventful. I spent most of my time reading the technical manual for our tuxes—our Offensive Survival Combat Suits, although you'll never hear a soldier call them that. I've read it countless times before, of course, but knowledge is the sharpest weapon Martha! Most of the passengers were middle ranking reserves, like me. I did make friends with a lieutenant by the name of Yansong. He was from the Eastern continent, but spoke very passable Standard. It turns out he was a mechanical engineer too, so we had plenty to discuss during lunchtimes.

Still, that month passed slowly. When we finally arrived, Mars was a crisp, red crescent hanging in the darkness of space. The platoon's Forward Operating Base was in orbit a few hundred kilometres up, and soon came into view. It was hovering above Olympus Mons—the largest volcano in the Solar System—and it was quite a sight, Martha! The FOB was a tiny speck of reflected sunlight, whereas the Mons was an enormous, sprawling cone rising out of the red haze as if it was trying to swallow the space station whole.

When we were close enough to make out the details of the FOB, I was a bit underwhelmed. It looked like a jumble of spare parts, rather than a space station, and Yansong told me I wasn't far from the truth. Apparently, it had started out as a research station. When the Sheens arrived, the military had taken over and it had become an Earth Alliance outpost. They'd been bolting parts on ever since, and ten years later it was a bit worse for wear.

Before long, we found ourselves disembarking and—I'm telling you, Martha—it was like night and day. Where the transport had been modern, spacious and civilised, the station was dirty, cramped and desperate. My first impression of it was the smell: stale air tainted with the odour of humanity. My second, was the people. The men were unshaven, and the women greasy-haired. They didn't look like the proud, rugged soldiers I'd been expecting. They looked more like the victims of a spent battle; they looked like the losing side.

I didn't have long to ponder these thoughts, because the Phoenix platoon commander was waiting for me at the airlock. He didn't give me a tour, or make any small talk. He just showed me straight to my fire team's bunkroom, and reminded me that there was a drop briefing at 0800. It was about 0430 Mars-time, which explained why the lights were out. In the darkness, I could just make out that three out of the four bunks were filled. I climbed carefully into the vacant top bunk, and tried to make myself comfortable. My gear wouldn't be unloaded until the morning, so I curled up under an issue-blanket and tried to get some sleep.

The sound of movement woke me a couple of hours later. Leaning over the edge of my bed, I saw two women crouched in the gap between the bunks. They were sorting their kit,

and murmuring in low voices. There was a man in the top bunk opposite, who was sitting up and looking at me blankly. I nodded and smiled, which seemed to make him jump.

“Ah—sir! You...must be our new sergeant? Sir?”

The two women looked up. They peered at the man who had spoken, and then across at me.

“It’s just corporal, actually, but yes—I’m your new commander.”

“Forget him, Wu,” the dark haired women said, in clipped tones. “He’s no sarge, just another corpse. He’s not worth the effort.” She glanced at me and then returned to her packing.

“I’m Private Wu, sir,” said the man opposite. He nodded robotically, and leaned over to shake my hand.

“Corporal Jennings, pleased to meet you, Private. And which of you is Lance Corporal Drake?”

Wu’s eyes darted back to the women who had spoken, and he gave me a weak smile.

“He’s talking to ya, Drake,” drawled the other woman. She looked at me and shrugged, as if in apology. “I’m Private Tyler, sir. Don’t mind her,” she said, nodding towards the lance corporal. She stood up to lean against a bunk, “It’s good to meet ya, but we all sure do wish it was under better circumstances.”

“Yes—as do I, Private, as do I. I’m sorry about what happened out there, but, well, orders are orders and here I am.”

It’s not the way I’d planned to introduce myself, Martha, but I suppose these things never go as we want them to. I climbed out of my bunk—I was still wearing my uniform from the night before—and tiptoed around Tyler and Drake to reach the door. I turned to face the room and stood to

attention.

“Phoenix Charlie Two,” I began, using our call sign. Wu climbed down and joined me at attention. Tyler carried on leaning against the bunk. Drake looked up, and forced a smile in my direction. “We have a drop briefing at 0800—that’s in forty minutes. I expect you to be ready to go in thirty. After the briefing, we’ll head to the mess and breakfast together. We’ll spend the rest of the day prepping our tuxes. I assume we’re dropping tomorrow, so I want us to be completely ready—that means there’ll be no downtime until I’m satisfied with each of your suits. Questions?”

“No sir,” came Wu’s prompt reply.

“Whatever you say, sarge,” said Tyler, giving me a relaxed—almost mocking—salute. She returned to her kit, and didn’t say another word.

Drake stopped packing and turned to Tyler. “He’s a corporal, Tyler, not a sergeant. Cole was a sergeant.” She waited for Tyler to reply, but was met with silence. “He’s not Cole, and he’s not our sarge, so don’t call him that.” She turned to me. “Why do we need to leave ten minutes early, Jenkins?”

Honestly, Martha, I was gobsmacked! She didn’t use my rank or honorific, and to top it off she couldn’t even remember my name! “My name is Jennings, Lance Corporal, and you will address me as corporal or sir. Is that understood?” She stared back at me, unperturbed. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt for the moment. “As for your question: I’m glad you asked. We’ll be leaving early, so we can arrive before the other teams and claim the best seats—I don’t want Phoenix Charlie Two missing out on any details!”

She stared at me blankly for a moment, and then turned back to Tyler. “Is he for real?”

The briefing itself wasn't quite what I expected. Apparently, the platoon had seen a hundred more just like it. Sometimes they dropped, sometimes they didn't. As a result, most of the details were left out, and I had to stay behind to clarify a few points with the platoon commander.

The plan was to drop at 0700 the following morning. Our target was a Sheen installation in the summit caldera of Olympus Mons. We needed to drop some way down the slopes of the Mons, because there's not enough atmosphere left at the summit to slow you down. The intelligence corps, on Earth, had determined that whatever the Sheens were building was probably some sort of transmitter. It was of the utmost importance that the transmitter was destroyed before it was completed, and that was our mission. We'd drop in fire teams and co-ordinate our attack from the western rim of the caldera. I'd need to bring Phoenix Charlie Two down in formation with the rest of our section, and make sure we touched down at just the right spot. Too far down, and it would take too long to hike back to the top. Too far up, and we'd risk alerting the Sheens.

One thing the platoon commander made abundantly clear, however, was that once we were down we were on our own. The FOB only had one re-entry vehicle, and he 'wasn't going to risk it picking up a couple of tin cans who don't know when to pop their VES.' Once we were down, we were to proceed to the FRV—the Final Rendezvous Point—on the edge of the caldera, and make contact with the rest of our section. Any teams that didn't make it to the FRV on-time would be assumed missing in action. Under no circumstances were we to try contacting the FOB. It relied on radio silence, and some smart stealth technology, to remain undetected by the Sheens. We'd have plenty of time—about thirty six hours—to make it to the FRV, so I just had to make sure I got the

team there before the attack began.

It was a good job I'd planned the rest of the day for tux maintenance, because there was a lot of work to do. My suit just needed un-crating. I checked it over, and re-packed the VES—the Vacuum Evacuation System—and then I was done. The same ought to have been true for the others, but they weren't even close. Wu's was OK, but I had to show him the best way to recondition his atmospheric recycler. It had less than a third of its factory capacity, which meant he'd have three times less air than the rest of us. Still, at least his combat systems were in good shape, as was his VES. A VES is a soldier's lifeline on Mars. Without it, there's no getting back to the FOB.

Tyler and Drake, however, left a lot to be desired. I was surprised Tyler wasn't still down on Mars, given the state of her VES, and half of Drake's power cells weren't even charged.

"You realise your cells aren't soaked, Lance Corporal?"

"They're all like it, Jen-nigs," she enunciated, "besides—it's an old suit. The cells are shot. Why don't you pick on Tyler, her suit got pretty beat up on our last drop, didn't it Tyl—"

"Shot is what you'll be, Lance Corporal, if you run out of charge in a firefight. They're easy enough to recondition—here, I'll show you how."

"Do what you want, Jennings, just lay off the lecture. I don't need it, and I don't wanna hear it."

"It's corporal or sir, Lance Corporal, and it won't take a minute, just—"

"Fine, do what you want."

I gave her a sharp look. She stared back for a second.

"Sir," she said after a pause.

Whilst I worked on her suit, she sat on one of the workshop counters and fiddled with her rifle. She did her best to ignore me. Wu came over though and asked me a few questions about what I was doing. Tyler was supposed to be re-packing her VES, but she kept sneaking glances too. Half an hour later, all of Drake's cells were at least ninety percent charged.

"I didn't know you could do that, sir. Not out here anyway," Wu commented from over my shoulder.

"You'd be surprised what you can maintain or recondition on a tux, even with field facilities like these. You should try taking a look at the technical manual some day, it has a lot of this sort of information in it."

"I bet you just ate that book for breakfast, didn't ya sarge?"

"I don't know about that," I chuckled, "but I've certainly read it a few times. We'll do this after each drop, and before you know it these suits will be as close to factory spec. as any outside of Earth orbit."

"I'll hold ya to it, sarge. Now, if you're done tinkering with Drake's can, maybe you could pull the same trick on mine?"

"Happy to, Private. Want to give me a hand, Wu?"

The three of us poured over Tyler's suit and, without much effort, her cells were as good as new. Drake stuck to her rifle, despite a few friendly invitations from Tyler. By the end of the day, Wu could breathe for as long as Drake; Drake could shoot for as long as Tyler; and Tyler could leave the planet whenever she liked. Not bad for a day's work, Martha!

We turned in early that night, and I thought of you in the stillness of lights-out. I wondered where you were, and what you were doing. My watch was still on Earth-time,

so I knew you'd be at work. I hoped you weren't missing me too much, Martha, but I knew you were proud of me. I remember thinking—with a jangle of nerves—that I'd be living up to that pride, first thing in the morning. I'd be falling into the thin Martian atmosphere, onto the flanks of Olympus Mons, and laying my first footprints in the red soil.

Even sat in my tux, the drop chamber's vacuum alarm hurt my ears. We were crouched in a circle, waiting for the alarm, but when it sounded it sent jolts of nerves through my bowels. I caught Drake looking at me, with a peculiar expression on her face. I hoped she couldn't read the fear on mine, but felt a pang of sympathy for her at the same time. If she hadn't been encased in her tux, it looked as though she'd have curled up in a corner. It couldn't have been the drop, because I knew from her record that she'd done dozens before. It might have been the Sheens. Sergeant Cole had been killed on the last drop, so maybe she was afraid the same thing was going to happen again. I couldn't tell what it was, but she looked the way I felt—only worse.

“Tyler?”

“Check-sir.”

“Wu?”

“Check, sir.”

“Drake?” I looked in her direction again, but her eyes were closed. “Lance Corporal Drake?”

Her eyes flicked open, and she glared at me. “Yes, dammit, I'm here aren't I?”

I let it pass—the middle of a drop chamber isn't the place to argue—but I needed to address her attitude.

“OK, team, on your feet. Disengage restraints, and be ready. Phoenix Charlie Command? This is Phoenix Charlie

Two. Ready to drop, sir.”

“Roger that, Charlie Two. Prepare for de-pressurisation.”

The air in the chamber hissed away into a gentle silence, leaving nothing but the sound of my breath. There’s always a moment of peace, then, between the anxiety of waiting and the thrill of the drop. That moment doesn’t last for long, but it’s like a calm sea awaiting a storm.

The hatch above our heads shot open, and the remaining atmosphere was sucked out into space-taking us with it. After that first moment of peace, the second one is violent and disorienting. Up becomes down, and suddenly you’re falling head-first towards Mars. The FOB plummeted away beneath us, and my stomach turned with the acceleration of being launched into the void.

When the acceleration is over, though, and the FOB is gone; there’s a second moment of calm-of wonder, really. The gravity from Mars is a gentle tug, pulling you down, and Mars itself is a frozen picture of mountains and craters. The surface is so vivid, and so bright. There’s hardly any clouds; just a distant, red landscape etched into the darkness. It’s breath-taking, Martha, it truly is.

And then you notice it. It’s easy to forget that you’re falling, but Mars is still getting closer. The Mons is rising out of the surface like a lumbering leviathan, and the first kicks of the atmosphere remind you: there’s a whole lot of friction between you, and the surface.

“Jennings-Tyler!” shouted Drake, over the radio.

I looked from her to Wu, and then searched for Tyler. I’d been a fool not to notice. She must have hit something on the way out, because she was in a dizzying spin. It looked like she was heading out towards Amazonis Planitia, hundreds of kilometres from the Mons.

“Clear comms only. Private Tyler, do you copy?”

It took her a few seconds to reply. "Sarge," she said in a strained voice.

"Can you control your spin, Private?"

"I'm trying, sarge...but it's...tough."

"Just relax, Private, wait 'till you hit more atmosphere—the drag will make it easier."

"Yes-sir."

"We'll get your spin under control, then we'll worry about your trajectory." She was definitely heading for the Planitia.

"Hell, just leave me, sir. I'll pop my VES when I'm down, and—"

"Out of the question, Private. We hit the red soil together or not at all."

Even though I was falling straight down, like a torpedo, I could feel the drag picking up. My tux was being buffeted from side to side, and my head was a lot warmer than my feet. I looked back for Tyler, but couldn't see her. Drake and Wu were in formation, right next to me. I checked my HUD: she was a hundred metres above us, and receding fast. She was still spinning.

"Drake, Wu: sixty seconds, two degrees West. Drop pattern Gamma. Make for twenty clicks West of the drop site. Questions?"

"No, sir," Wu replied promptly.

"What about Tyler?"

"I'll worry about Tyler, Lance Corporal. You two just stick together, alright?" There was a moment's silence between us. "Good. Forty-six seconds on the clock. See you down there."

I leaned out of the dive, and my tux shook violently from the atmospheric friction. That's what I wanted, though, and I pulled back from the others. Within moments, I was

sliding past Tyler's tumbling form, and I adjusted my trim to stay level with her.

"Private?"

"Yes-sir," she panted, "sorry, sarge...I just can't get it."

"That's OK, Private, you're going to be just fine. I want you to stop trying, OK? Just relax. We're going to spin you down on thrusters, alright? I'll tell you how, you just follow my orders."

"Thank you sarge, will do."

"Alright, now, on my mark: one second, counter-clockwise...and...mark!"

Two thin bursts of plasma illuminated her torso for a second, and then were gone. It was enough, though—she was spinning much slower.

"Great work, Private, great work."

"Thanks, sarge, that feels a whole lot better!"

"I bet it does, Private, I bet it does. Now, we're going to do point five seconds lateral clockwise. Ready?"

"Ready, sarge."

"Alright, and...mark!"

Her thrusters fired again, and this time she stopped spinning completely. She was still unstable—her tux was bucking in the turbulence—but she wasn't tumbling any more.

"Well done, Private. Think you can stabilise?"

"You got it, sarge. Thanks a bunch. Ain't no way I could've done that myself."

"Don't mention it, Private. We're Phoenix Charlie Two—we're a team. You injured?"

"Na-ah, just banged my leg on the way out. Stupid mistake, sarge."

"It happens, Private, don't worry about it. You're looking much more stable, well done. Now, can you see the others?"

"The hell I can, sir, we must have lost 'em completely."

“Hmm, me neither. Let’s head in their direction, and see if we can pick up anything on infrared. Ready?”

We trimmed East, dove, and levelled out. We still couldn’t see anything.

“Ain’t no-one out here but the Mons, sarge, and it’s getting awful close!”

“Don’t worry about that, Private, we’re still twenty clicks up, at least. Plenty of time to slow our descent. Ah! I’ve got their signatures. They’re three or four clicks East, and about two down. Moving away fast.”

“That’s too far, sarge, ain’t no way we can make up that kinda distance.”

I nodded to myself. “You’re right, Private, but if we work together, we can still make it.” I switched to the long-range radio. “Wu, Drake? Do you copy?”

“Copy, sir,” Wu replied.

“Good. Change of plans: trim West again, four degrees. Make for fifty clicks out from the green zone.”

“Copy that, sir.”

“Fifty clicks?” Drake demanded. “Are you mad, Jennings? It’ll take us weeks to hike back up!”

“It’s corporal or sir, Lance Corporal, and that was an order. Don’t transmit junk.”

Her signal cut, but I could see from their heat signatures that she was following orders. I looked back over at Tyler.

“Great, Tyler, your trim’s much better. How’re you feeling?”

“Ha! Feeling, sarge? Just peachy, couldn’t be better, sir!”

I was glad she was in better spirits. She was probably still running on adrenaline. “Good. We’re going to trim East and roll into a dive. We’ll fall for two, stabilise and then engage dorsal thrusters to make up the distance. It’ll

be a rough ride, but if we time it right we can pull out of the dive a stone's throw from the others and still land smoothly. Questions?"

"No-sir. You just tell me what to do, and when to do it, and I'll buckle in for the ride!"

"That's the spirit, soldier. Alright: trim East, five degrees, and then we'll roll into the dive. Ready?"

She did marvellously, Martha, she really did. She didn't err, and she didn't hesitate. I'd only known her a day, but I was already proud of her. We made it down in one piece, and heard over the radio that the others had done the same. We just had a few kilometres to cover, and we'd be reunited as a team.

I must say though, Martha, all this conversation has left me exhausted. I think I'll just take short nap, and then I'll tell you all about it. I'll just close my eyes and—

Part II

Mars

We agreed a rendezvous point, about ten kilometres away, and set off immediately. Taking into account the terrain and the gradient, I expected to meet the others by midday. Hiking in a tux is actually quite relaxing. You move your leg, it moves its leg. Your arm, its arm. The interior is climate controlled, and the actuators in the limbs do all the heavy lifting. Even though I was hauling hundreds of kilos of red metal up the tallest volcano on the planet, I didn't even break a sweat.

"Don't take it personal, s'all I'm saying, sarge." Tyler had broached the subject of Drake, and I was willing to entertain any advice she had to offer.

"She had a hard time, on our last drop. It was a tough mission, what with Cole and all. He was injured before the end. He suffered, he suffered bad, and they were—well, close."

"Close, close?" I probed.

"Not like that, just friends, you know. Been by each other's sides since basic training—you form a bond, when you go through that with someone."

"I can imagine."

"With respect, sarge, I'm not sure ya can. You're a reserve, aren't ya?"

"Well—yes, but I still completed the same training."

"On your weekends?"

"Yes, but—"

"Go back to your wife at the end of each Sunday?"

"Fiancé, actually, but—"

"S'not the same, sarge. Basic training—for us weekday warriors—is six months o' hell. No social calls, no visitors. No decent food, and no booze. The last eight weeks is on the Moon. It's tough, sarge, and the people you train with become your family overnight."

I nodded. I suppose it was hard for me to imagine after all.

“Anyway, she was in the same cohort as him. I think he’s the same age as her brother. I guessed that o’ course, but—”

“I didn’t think she had a brother? That wasn’t in her file...”

“Hell, sarge, those things just list ya next of kin. He died, I don’t know, a few years back. Drake doesn’t open up much, ya know?”

I nodded again. “Hmm, I know.”

“Well, anyway, she told me about her brother one time. And Cole? I figure he’s about the same age. I don’t know what his story was, but they were a piece of home for one another. Hell, I don’t get it, sarge, but that’s the way it was.” She paused for a moment, and looked at me sidelong. “O’ course, I pieced most o’ that together. Probably best to keep it between us...”

“Of course, Private, this is all confidential as far as I’m concerned.”

“That’s it, sarge, classified and top secret.” She flashed a grin at me, and I smiled back. Encouraged, she carried on. “So that’s the thing: they were close. And his death? Well, sarge, it hit her hard. Like I said, he was hurt before the end. Always said he wasn’t gonna activate his death mask—said he wanted to face death like a warrior, or some bull like that. Me? I say: you take what your given. If your tux is handing out mercy at the end, ya take it.

“But Drake, now, she was on his side. Thought there was some sorta warriors creed that the two of them were in on. So, when he was hit, she stayed with him. Tried to ease his mind with words, but words are words, sarge—they ain’t no drugs. And he was hit bad, real bad. Screaming, he was,

filling the radio with his anguish and his rage. I turned it off. I couldn't listen no more. Wu told me what happened after. Drake had tried to be with him—tried to see him off the way he'd wanted—but he couldn't take it. Wu didn't use the word, but I know Drake would think it: he turned coward. He was scared, and hurting real bad. So he used it. Turned on his death mask, and—just like that—slipped into a terminal haze of electrode-fuelled ecstasy.

"I saw it happen, even if I couldn't hear it. She sorta slumped down by his side. She looked away, just down into the red soil. She didn't look at him no more. And I don't blame her. They don't call it a death mask for no reason. You ever seen someone use it, sarge?"

I shook my head. I'd heard of it, of course, although the technical manual didn't call it a death mask. If you were terminally injured, and suffering, you could activate a psycho-electric signal in your helmet. I forget the details, but it basically puts you into a euphoric hallucination until you die. It's sort of a last resort painkiller. Not the sort of thing I put too much stock into, Martha.

"Well, I have—before Cole too. They sorta relax, and go all calm. Their eyes glaze over, and they get this stupid smile on their faces. Some of 'em even drool. It ain't pretty, sarge, they're smacked right out of it. They got bones outta their skin, they got shrapnel in their faces, they got holes through their guts—but none of it matters any more. They've arrived at heaven early, and there ain't nothin' gonna bring 'em back.

"That's the way Cole was, at the end. It must have hit Drake hard, to see him like that. He hadn't wanted to go that way, but there he was: checked outta this life, and waiting for the next. When we got back to the FOB, she wasn't the same. She was stuck in herself, if you know what

I mean. Snapped a lot. Didn't laugh at my jokes no more.

"And that was, what, three weeks ago now? It's too soon, sarge. Too soon for her to be over it. Too soon for her to be back here. But, the war says jump and, hell, here we are. Just don't take it personal, s'all I'm saying. It's not you, it's her. Well, not her, but him. His death. His way of death. Not a damn thing you can do about it, if you ask me. Just treat her right—the same you'd treat me or Wu—and she'll come round."

She'd given me a lot to think about, Martha, and we spent the rest of the march in silence. The slopes of the Mons are barren—red, gritty and scattered with boulders. The volcano hadn't been active for billions of years, so all that remained was settled dust and errant debris. We made good time, and caught up with the others just after lunchtime.

"Alrighty, sarge, so what's the plan?" Tyler asked, once we'd all exchanged greetings.

"Well, we're out of range of our section, so we can't call in our position. By my estimates, we've got about fifty clicks to cover to make the FRV. We've got about thirty hours left, which should be plenty of time if we march long days. We'll crouch-camp late tonight, and try to make it to the FRV by the end of tomorrow. Questions?"

"No sir," Wu replied enthusiastically.

"Excellent. Let's move out!"

The Sun had long since set by the time we stopped. Martian days are about the same length as on Earth, so we were all ready for a rest. We crouch-camped that evening, which basically involves us all locking our tuxes in a crouch, and making ourselves as comfortable as possible. It's not so bad—there's room enough to curl up in the bellies of the

suits, and you get a reasonable night's sleep. It's not luxury, but I've slept in worse places.

We rose before dawn, and all was calm and crisp. You can't feel the morning chill on Mars, but you can almost see it. The air is completely clear—it's almost non-existent—and the rays of the stars seem to penetrate everywhere, casting the landscape in an ethereal glimmer. The Sun rose that morning from behind the Mons, looming ahead of us. The atmosphere is so thin, the night clings to the sky until the very last minute. Even when the warming rays of the Sun spill over the horizon, the stars are still visible to the naked eye. Twenty minutes after waking, we were all up and about and ready to go. We made good progress on that second morning. But, just after lunchtime, we ran into trouble.

The summit caldera of the Mons sits atop a dome of basalt, dozens of kilometres across. It was upthrust from the main mass of the Mons during some long-past geological cataclysm, leaving a cliff encircling the summit. We were supposed to have landed on the summit-side of this obstacle, but our unplanned descent had left the cliff between us and the caldera.

When we found ourselves at the base of this cliff, it looked intimidating. It was about thirty metres high, but it looked climbable—even in our tuxes. On Earth, climbing that high in a quarter of a tonne of hardware would have been ridiculous. Under the more gentle Martian gravity, it was just a bad idea. Tyler had volunteered to go first, because she said she used to rock climb back on Earth. I was just glad it wasn't me.

"Easy as pie," Tyler bragged when she reached the top.

I was about five metres down from her, and Drake and Wu were below me.

"Easy?" Drake shot back. "Let me tell you something,

Tyl—

“Er, Corporal?” Wu interrupted. His voice was higher than normal, and it wasn’t like him to interrupt anyone—least of all Drake.

I peered down between my feet. “How’re you holding up, Private? Looks like you’re doing just fine.” I couldn’t quite see him past Drake. She adjusted her position to look down as well, and I caught a glimpse of him. There was something strange about his position—he looked contorted. Then, before I knew it, he was gone; tumbling down the cliff in slow motion. He bounced off an outcrop here, and thumped into a ledge there. I could see debris flying off his suit from each impact. When he finally hit the floor, I could feel the impact through the rock face. Martian gravity is low, but a few hundred kilos of steel is still a lot of mass. He lay prone, face down in the red dirt. A moment passed in silence, as we all stared at his immobile figure.

“Private Wu? Come in Private!”, I said frantically.

Drake swore under her breath. “What was he thinking?”

“Drake: you and I, down-climb, on the double.” She didn’t answer, but she didn’t argue either.

“Where d’ya want him, sarge?”

Tyler’s question didn’t make sense; I was too intent on what I was doing. “Private?”

“You want him down there, or up here?”

“Erm—”

“It’s just, I can set up a haul line from up here if you like. Send down a ’biner, and you can clip him in? I can have him up here in no time, if that’s where you want him?”

“Right, good thinking Private. We’ll probably need a tent to sort him out. Get started, and I’ll decide when I reach him.”

By this point, Drake had reached the ground and was diagnosing Wu's suit. I was a heartbeat behind her.

"Think he's OK," she said, "just banged his head—looks like he's unconscious."

"What's his health readout?"

She paused to check. "Good, mostly green...no broken bones or lacerations. I think it says he's got a concussion, but I'm not sure—"

"That's fine, Lance Corporal, good work," I said, reaching the bottom.

"His tux is pretty beat though."

"Let's take a look," I said as I crouched down next to her. I brought up the menu for suit diagnostics. The damage codes were bad, but I don't think Drake recognised them. She didn't react the way I was expecting her to.

"Alright, it's not too bad," I probed. I wanted to keep her morale up; I didn't want her thinking she was going to face two casualties in two drops. "It could be worse—we'll fix it up, and he'll be good as new."

She searched my face, with a look somewhere between fear and suspicion. I switched to narrow beam, so only she could hear me.

"He's going to be fine, Lance Corporal. He's still alive, and his tux is going to keep him that way. We were lucky." I gave her a reassuring smile and, for an instant, she almost smiled back.

"Alrighty, sarge," Tyler's voice interrupted. "Locked and loaded and ready to go up here, want me to send down a line?"

"Great work, Private! Where did you get the haul cord from?"

"Unpacked my VES, unthreaded the balloon tether. Eighty metres of prime haul line, right there sarge."

“Of course,” I nodded, “good thinking, Private. Yes, send it down—we’ll haul him up and set up camp at the top.”

Within minutes, we had Wu clipped in and had started climbing alongside him. Tyler was hauling him up slowly, and Drake and I were manoeuvring his inert form around obstacles. When we pulled him over the edge, we all collapsed in relief. Even with mechanical assistance, hauling another man’s tux is—as Tyler put it—‘one helluva dead weight’.

“Great work on the hauling rig, Private,” I said to Tyler, as I made to inspect Wu’s health readout.

“Least I could do, sarge.”

“Alright; blood pressure’s good, no internal bleeds, respiration normal. Looks like it’s just that concussion, and a banged up suit. Great work everyone.”

Tyler was grinning, but Drake’s face was still set. “We need to treat his concussion. What’s next?”

“We move him away from the cliff, and we set up a tent.”

Before you say anything, Martha, we don’t use real tents on Mars—there’s no way they’d be able to contain the pressure of a breathable atmosphere. Instead, we join our suits together to make a force field generator. Then, we pump the void filled with compressed gases—our tuxes have enough for about four camps. For some reason I can’t explain, in the army they still call that a tent.

“Won’t work with three suits, Jennings. You need four field generators to make a tent.”

“I know that, Lance Corporal,” I replied evenly.

“Damn right he does, Drake. Hell, I bet you wrote the book on them tuxes, didn’t you sarge?”

Despite our situation, I chuckled. “Can’t say I wrote it, Private, but I have read it cover to cover. Don’t worry, Lance Corporal, we’ll be fine.”

“But you need four suits to—”

“Trust me, Lance Corporal, I have an idea in mind.” I didn’t tell her what that idea was, because I didn’t think she’d agree to it.

Sat in a circle, we started with Drake. She activated her field generator, and a telescopic antenna extended in an arch. It stopped when it reached the apex of a hemisphere, about three metres high. Tyler was next; her antenna reached up towards Drake’s, and connected. I went last, and my tux confirmed connection when it linked up with the others. In order to establish a force field, we needed Wu’s to do the same.

“What now, Jennings?”

I didn’t reply. Instead, I pulled my arms and legs into the torso of my tux, and triggered the eject sequence. The breastplate fired off, and the rush of evacuating atmosphere sucked me out in an instant. I tumbled face-down onto the frozen Martian soil, and my skin prickled in the near-vacuum surrounding me.

All this might sound dangerous, Martha, but I knew what I was doing. A human can survive in the vacuum of space for about thirty seconds, before lasting damage is done. There was still some pressure, even at our altitude, so I knew I had at least that long. It was cold too—about minus ninety—but the low pressure meant I’d take a lot longer to freeze than on Earth.

I picked myself up, and stumbled towards Wu’s tux. In the few seconds it took me, all the exposed moisture on my body boiled off. I was left with itching skin, and raw eyes. You’d think the moisture would freeze, but the low pressure means water will boil at almost any temperature. My fingers hurt, my face hurt, and I could barely keep my eyes open. Still, I made it to Wu’s suit. I pulled open the service hatch,

with hands that were quickly becoming clubs, and punched in the controls for his tent. The antenna from his tux rose to join the others in painful silence, and my lungs started to ache from the lack of breath.

The gentle return of sound told me that Earth-like pressure had been restored, and I luxuriated in the rapidly warming air.

“Well I’ll be damned, sarge,” Tyler said, as she stepped out of her tux. “That’s certainly one way to do it! You’re either a madman or a genius; just don’t ask me which!”

“He’s an idiot, Tyler. A damned idiot. You should be dead, Jennings, you know that? And stop calling him ‘sarge’. He’s a corporal, Tyler. They don’t make idiots like him sergeants, so they can come all this way and get themselves killed. They—”

“Whoa there, take it easy Drake,” Tyler replied, holding up both hands. “The man just saved Wu’s skin. How’re we gonna treat him when he’s locked in his tux? We gotta get him out somehow, and—”

“Sergeant Cole is dead, Tyler, or don’t you remember?” Drake’s voice was cold and flat. “His body was broken, and his mind bent, pulling some crazy stunt like that. He wasn’t a hero at the end. They didn’t give him a medal. He was just dead, on Mars, desiccated.”

That stopped Tyler in her tracks, and froze the smile on her face. Her expression faded to leave something else entirely.

“It’s alright, Lance Corporal,” I began gently. “I know what I’m—”

“The hell you do, Jennings. You’ve never set foot on Mars before, but because you’ve read some book you think you know it all. You’re an idiot in a can, who thinks he’s better than everyone else. But, when you’re dead too, you

won't be. You'll just be dead. Do what you want; the rest of us will just try to stay alive."

I have to say, Martha, that made me angry. I let it pass, though, and took a deep breath.

"I'm going to get Wu out of his tux, and treat his injuries. Then I'm going to take a look at his suit. One of you help me, the other make camp. Alright?"

"Fine by me, sarge. Drake: you cook us summit tasty, will ya?" She squeezed Drake's shoulder on her way past, and joined me at Wu's tux. Drake stood there for a moment, and then busied herself with setting up camp.

We dragged Wu out, and lay him on a camp bed. He was fine, really—a few bruises here and there—and he just needed some sedatives, and a long rest. Half an hour later, he was cocooned in a sleeping bag and sound asleep. Tyler and I joined Drake around the camp fire—a rifle cell rigged through a heating coil—and gratefully accepted the mugs of soup she handed us.

"How's his tux?" Drake asked, breaking the silence. Tyler looked at me, and shrugged.

"Well," I began, "life support is green, his VES is fine and his rifle just has a few scratches."

"But?"

"But, his left side took a beating. The actuators in the arm are shot, and three out of five are blown in the leg."

Drake looked from me to Tyler. "What does that mean?"

"What he's saying, Drake, is that Wu's gonna walk with a limp and need one of us to wipe his ass."

I gave Tyler a disapproving look, and answered the question myself. "It means, Lance Corporal, that we'll make slower than normal progress, and that Private Wu won't be able to reload without assistance."

"Damn."

“Nah, the sarge is right. Has he got air? Yip. Has he got a gun? Yip. Has he got a way off this rock? Yip. A dud leg and a bust arm ain’t nothing to cry over.”

Drake nodded thoughtfully, as if she was digesting Tyler’s insightful contribution. I just sipped my soup, and stared into the glowing coil. After dinner, I ordered the other two to bed and spent a couple of hours working on Wu’s tux. We were going to break camp in the early hours, so I wanted to give him a fighting chance at keeping up. In the end, I managed to get one of his leg actuators working again. That meant only two out of five were blown—not bad for a night’s work.

When I finally curled up in the open belly of my tux, I was exhausted. Still, I felt surprisingly optimistic about the next day. Tyler and Drake were both asleep in their tuxes, and Wu lay peacefully on the camp bed. Despite having a bad day, not to mention Drake’s reaction to my little trick, I felt like we were getting closer as a team. I didn’t know what the next few days would bring, but we were surviving. We were going to keep on surviving, until we popped our VES’ and floated back to the FOB. If there was one thing I wanted to achieve on Mars, it was to leave in one piece and as one team.

For most of the next day, Wu struggled on with his suit—but he didn’t complain. He kept having nose bleeds—as messy affair in a helmet—and, a couple of hours after lunch, he had one which didn’t stop. We set up another tent-camp, and gave Wu a rest. I was sure I could make out the caldera’s rim on the horizon, and I told the others I thought we’d reach the FRV the following day.

I ordered Wu straight to bed when we’d put up the tent. Drake gave Wu a double ration of soup, whilst she was cook-

ing dinner, and I worked on his suit again. Tyler volunteered to clean out his face-plate, which was a really decent thing to do. Dinner was a sombre affair that night. No-one mentioned it, but we all knew—we were twenty four hours late for the FRV.

Drake surprised me by passing round a hip flask to everyone—myself included—and that seemed to lift our spirits. Wu went straight to sleep that night, and I continued tinkering with his suit. Drake and Tyler sat murmuring by the cooling heating coil, until all I could see was their silhouettes. By the time I crawled into my tux I was tired, but happy. I'd recovered a salvageable actuator from Wu's arm, and fixed it up in the leg. With any luck, he'd be able to keep up with the rest of us in the morning.

I fell asleep in an instant that night and, come to think of it, I'm rather tired now. Despite the air in here—it's cold isn't it?—I'm awfully drowsy, all of a sudden. I—I'll just take another nap, Martha, and then—

Part III

Mons

As I predicted, we made it to the caldera's rim the following day. It was mid-afternoon when we reached it, and we stood in silence to take in the view. The summit ridge is a rough ring of rock that sweeps out into the distance. Despite our situation, I was struck dumb with awe. The lip of the caldera is the highest point on Mars—the highest point on any terrestrial planet—and I really felt it. The caldera opened onto an enormous amphitheatre of rock, and the sky was a midnight red that was speckled with stars.

We weren't able to reach the rest of our section, which didn't surprise me. We were a few hours short of being two full days late for the FRV. They might have been out there, but keeping quiet—there was just no way to know. Whether they were out there or not, we were on our own. We just had to find the transmitter, and continue with our mission.

"Ya see it, sarge?"

"I can't say I can, Private. You?"

"Na-ah. Nothin' but red dirt, and red rock."

"Where are the others?" asked Wu, to no-one in particular.

"Fried, I'd guess," replied Drake.

"They're probably out there right now, Private," I said confidently. "They'll have their comms off, as per our orders, but they're probably still preparing for the assault. We're only a handful of daylight hours late for the rendezvous, so they're probably still out there."

"They're gone, Jennings," said Drake, as she stared out into the caldera. "Pretending they're not won't change a thing."

"Ain't nothin' out there but red dirt and red rock, sarge," Tyler said, scanning the horizon. "No transmitter, no Sheens, no tuxes. Nothing."

"Well, we're on our own, for now, so we just need to

make the best of it. We've got a couple of hours of daylight left, so we'll conduct some reconnoitre to decide the best route down. We'll crouch-camp at sundown and leave at 0200. I want to be halfway down that slope by the time the Sun comes up. We'll be locked and loaded, and expecting a fight. Clear?"

Three solemn faces, behind three visors, nodded their assent. As the Sun was setting, I crouched in my tux and watched the shadows draw out in-front of me. I narrow beamed each of the team, before lights out, to see how they were holding up. The night before combat is always a restless one.

"How's the head, Wu?"

"It's OK, sir, thanks for asking."

"Any more nosebleeds today?"

"No sir, I'm feeling much better."

"Glad to hear it, Private. And how's the tux?"

"Not too bad. You did some good work on the leg, sir—I've hardly noticed it at all today. The arm's still dead, but there's nothing we can do about that."

"That's the spirit, soldier. Ready for tomorrow?"

He hesitated for a moment. "I will be, sir, when the time comes."

Tyler was nervous, but wasn't ready to admit it. She cracked a few jokes, but didn't give me any straight answers. Drake seemed bored. I still couldn't read her—she could have been relaxed or terrified, I just couldn't tell. Speaking with her reminded me of the look on her face in the drop chamber.

In the silence before sleep, I thought about our situation. The more I thought, the more nervous I became. There was no trace of our section, and I couldn't expect there to be, but I think I'd been hoping to find something. They were either out there right now—in hiding or preparing an attack—

or they'd already engaged the Sheens. If they'd engaged the Sheens and won, they'd be on the radio trying to reach us. So, that meant that they were either out there, or they'd been annihilated in the attack. I was worried it was the latter—we were two days late for the FRV, after all. If that was the case, Phoenix Charlie Two were the last fire team left in the theatre of war. It was down to us to stop the Sheens from completing their transmitter. The following day, we had to destroy it—or die trying.

When Tyler's drop went wrong, I knew I could correct her trajectory. When Wu had fallen down that cliff, I knew I could repair his suit. But, that night I was faced with the unknown. Our section could be out there, or not. The Sheens could be waiting in ambush, or not. We might survive the day, or not. I slipped into an uneasy sleep that night, Martha, and dreamt of an invisible enemy murdering each one of us, in the darkness of an eternal night.

When the Sun finally spilled over the far rim of the caldera, we'd already been marching for a couple of hours. A yellow glow had been building on the horizon for twenty minutes or so, but the sky above was filled with stars until the last moment. The appearance of the Sun flooded the basin with yellow light that glinted off our suits, and glared through our visors.

I squinted into the distance, and then opened the narrow beam to the others. "I think I can make out the transmitter in the distance, ten or fifteen clicks off. Tyler: you're point. Drake: at the rear. Wu: behind me. Questions?"

The narrow beam was silent.

"Alright everyone, stay sharp and stay close. We're going to make it to that installation, and we're going to blow it into orbit. Let's move out."

We started marching again, but we'd barely started before we stopped again. The sunlight hadn't just brought the Sheen transmitter into view, it had brought the Sheens themselves. Three chrome spheres had popped into existence about ten metres ahead. They were two metres in diameter, and floated motionless a metre from the ground. I say they were chrome, but I don't really know what they were made of. They were so polished, that I could see my own distorted reflection looking back at me in triplicate.

"What now, sarge?" Tyler asked as the four of us stood motionless, staring at the spheres.

"I'm not sure, Private. It's their move, but I'd say: let's blow 'em all to hell."

"Amen to that," Drake said, and raised her rifle to her shoulder.

There's no sound in atmosphere that thin, so I didn't hear the first shot. It wasn't Drake's. Droplets of Tyler's blood spraying across my visor were the first sign that we were in a firefight. The laser that killed her had punched a hole straight through her tux, and vaporised her entire torso. Her errant limbs floated to the floor like ash. The blood on my visor boiled off in seconds, leaving nothing but a dirty brown smear. The laser didn't turn off, and started to melt a hole in the ground behind her.

"Down!" I ordered, but the others were already in motion. Wu had dropped to his useless side, and was starting to lay down cover fire. Drake was down on one knee, firing bursts of energy into the Sheen that had attacked. I rolled to the ground, and joined in. The beam from the Sheen was so intense, I could feel the heat from it on my cheek. In contrast, our lasers just glanced off the Sheen exteriors and surrounded them with a halo of diffuse energy. The three of them just hung there, the laser still burning.

The second time I was ready, and running on battle nerves. I saw the beam that hit Drake. It appeared as a spontaneous line of energy, which stuck her rifle shoulder, and then—moments later—gouged straight through to hit the rocks behind her. The dismembered arm drifted to the ground and so did Drake, the hole in her suit filling with atmospheric blocker and coagulant.

I started laying down fire at the second Sheen, which was as impervious as the first. It glowed a faint blue, as my laser light glanced effortlessly around it.

“Drake!” I yelled over the narrow beam. She didn’t reply, and just lay motionless on the ground.

Then, all of a sudden, it was over. The two laser beams switched off, one by one, and the three spheres just hung there. It was loud in my helmet, and I realised I was panting.

“Lance Corporal?”

“Damn,” she groaned, “I’m cooked, sarge.”

I got to my feet, and glanced at her health readout. “You’re not cooked yet, Lance Corporal. I’ll tell you when you’re done, and you’re not done yet.”

“Argh,” she groaned, rolling over onto her back. “VES is burst, clavicle’s gone, lung’s punctured. I’m toast, sarge.”

“You got legs, soldier?”

She grunted.

“Know how to use ‘em?”

“Sir.”

I could see that her tux was fuelling her up on painkillers and stimulants. “Good, then get up and use them, and stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

I know it sounds harsh, Martha, but it’s what she needed to hear. She rolled back onto her side, and started getting to her feet with her remaining arm. Her health readout was bad, and with her VES gone there was no way off Mars; no

escape. She'd be dead within a day. But you can't give in, Martha, not in those situations. Survival becomes a matter of staying alive for as long as you can, and you have to keep trying for every single instant. I stomped over to give her a hand. Her face was creased with pain, despite the drugs being pumped into her body.

I looked into her eyes, and nodded. She held my gaze, and nodded back. We didn't need to say anything, but we understood each other. "And how's Private Wu?" I called over my shoulder.

"What happened to Tyler?" he asked. He was standing, but looked like he was hanging limp inside his suit. His rifle was on the ground. I looked over to the pieces of her suit scattered on the red soil. My eyes focussed on the brown smear. Blurred in the background, the three spheres floated ominously.

"We'll pay 'em back in kind, Private, but right now we've got to move out. Pick up your rifle."

"But what about them?" a note of desperation reaching his voice, as he pointed to the Sheens. As if they were waiting for their cue, the Sheens each shrank to the size of a marble and then disappeared in silence.

"I'd say they're not our problem right now, soldier. Now, pick up your rifle." He didn't move. "Private Wu: pick up your rifle."

He looked over at me, and then down at his rifle. "Yes sir, sorry sir."

"You good to walk, Lance Corporal?"

She articulated her legs, and nodded. I guessed we had about thirteen kilometres to cover. We should have been able to make it by nightfall, but our bad luck wasn't over. Wu's repaired actuators had been overloaded in the attack, and his limp was back-worse than ever. And as for Drake:

well, let's just say that I could see how much each step cost her. As darkness fell, we tried to remain vigilant, but we saw nothing. I tried not to think about what we were going to do when we reached our destination. Drake's rifle had gone with her shoulder, and Wu couldn't reload unaided. Besides which, our weapons seemed to be useless against the Sheens. There was no doubt in my mind, Martha, that we were walking into a death trap.

As dusk fell, we lost sight of the transmitter. We were in the caldera's basin and, in the half-light, a low outcrop had risen up to obscure our view. When the last of the light failed, I guessed we were no more than a couple of kilometres from the rise. However, it was well past midnight before we finally made it to the top, and caught sight of the transmitter again. It was a couple of hundred metres below us, and looked like a disordered array of pylons and masts. Even in the darkness, I couldn't mistake the eleven glinting spheres of reflected starlight. Each of them looked frozen in time, as if they were waiting for us to arrive before going about their business.

"Do you see them, Corporal?" came Wu's voice from beside me.

"I do, Private. I count eleven."

"Damn Sheens," rasped Drake. "Are they sleeping? They look like they're sleeping."

"We don't stand a chance," Wu whimpered. "They'll cut us apart like we're nothing; like we're Tyler—if we get any closer, we're dead Corporal. We've got to—"

"Got to what, soldier? You want to get off this rock, is that it? Want to pop your VES and float on out of here? We've got a job to do, and we're going to do it. You see anyone else round here? Any other soldiers? Any more

friendly tuxes? It's us or nothing, soldier.

"Those Sheens are building something—probably to bring more of them down. Probably so they can attack the inner system. You want them on the Moon? On Earth? We were ordered to take out that transmitter and, so-help-me-God, that is what we're going to do. If we die trying, we die trying. Simple-as. You see the rest of our section? Our platoon? It's us or nothing, Private. You hear me?"

He looked back at me with wide eyes, but stayed silent. I felt a little guilty, but he needed to be reminded of why we were there. At that moment, so did I. Faced with the grim prospect of defeat, using my VES was tempting.

"Amen to that, sarge," came Drake's voice, sounding relaxed. "Amen to that."

Wu nodded, and took a deep breath in his helmet. "Yes sir, sorry sir. I'm ready now."

I nodded back, and smiled. Opening my mouth to form a plan, I was interrupted by Drake before I had the chance.

"So here's the plan, Phoenix Charlie Two. I'm going in first. I'll be the bait, and—"

"Now hold on a second, Lance Corporal—"

"Hold on yourself, sarge. You're not the only one round here who gets to risk their neck. I've got no weapon, no arm and not a rat's chance in hell of getting off this rock. I'm dying here, one way or another. So, here's the plan: I'm the bait."

I sighed. "Go on."

"I'll take point, and lead them off. When they're distracted, you two go in guns blazing. Don't bother with their chrome hides, just hit those pylons with everything you've got. They take me out, you take them out, and we all meet in the mess afterwards for tea and biscuits. Questions?" She gave me a devilish grin, and looked from me to

Wu.

“No sir,” Wu replied promptly.

“That’s a good plan, Lance Corporal. If it works, I’ll put you in for a promotion when we get back.”

Her grin turned to real joy, and she beamed back at me. Her face was serene, and her eyes calm. I tell you, Martha, for that moment she looked completely innocent. Freed from the weight of her life, death had given her something she couldn’t have found otherwise: peace. Our eyes met for a moment, and then she was gone.

We gave her a few seconds head start, and then slid down the slope in her wake. Despite her injuries, she was covering ground quickly. I checked her readout, and wasn’t surprised to see her system suffused with adrenaline and her heart racing. Her tux was doing some of the work, but her body was burning out. We did our best to keep up, but Wu’s nose was running with blood by the time we reached the transmitter.

A rock gave us some shelter, whilst Drake headed off to distract the Sheens. She was almost on them, when two spheres finally seemed to notice her. They disappeared from the pylons, and reappeared instantly behind her. She rolled to her side, and sprinted for cover. A dazzling beam of light struck her footprints a moment later, and lit up the entire scene. Another beam followed from the other Sheen, but somehow she was too fast for them.

I exchanged a look with Wu. There were still nine Sheens around the transmitter, and I could tell he was thinking the same thing. His face relaxed, and a light on my HUD told me he’d turned off his comms. Nodding once, he set off at a loping run. He was limping, but only just—he must have been dragging his damaged leg with all his might. Holding his rifle above his head, he brandished it towards the Sheens

as if he was shaking a spear or a club. I couldn't hear him, and I couldn't see his face, but I imagined he was uttering a battle cry. Inside that suit, he was making war.

Wu had set his rifle to overload, Martha. It's a last resort that a tux is programmed to rig. He was holding down the trigger the whole time and, without a beam to vent the energy, his rifle had turned into a bomb. By the time he reached them, a couple more Sheens had spontaneously surrounded him. Two crisp beams of light cut through his tux like tissue paper. A third beam connected with his leg, which erupted in a cloud of boiling metal and flesh. Before he hit the ground, his rifle went critical and exploded.

The force of the explosion threw me backwards, and I landed heavily. My visor had gone completely opaque to shield me eyes from the radiation, and it took a few seconds to clear. When it did, I was presented with a vision of destruction. Wu's tux had become a glowing crater of slag, and the wrecks of eight Sheens were scattered around it. A glowing cloud of vaporised rock, metal and bone was mushrooming gently, as it expanded into space. Wu had single-handedly taken out more than half the enemy force. He'd never know it, but he was a hero.

I didn't have time to grieve, however, because Drake was pinned down behind a boulder. One of the Sheens was still melting her footprints, and the laser from the other was slowly turning her hiding place to magma. She wouldn't last long under the intensity of the beam, so I had to make a difficult decision. She needed my help, but the path to the transmitter was clear. I didn't know where the eleventh Sheen was, but it wasn't with her and it wasn't with me. I had to make a break for it. Opening the trigger on my rifle, I sprinted towards the transmitter. As I ran, I let loose reams of sharp, blue light into their delicate filigree. The Sheens

might have been immune to our lasers, but their machinery wasn't.

Within seconds, all the pylons were swaying pendulously. In the low gravity, they gently collapsed into destruction and ruin. I couldn't believe it, Martha—we'd done it! I was about to look round for Drake, when something fast and hard slammed into the small of my back. It launched me forward a couple of metres, and I landed on my face. There was a loud crack, as my head stuck the inside of my helmet.

I must have blacked out for a moment, because I was woozy when I came round. I rolled gingerly onto my side, and looked around. Drake was nowhere to be seen, but her boulder had been transformed into a pile of molten rubble. The two Sheens bearing down on her had been reduced to fragments. Globules of rock were falling out of the sky, glowing in the midnight light where they struck the ground. She must have destroyed her tux, somehow, to give me a fighting chance.

I wonder how she did it—I mean, I know you can rig your cells through your suit too, like Wu did with his rifle. But I wonder *how* she did it. Did she use her death-mask, to get her through those final moments? Or did she face death square in the eyes. I like to think she redeemed Cole in those last few seconds; that she sacrificed herself serenely, calmly, and with courage. I'd only known her a few days, but I knew she had courage. She might have been tough to get along with, but I knew why now. And I also knew that she was a warrior at heart—she wasn't afraid of death, but she might have been afraid of how she'd face it. Well, Martha, I hope she faced it well. I hope Cole is proud of her.

She might not have had to do it, you know, if I'd tried to help her. I could have tried taking out those Sheens myself.

Maybe I could have rigged my rifle like Wu, and thrown it in like a grenade. Drake could have taken cover, and we could have brought down those pylons by hand. But in the heat of battle, Martha, you have to make decisions. Some of them are good, some of them are bad. But, if you end up saving lives in the long-run, you've done your job. My job was to stop the Sheens from getting help. We don't want them on Earth, and we don't want them on the Moon. Hell, we don't even want them on Mars. So, I did what I had to do, and I don't regret it. I just hope that she died in peace, free from the delusion of her death-mask, and free from fear.

I checked my own readout, but my HUD was damaged. Despite the crackling display, I could make out that my VES was gone. The vacuum cylinder had been pierced, and the balloon reduced to ash. I was as likely to escape as Wu or Drake. Also, my visor was cracked—I was leaking atmosphere.

I barely had a chance to register my predicament, when the eleventh Sheen showed up. It popped out of nowhere a couple of metres away. Rather than floating at head-height, it was scraping through the soil like some wounded animal. I ducked to my right—which made my head pound—and crouched behind a rock. Nothing happened. I looked cautiously around the edge of my shelter, and found the Sheen just sitting there. The base of its shell was riddled with cracks, and a metallic liquid was fizzling out.

The next few seconds are a bit of a blur. I fired a few bursts of energy into the Sheen's cracks, hoping for a lucky shot. It targeted my rock with a laser. My rock was much smaller than Drake's, and it couldn't withstand the intensity of the beam for an instant. The rock erupted into a geyser of lava, and the beam cut straight through and vaporised my thigh. I was knocked backwards by the shockwave, and

saw my calf and boot fly off out of sight.

Laying on my back, I remember watching the mass of glowing rock reaching its apex. It seemed to hang in mid-air for longer than it should have, before beginning to slop back down again under the gentle Martian gravity. I was practically underneath it. The Sheen disappeared, and popped into existence again where the rock had been.

Hot, wet rock engulfed us both. The Sheen—which was barely staying afloat as it was—came down hard, crushing my other leg. It was draped with glowing rock, and was deforming under the weight. I couldn't see my leg, but the pain was breathtaking. The rest of the molten boulder slopped down all over my tux. I could feel the heat immediately, although my armour seemed to hold up better than the Sheen.

By this point, I must have been completely shot through with drugs from my tux. My vision was quickly receding down a tunnel, and it wasn't long before I lost consciousness. The last thing I remember was that I couldn't move my arms, and I couldn't move my leg. All I could see was the dull Martian pre-dawn, filtering through Tyler's blood, on the postage stamp of my visor which fell into darkness.

I have flashes of memory, but nothing concrete. I remember trying my VES, but it was obliterated. It wouldn't have been able to lift that much rock anyway, and I was glued down once it had cooled. I think I tried reaching the FOB—to hell with our orders—but there was never any answer.

Did they send down a ship to collect me? They must have, or else—how did I end up here? They must have fixed me up—they don't let your family in, unless they've fixed you up—but I still can't feel my legs. It's cold in here, too, isn't it? Are you cold in here, Martha? And I'm so heavy.

I can feel the weight of it on my chest, pressing me down—it must be the gravity on Earth. I've been away so long, I'm not used to it.

I feel happy now, though, Martha. Happy I've had the chance to tell you what happened. I wish we could see each other more clearly, without that dirty brown screen between us, but I'm glad you're here and we could talk. I feel warm now, so cosy and warm. And tired. I'll just take another nap, my love, and then we can—