

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. Am I back on Earth? I suppose I must be. How long has it been since we said goodbye? It feels like a lifetime.

Do you remember when we found out I was leaving? It was a Thursday, I think. I'd just gotten home from the office and you had champagne on ice. All those simulations, the exercises, the months of training—it had all finally paid off. Dispatch orders! 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 solidier call them that. I've read it countless times before, 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 and we had plenty to discuss during lunchtimes.

Still, that month passed slowly. When we finally arrived, Mars hung in the darkness of space like a crisp, red crescent. The platoon's Forward Operating Base was in orbit a few hundred kilometres up and it soon came into view. It rounded the horizon alongside Olympus Mons—the largest volcano in the Solar System—and I can tell you Martha, it was quite a sight! 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 rather underwhelmed. It looked like it had been thrown together with no thought or design. Not like the sleek transport we'd arrived in. I mentioned this to Yansong on our final approach and he told me that the station had started life as a research post in high Mars orbit. Apparently, when the Sheens had arrived the military had commandeered all Martian assets and the station had become an outpost of the Earth Alliance Army. It had been added to ever since and ten years later 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 verging on desperate. My first impression of it was the smell. Stale air tainted with the odour of humanity. My second impression was the people. The men were unshaven, the women greasy-haired. They didn't look like the proud and rugged soldiers I'd been expecting. They looked like victims of some atrocity or survivors of some great battle. They looked like the losing side.

I didn't have long to ponder these impressions, because waiting for me at the airlock was the Phoenix platoon commander. 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 and three of the four bunks were filled with bodies. 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.”

One of the women snorted and said in clipped tones, “He’s no sarge Wu, just another corpse.” She turned back to her packing and ignored me.

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

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

That drew another snort from the woman on the floor, who didn’t look up.

“I see. And that must make you Private Tyler,” I said addressing the other woman crouching over her kit. She stood to mock attention and gave a salute.

“Yes sir-ree!” she drawled. She winked and then returned to the floor.

I was appalled at their lack of discipline Martha. Private Wu seemed to be the only one with a modicum of respect. The behaviour of the two women was—I hope you don’t mind me saying—outrageous! I climbed out of my bunk and tip-toed around the two women to reach the door. Wu seemed to take this the right way and climbed down as well to stand at attention. Drake and Tyler didn’t look up.

“Phoenix Charlie Two!” I began, using our call sign.

“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 and rifles. I assume we’re dropping tomorrow and I want us to be completely ready. That means there’ll be no downtime until I’m satisfied with each of your suits. Questions?”

Tyler had gotten up next to Wu, but she had an amused look on her face. Drake was still crouching amongst her kit.

“Aye-aye sarge,” Tyler replied with another mock salute.

“He’s a corporal Tyler,” Drake said from the floor, without looking up. “Cole was a sergeant. He’s not Cole and he’s not our sarge. Why do we need to be ready ten minutes early?”

“You’re right Lance Corporal, I’m not Sergeant Cole. I’m sorry about what happened to him, but I’m here to do a job and I’m your commanding officer. You will address me as corporal or sir.” She continued to stare at her kit. “As for your question—I’m glad you asked. We’ll be leaving early so we can arrive at the briefing first and claim the best seats. I don’t want Phoenix Charlie Two missing out on any details!”

Drake snorted again and carried on with her kit. I tell you Martha, it was a tough crowd.

The briefing itself wasn’t quite what I was expecting. 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. I had to stay behind to clarify some of the finer points with the platoon commander. The plan was to drop at 0700 the following day. Our target was a Sheen installation in the summit caldera of Olympus Mons. We’d need 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 assignment. We'd drop in fire teams and co-ordinate an attack from the western fringe 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 on the Mons at just the right spot. Too far down and it would take too long to hike back up. 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 waste it picking up a couple of tin cans who can't pop their VES at the right time.' Once we were down we were to proceed to the FRV—the Final Rendezvous Point—at the rim 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 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 if we were stranded he'd have three times less air to breathe 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?"

She just shrugged and looked away.

"They're all like it. It's an old suit. Cells are shot."

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

"Do what you want Jennings, but lay off the lecture, I don't need it."

"It's corporal or sir, Lance Corporal. Now, it won't take a minute—take a look."

"Fine."

I gave her a sharp look.

"Sir," she sulked.

She slouched in a corner and pretended to ignore me. Wu came over though. Tyler was busy re-packing her VES the way I'd shown her, 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," commented Wu from over my shoulder.

"These suits are our life blood out there Private. I've made it my business to know them inside out—most of the systems you can maintain or recondition, even with field facilities like these. Before each drop we'll spend the day

working on our tuxes and before long they'll be as close to factory spec as any suit outside of Earth orbit."

He smiled and thanked me. Tyler nodded once with the trace of a smile. Drake just snorted again and slunk away. By the end of the day Wu could breath 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 still be at work. I hoped you weren't missing me too much Martha, but I knew you were proud of me. I knew your heart was with me. I remember thinking—accompanied by a jangle of nerves—that the following day I'd be living up to that pride. To that love. I'd be falling into the thin Martian atmosphere onto the flanks of Olympus Mons and laying my first footprint 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 that alarm, but when it sounded it sent jolts of nerves through my insides. 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 suit, 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 Drake's last drop. Maybe she was terrified of the same thing happening 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. Her eyes were closed. “Lance Corporal Drake?”

Her eyes flicked open and she glared at me. “Yes dammit, check already.”

I gave her the benefit of the doubt, but I’d need to address her attitude later.

”OK team, on your feet, disengage restraints. Be ready. Phoenix Charlie Command? This is Phoenix Charlie Two. Ready to drop sir.”

“Roger that Charlie Two, prepare for vacuum evac.”

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 an approaching 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, that next one is violent and disorienting. Up becomes down and suddenly you’re shooting head first towards the Martian surface. 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 clear 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 in that mo-

ment that you're still falling. Mars is getting closer. The Mons is rising out of the surface like a slumbering leviathan and the first kicks of the atmosphere remind you that 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 of the hatch. She was spinning with dizzying speed towards Amazonis Planitia—a hundred kilometres or more from the Mons.

"Clear comms only. Private Tyler, do you copy?"

It took her a few seconds to reply. "Sarge". Her voice was strained.

"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."

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

"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 now 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 and found her about a hundred metres above us, receding fast. She was still spinning.

"Drake, Wu. Sixty seconds. Two degrees West. Drop pattern Gamma, keep together. Twenty clicks West of the

drop site. Questions?"

"No sir."

"What about Tyler?"

"I'll worry about Tyler, Lance Corporal. You two just stick together. Questions?"

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 as the friction from the atmosphere increased dramatically. That's what I wanted though and I pulled back from the others and quickly found myself sliding past Tyler. She was still flailing in a spin.

"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...ma

Two thin bursts of plasma lit her torso for a second and then were gone, but it was enough. 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. OK?"

"Got it sarge."

"Alright, and...mark!"

Her thrusters fired again and this time she stopped spinning completely. She was still unstable and her tux was rocking wildly, 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 without you.”

“Don’t mention it Private, we’re Phoenix Charlie Two. We’re a team. Are you injured?”

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

“It happens Private, don’t sweat 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 then see if we can pick anything up on infrared. Ready?”

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

“Ain’t no-one 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. 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,” came Wu’s prompt reply.

“Good. Change of plans. Trim West again. Four degrees. Make for fifty clicks out from the green zone.”

“Copy that sir.”

“Fifty clicks?” Drake chimed in. “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 known her a day, but I was proud of her already. We touched down a little over eight kilometres from the others. Within a couple of hours we were reunited as a team. Everyone was in good spirits and we shared a little nervous laughter and slapped each other heartily on our tux shoulders. Even Drake seemed to be in a good mood. I guess she was relieved.

I must say though, Martha, all this conversation has left me exhausted. I think I’ll just take a short nap. I’ll tell you all about it when I wake up, but I’ll just close my eyes and—

Part II

Mars

Once we'd all recovered from the euphoria of our reunion we soon realised that it wasn't all good news. Checking our location, I discovered we'd landed almost sixty kilometres off course. With the slopes of the Mons rising up ahead of us there was no line-of-sight with the rest of our section. That meant that we couldn't let them know our location without broadcasting it to the Sheens as well. We just had to cover the ground as fast as possible and hope we could reach the others before the FRV time.

We set off immediately and marched on until well past sunset. Martian days are roughly the same length as on Earth so by the time we stopped we were all exhausted. Whilst not luxurious, tuxes are comfortable enough and we just crouched in a circle and reclined our suits for the night. A liquid dinner followed by lights out and we were all asleep in minutes.

Rising in the pre-dawn light, we were all a little less comfortable than the night before. Tux coffee isn't the best, Martha, but there are worse ways to start the day. You can't feel the morning chill on Mars, but you can almost see it. At dawn the Sun rose from behind the hulk of the Mons ahead of us. The atmosphere is so thin that the night clings to the sky until the very last minute. Even when the warm rays of the Sun spill over the horizon, the stars are still visible to the naked eye. We made good progress that 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 by 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 the cliff it looked intimidating, but not insurmountable. It was about thirty metres high and looked climbable, even in our tuxes. On Earth, climbing that high in a quarter of a tonne of hardware would have been ridiculous. Under 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 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 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 the position he was in. 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 and, when he finally hit the floor, I could feel the impact through the rock face. Martian gravity is low, but three 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!"

"Damn. What was he thinking?"

"Drake. You and I, down-climb on the double." She didn't answer, but she didn't argue either.

“What about me sarge?”

“Setup a haul line Private. We’re going to winch him to the top.”

“A haul line?”

“You heard me Private.”

“Ah...hell sarge...not sure I know—”

“Remove your VES and un-thread your balloon tether. Rig it on a boulder or something and let me know when you’re done. I’ll talk you through the rest.”

“You got it sarge.”

“Careful when you take out your balloon—you don’t want to puncture it.”

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

“I think he’s OK, just banged his head—looks like he’s unconscious.”

“What’s his health readout?”

“Er...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 had to keep her morale up, especially after the fatality on her last drop. “It could be worse. We’ll fix it up and he’ll be good as new.”

Drake searched my face through her visor, looking for any trace of deception. I think Cole’s death was too recent and her fear of losing another comrade was written all over

her face. She needed to know I was telling the truth. 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 crackled in the radio, “VES unpacked, tether detached, one hell of a mess of string up here, but I think we’re good. What’s next?”

Within minutes a carabiner was dangling down to the ground on the metallic thread from Tyler’s VES. Drake and I dragged Wu over and clipped him in. I wanted us all at the top of the cliff so we could setup camp without having to worry about getting Wu up later. I knew he wouldn’t be able to climb up by himself.

“Alright Private, haul away! The Lance Corporal and I will climb alongside and make sure he doesn’t get snagged.”

“You got it sarge, hauling!”

When we’d pulled Wu’s prone form over the edge of the cliff, we all collapsed. Even with mechanical assistance, hauling another man’s tux is—as Tyler put it—‘one helluva dead weight’. It had taken us just over twenty minutes since Wu’s fall. It’s a testament to Drake and Wu’s determination and grit that we managed it so fast. After a moment’s pause, I pulled myself up and checked Wu’s health readout.

“Blood pressure’s good...no internal bleeds...respiration normal—looks like it’s just that concussion and a banged up suit. Good job Private, Lance Corporal, great work.”

Tyler was panting in her tux, but nodded. Drake’s energy seemed to have evaporated after the climb and she looked at me despondently.

“What now?”

“Help me move him away from the cliff and we’ll setup a tent.”

Before you say anything Martha, we don’t use fabric 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 and then pump the void filled with compressed gases. It’s just, in the army, they still call that a tent.

“Won’t work with three suits Jennings. We 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?”

“I can’t say I wrote the book Private, but I have read it a number of times—I think we’ll be fine.”

“But you need four suits to—”

“Trust me Lance Corporal, we’ll be fine.” I didn’t tell her what I was planning, because I had the feeling she wouldn’t 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 at the apex of a hemisphere about three metres high. Tyler was next and her antenna reached up towards Drake’s and connected at the apex. Mine was next and my tux confirmed connection when it linked up to the others. We needed Wu’s tux to do the same.

“What now Jennings?”

I didn’t reply. Instead, I drew my arms and legs into my tux’s torso and triggered the eject sequence. The breastplate was fired off and the evacuating atmosphere pulled me out like a roller coaster. I landed face down in the frozen Martian soil and my skin prickled from the near-vacuum surrounding me.

Now, this might sound dangerous Martha—and you’d be right—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. Even at our altitude there was still some pressure, so I knew I had at least that long. It was cold—about minus ninety—but the low pressure meant I’d take much 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 leaving my skin itching and my eyes raw. 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, but 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. His tux’s antenna rose to join the others in painfully silent serenity and my lungs started to burn from a 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,” said Tyler as she stepped out of her tux, “that’s certainly one way to do it! You’re 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! The man just saved Wu’s skin! How we gonna treat Wu when he’s locked in his tux? We gotta get him out and—”

“Sergeant Cole is dead Tyler, or don’t you remember?”

Drake asked in a faltering voice. "He was blown to bits pulling a crazy stunt like that and now he's dead."

That stopped Tyler in her tracks and froze the smile on her face, which slowly faded leaving something else entirely.

"It's alright Lance Corporal," I began gently, "I know what I'm—"

"The hell you do Jennings. You've never even set foot on Mars before! You're an idiot in a can who thinks he knows best. Do what you want and the rest of us will just try to stay alive."

My temper flared at that, but I let it pass. I took a deep breath.

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

"Fine by me sarge. Drake, you cook us up summit tasty will ya?" Tyler said, slapping Drake around the shoulder and joined me by Wu's tux. Drake looked disgruntled, but she busied herself with setting up the camp and didn't yell at me anymore.

We dragged Wu out and lay him on a camp bed. He was fine really—a few bruises here and there, but 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?"

“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. “So 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 about.”

Drake nodded thoughtfully as if she was digesting this insightful contribution from Tyler. I just sipped my soup. I ordered the other two to bed that night and then spent a couple of hours working on Wu’s tux. I needed them fresh in the morning—I wanted to break camp an hour before dawn—but I wanted to give Wu a fighting chance at keeping up too. In the end, I managed to get one of his leg actuators working again which made only two out of five blown. Not bad for a night’s work.

When I finally curled up in the open belly of my tux I was exhausted, but felt surprisingly optimistic about the next day. Tyler and Drake were both sound asleep in their tuxes and Wu was laying peacefully on the camp bed. Despite having a bad day, not to mention that outburst from Drake, 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 and we were going to keep on surviving until we popped our VES’ and floated back up 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 with his suit, but he didn't complain. He kept having nose bleeds—a messy affair in a helmet—and a couple of hours after lunch he had one which didn't stop. We setup another camp like the night before and gave Wu a rest. I was sure I could make out the caldera's rim on the horizon at sunset and I told the others I thought we'd reach the FRV point the next day.

I ordered Wu straight to the camp bed when we'd put up the tent. Drake made some food and gave Wu double rations of soup whilst 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 slightly sombre affair that night, but Drake surprised me by handing round a bottle of some illicit—and probably illegal—liquid which put a smile on everyone's face, even Wu's. He went straight to bed that night and I continued tinkering with his suit whilst Drake and Tyler sat murmuring by the cooling coil. By the time I crawled into my tux I was exhausted, but happy. I'd recovered a salvageable actuator from Wu's arm and fixed it up in his 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. All of a sudden I'm awfully drowsy. I—I'll just take another nap Martha, and then—

Part III

Mons

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

We weren't able to contact the rest of the platoon, which worried me. Narrow beam laser comms were silent and the radio frequencies were empty. Either they were out there and were keeping quiet, or they weren't out there any more. We were late for the rendezvous, so we couldn't expect our section to have waited for us and we were under orders not to contact the FOB. We were on our own. We just had to try to find the transmitter and continue with our mission.

"Ya see it sarge?"

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

"Na-ah. Nothing but red dirt and red rock."

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

"Fried," came Drake's deadpan response.

"They could be out there right now Private," I said confidently, "just with their comms off to prevent detection. We're only a few hours late for the rendezvous, so they're probably out there."

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

"Well for now, at least, we're on our own so we need to make the best of it. We've got a couple of hours of daylight left so we'll conduct some reconnoitre and decide on the best

route into the caldera. We'll crouch-camp at sundown and leave two hours before dawn. 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 that night I crouched in my tux watching 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 the tux?"

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

"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. It reminded me of the look on her face in the drop chamber.

In the silence before sleep I thought about our situation. The more thought I gave it, the more nervous I became. There was no trace of the rest of the platoon and there ought to have been something. Either that meant they were out there, but hiding, or it meant that the Sheens had annihilated them. Based on previous encounters that I'd read about, it was probably the latter. If it was then Phoenix

Charlie Two were the last fire team left in the theatre of war. It was down to us to stop the Sheens 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. The platoon 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 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 walking for a couple of hours. A yellow glow had been building on the horizon for twenty minutes or so, but the sky above was dark and filled with stars until the last minute. The appearance of the Sun flooded the basin with yellow light that glinted off our suits and glared through our visors.

"I think I can make out the transmitter in the distance, ten or fifteen kilometres 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 no sooner had we started than we stopped again. The sunlight hadn't just brought us visibility of the Sheen transmitter. It had brought us the Sheens themselves. Three chrome spheres popped into existence about ten metres ahead of us. They were two metres in diameter and floating motionless a metre off 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 their surfaces.

"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 had 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 which 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. Our lasers glanced off the Sheen exteriors and surrounded them with a halo of diffused energy. They just hung there. The laser that killed Tyler was still going.

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 struck Drake's rifle shoulder and then—moments later—gouged straight through to meet the ground 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 with about as much effect 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. She was laying 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. “You’re not cooked yet Lance Corporal. I’ll tell you when you’re done and you’re not done yet.”

“Argh,” she groaned again and rolled over onto her back. “VES is burst, clavicle’s gone, lung’s punctured. Roasted sarge.”

“You got legs solder?”

She grunted.

“Know how to use ‘em?”

“Sir.”

“Good, then get up and stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

It sounds harsh Martha, but it worked. She rolled back onto her side and started getting to her feet with her remaining arm. I’d seen her readout. With her VES gone there was no chance of evac. Without evac. she’d be dead within a day. But you can’t give in Martha, not in those situations. I stomped over to her and helped her up. Her face was creased with pain despite the drugs I knew her tux must be giving her.

“And how’s Private Wu?”

“What happened to Tyler?” He was standing up, but looked like he was 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 focused on the brown smear. Blurred in the background, the three spheres still hung there.

"We'll pay 'em back in kind Private, now pick up your rifle. We need to move out."

"But what about them?" he gestured uselessly towards the Sheens. As if they were waiting for their cue, they each shrank to the size of a marble and disappeared in silence.

"They're not our problem right now solder. Pick up your rifle." He didn't move. "Private Wu. Pick up your rifle."

He looked over at me and then seemed to catch himself. "Yes sir. Sorry sir." He reached down and re-armed himself.

"You good to walk Lance Corporal?"

She articulated her legs and nodded. By my estimates we had 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 for shining spheres suddenly appearing, but we saw nothing. I tried not to think about what we were going to do when we got there. 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—we were walking into a death trap.

As dusk fell we lost sight of the transmitter. We were in the caldera's basin at this point and there was a low outcrop that blocked our view. When the last of the light failed I guessed that we were no more than a couple of kilometres from the rise, but it was well past midnight when we finally made it to the top and caught sight of the transmitter again.

It was a hundred metres or so below us and looked like a disordered array of pylons and masts. Even in the darkness, I couldn't mistake the eleven glinting spheres reflecting the 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 over the radio, "they'll cut us apart like we're nothing, like we're Tyler...if we get any closer we're dead, Corporal, we're—"

"So what soldier? You want to evac, is that it? Want to pop your VES and float on out of here? We've got a job to do and we're gonna 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 mount an attack on 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 didn't say anything. I felt a little guilty then, but he needed reminding of why we were there. So did I. I wasn't feeling as confident as I sounded.

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

Wu nodded and looked like he took a deep breath. "Yes

sir, sorry sir...I'm ready now."

I nodded at him and smiled through my visor. I opened my mouth to explain the plan, but Drake interrupted before I had the chance.

"So, here's the plan team. I'm going in first, I'm the bait--"

"Now hold on a second Lance Corporal--"

"Hold on yourself Jennings, you're not the only one round here who gets to take risks. 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 sarge, 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, waiting.

"No sir," Wu replied promptly.

"It'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 smiled back at me. Her face was calm and her eyes relaxed. I tell you Martha, for that moment she looked completely innocent. Freed from the weight of her life, death had given her what she could not have found otherwise: peace. Our eyes met for a moment and then she was off.

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 and we did our best to keep up. Wu's face

was white and his nose was bleeding again, but he didn't say anything. His face was set and his nostrils flared.

It didn't take long to reach the transmitters. Wu and I crouched down whilst Drake headed off to our left. She was almost on them when two of the Sheens 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 the entire scene up. Another beam followed from the other Sheen, but she was too fast for them.

I looked at Wu. There were still ten Sheens around the transmitter and I could tell he was thinking the same thing. His face softened and a light on my HUD told me he'd turned off his comms. He nodded once and then was gone. He rushed off in a loping run heading straight for the biggest group of Sheens. He was holding his rifle above his head in one arm and shaking it. I couldn't hear him and I couldn't see his face, but I imagined he was uttering a fearsome battle cry. Inside that suit, he was making war.

Wu had set his rifle to overload Martha. It's a last resort that the suits are 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 my eyes from the radiation and it took a few seconds to clear. When it did I pulled myself up to look around. There was a glowing crater of slag where Wu had been with

the cracked wrecks of eight Sheens scattered around it. A cloud of vaporised rock and dirt was glowing as it mushroomed up into space. Wu had single handedly taken out more than half the enemy force. He'd never know it, but he was a hero.

Meanwhile, Drake had taken shelter behind a boulder. One of the Sheens was still frying her footprints, but the other had redirected its gaze towards her and was slowly turning her hiding place to magma. She wouldn't last long under the intensity of the Sheen's laser, but I couldn't help her. I didn't know where the eleventh Sheen was, but at that moment the transmitter was undefended and I had to make a break for it. I opened the trigger on my rifle and let loose reams of sharp, blue light into the struts and pylons. The Sheens might have been immune to our lasers, but their machinery wasn't.

Within seconds all of the transmitters were swaying pendulously and beginning to collapse gently to destruction. We'd done it Martha! Against all odds, we'd destroyed the transmitter! I was about to look round for Drake when something slammed into the small of my back and launched me onto my face. I hit the inside of my visor with a loud crack and blacked out for a moment.

I was woozy when I came round, but I had the presence of mind to roll into a crouch and look around. Drake had pulled the same trick as Wu. Her boulder was gone and the two Sheens bearing down on her had been reduced to fragments. Globules of molten rock were falling out of the sky, glowing where they landed in the midnight light—that's probably what had hit me.

My HUD was malfunctioning, but I could make out that my VES was gone. The vacuum cylinder had been pierced and the balloon reduced to ash. I was about as likely to

escape as Wu or Drake. Also, my visor was cracked—I was leaking atmosphere.

I barely had the chance to register all this, when the eleventh Sheen turned up. It popped out of nowhere a couple of metres from me, but rather than floating at head-height it was scraping against the dirt. 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 had been and it couldn't withstand the intensity of the beam, even for an instant. The rock transformed into a geyser of lava and the beam continued straight through and vaporised my left thigh. I was knocked backwards by the shock wave of the erupting rock and saw my left calf fly off out of sight.

Laying on my back, I watched the mass of glowing rock reach its apex and begin to slop back down under the gentle Martian gravity. I was practically underneath it. The Sheen disappeared and re-appeared where the rock had been, as if it thought it was catching up with me.

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 in glowing rock and deforming under the weight, pushing my leg into the soil. The rest of the molten boulder slopped down all over my tux. I felt the heat immediately, although my armour seemed to hold up better than the Sheen's.

By this point, I was completely shot through with drugs

by my tux. My vision was quickly receding down a tunnel. I tried to move my arms, but I couldn't Martha. I couldn't move anything.

I must have lost consciousness or fallen asleep after a while. I have flashes of memory, but nothing concrete. I remember trying my VES, but it was obliterated. Come to think of it, it wouldn't have been able to lift that much rock anyway. I think I tried reaching the FOB a lot—to hell with our orders—but there was never any answer.

I guess they must have sent down the ship to collect me? They must have brought me back to Earth to be with you? And they must have fixed me up, since you're here. I just wish it wasn't so cold. And so heavy. I feel so heavy. It must be the gravity on Earth—I'm not used to it.

I'm tired again Martha. So cold and so tired. I'll just take another nap, my love, and then we can—