

SEBASTIAN BLUNT

A CAN OF PAINT 2.0

INSPIRED BY A.E. VAN VOGT



A Can of Paint 2.0

A Novella by Sebastian Blunt

Inspired by A.E. Van Vogt

4XDX

Sci Fi

A Can of Paint 2.0

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A 4XDX Sci-Fi Book

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Dedication

In September of 1944, Astounding magazine published a fantastic short story called *A Can of Paint*, by A.E. Van Vogt.

A.E. Van Vogt was born in Canada on April 26, 1912. After a tumultuous childhood, Van Vogt published his first sci-fi story in Astounding in 1939. The story was called *The Black Destroyer*, which began a writing career that saw his last published work appear in 1986.

Interestingly, one of sci-fi's greatest movies, *Alien*, was alleged by Van Vogt to be based on two of his works published in 1939. One of which was *The Black Destroyer*. The movie company 20th Century Fox paid \$50,000 in an out-of-court settlement.

I first came across *A Can of Paint* several decades ago when I swiped a book of sci-fi short stories from my older brother's room while he was at school. The tale of an astronaut on Venus was enthralling, and I recommend reading this wonderful story, despite physics that we know are flawed in today's understanding of science.

I hope you enjoy this humble tribute that is LOOSELY inspired by Van Vogt's classic tale.

Please visit my website for more on sci-fi and my books.

www.booksbyblunt.com

Chapter One

As Chris McClain surveyed the surface of Mars from the window of his giant rover named Big Bob, he considered that it was desolate, inhospitable, and downright unfriendly. The surface of the Earth was inhospitable and downright unfriendly—not yet desolate.

McClain, one of the World Governing Body Executives on the surface of the fourth planet, considered which planet he'd prefer, then mumbled out loud, "Neither."

Stephanie Collins, exo-microbiologist, woke up from her own daydream. "What's neither, sir?"

Executive McClain swiveled to face the pretty, racially mixed scientist. Her roots were Chinese, but there was other D.N.A. in her blood, western genes. It somehow coalesced to give her beautiful, straight black hair and distinctive facial features.

"What, what?" he asked.

"Sir, you just said the word 'neither' as if you were completing a thought. Is it something that we should know about?"

"Oh, no. Not important, just random thoughts. Stay focused on whatever you were doing."

Dr. Collins had that ability to read nuances that nearly everyone else would miss by a mile. The woman could look at an amoeba and sense whether it was having a bad day. She persisted. "You had a look on your face that was a mix of disgust and resignation."

McClain changed the subject. Mars was far enough away that he didn't want to wave around his corporate council bullshit—especially political views that would get him trouble. "So, what's our E.T.A. to the cave?" He said this while turning in the other direction to address Dr. Jimmy Wilson, the Nigerian engineering wizard currently at the vehicle's controls

"Maybe three days and four hours." The precise engineer referred to Martian days, which were 24 hours, 39 minutes, and 35 seconds."

"Fine. I'm going to take a nap. Try not to drive us into any craters."

Jimmy grinned. "Even the little ones?"

Chris McClain just shrugged. Humor between executives and the working class was frowned upon. He turned and headed back to his “stateroom,” which was more like a closet with a bed. Dropping his square-framed body into horizontal was enticing.

McClain did a calculation. Thanks to working out more seriously and stuffing his face, he’d added four kilograms of mass. But on Mars, the acceleration of gravity was 0.379 of Terra, so Chris only weighed a whopping 31.8 kilo. Still, he was a prime specimen on the red planet—strong, intimidating, and dangerous.

After the W.G.B. official was out of earshot, behind the closed hatch at the rear of the main cabin, Wilson leaped from the engineering station to Steph’s proximity and kissed her lightly behind her right ear.

“Take it easy, Jimmy. You did put this rover on auto-pilot, right?”

“But of course.” He eased back behind the console to Dr. Collins’ right.

“Technically, we’re on duty for the whole mission. I don’t know our boss very well, and I certainly don’t want to muddy up the waters and give him an excuse.”

“An excuse to do what? Use his corporate authority to fire us for not following company policy?”

“Company policy. Yes. We have arrived at a point in history where the bureaucrats and the corporates have merged for our own good.” The cynicism in her tone was overt.

Wilson sighed heavily. “Good point. Science has been sickeningly political since global warming overpowered all rational thought.”

“And how did that work out?” she asked.

“A disaster for the poor, who are now called ‘workers’ and ‘contributors’ to justify their miserable lives. I guess we’re the lucky ones since we lucked out and got selected to study.”

“Don’t forget that we are here on Mars. We’re privileged workers!” Steph added sardonically.

Collins stood up and stretched. In their off-time, she and Jimmy were lovers, and everyone knew it—except for the new executive who’d just gone to sleep in the back of the 30-meter long ultra-bus-truck-science beast lab. Wilson stared at her. It had taken a year of dancing around the obvious until they both admitted that love had replaced like.

She felt the large composite, artificially intelligent tires rumble on the dusty soil as they negotiated the surface. Exactly how they worked was Jimmy Wilson's expertise, and she trusted him not to let her die out here in the authentic frontier. Nevertheless, as an academic, she was always curious.

"Tell me about this machine we're putting our faith in; this is my first time out, you know."

The engineer switched gears, from the man who just wanted to stare at her to the tinkerer *par excellence*.

"Sure. You know the basics. The main section is 25 meters, and we roll on ten A.I. tires. Well, they are more like a computer with a wheel attached. The tires all talk to each other. We are a maximum of eight meters tall and five wide. That trailer connected by the umbilical cord is your lab—but you knew that.

"Our top speed is 25 kilometers per hour on a flat surface. To the target on this trip, we'll average 14 or so. That will be about 1,050 kilometers from home."

The shadow of fear passed over her face. He'd seen that on all the newbies because of the primal fear of being stranded and dying. That would be a harshly unpleasant way to go, maybe stuck in a suit because of some catastrophic atmospheric loss, with perhaps 12 hours of air. In such a case, all of them would be dead for three days before a rescue team would arrive.

"That's really far away. Is there anything else that can go wrong?"

Jimmy raised his eyebrows and tilted his head. "Didn't you do the prep course—including the emergency part?"

"Yes. The truth is that I try to tune out the nasty final moment's stuff," Collins admitted.

"Well, we could have a mechanical failure. But then we just sit out here and wait for a rescue. Or, the A.I. could get confused, and our transportation, Big Bob, could fall off a cliff with us inside. Despite the low gravity, we would still die of one thing or another."

"Um. I don't want to know the rest, thanks." She smiled meekly.

"The good part is that the galley is fully stocked. We've got military-style M.R.E.s and water. Yum."

"Those are my favorite. Neck and neck in a contest with bauxite ore."

“Oh, please. Stephanie, they are not that bad at all. I’ll doctor yours up a little, and you’ll swear it’s regular food.”

“That was delicious, kind of.”

“Thanks? I think.”

“Let’s skip to a different subject Jimmy. Radio wave propagation.”

The engineer was pleasantly amused. “Nothing like a little light after-dinner conversation. Why are you mentioning it, Steph?”

“I’m curious to know what happens when we are out of the line of sight as we get further from Carter Base.”

Wilson pondered the question. “Do you know that when I was a kid, I asked my dad that question about Mars wave properties?”

“And?”

“He told me to first study an article that was published by the old NASA. It was called J.P.L. Publication 02-5, *Radio Wave Propagation and Handbook for Communication on and Around Mars.*”

The exo-biologist tilted her head and spoke as sensuously as she could. “I love it when you talk sexy to me.”

“Right. It’s a serious article.”

“Oh my gosh! Jimmy!”

“Were you making a joke?”

She nodded.

“Ha! I get it. I get your joke this time! You’re making jest at the scientific nature of the article’s title, right?”

She nodded more enthusiastically and blatantly so.

“Right. So the article was kind of ground-breaking, because whereas back in 2002, ham radio operators had already been quantifying atmospheric earth layers and propagation of waves for a hundred years—well, Mars was all brand new.

“Would you like to see an interesting formula?” He began scratching out on his digital pad: $f_0(\text{MHz})=9.0 \times 10^{-6} \sqrt{N_0(\text{m}^{-3})}$

“How do you like that?”

“I love it. What does it mean?”

“The executive summary is that this equation yields a critical frequency on Mars at 4.0 megahertz. That means that the one-hop maximum usable

frequency is between 4.0 megahertz and 15.5 megahertz. I think there was a table on page 16 of the publication. So, here's a little hard science: if we use a take-off angle of the radio wave of 75 degrees, then we can bounce our 15.5 megahertz signal about 933.0 kilometers. Isn't that exciting?"

"Jimmy! I think I'm going to faint!"

He looked shocked. "Are you okay?"

"That was another jest at your expense. When you get excited about math, you are really quite adorable."

"Whew!" Wilson looked relieved.

"So we can talk back to Edgar Rice Burroughs John Carter Base with no problem. Great. I'm feeling so much better about that."

"No," Wilson replied.

"No, what?" she asked cautiously.

"Under ideal conditions at solar maximum. We aren't at solar maximum."

Stephanie frowned. It was something she knew from when she had studied for her ham radio license as a fifth-grader. The Sun has an 11-year cycle from solar sunspot maximum peak-to-peak. That meant as long as the number of sunspots was high, then the single-layer of ions in the Mars atmosphere would be ready to rock and roll.

"Aren't we now something like three years away from max?"

"Almost exactly," he agreed.

"Then we are going to have line of sight for only another day, and that's on the V.H.F. and U.H.F. bands. Once we are out of range, then we are relying on luck to talk back to base."

"Pretty much."

"So if we have trouble, then we have to hope for good conditions?"

"Not entirely. We have a secret weapon."

"Did they talk about this in the mission plan?" Steph wondered.

Wilson groaned. "You were daydreaming about D.N.A. sequences, probably."

"What's our emergency plan?"

"FT4. Do you still have a callsign?"

"Sure. KF4OHL."

"FT4 is a kind of digital frequency shift communications. It's really old, but really, really freaking awesome. It sends out very rapid tonal shifts by

frequency changes, and a receiver back at the base can interpret the tones. Isn't that cool?"

She felt like the stuff he was talking about might exist in some pocket in her brain, but then maybe not. "You mean like Morse Code from old, old radio days?"

"No, my sweet molecule-dissecting girlfriend. Continuous Wave Morse Code is the most extraordinary form of transmitting data known to man. FT4 is just slightly better at getting little itty bits of data through when conditions are grungy stinky."

"I guess you're flowery description must mean that you are no longer in science mode."

Grunt. "Whatever. But, anyway, we can hope that a little burst of digital will tell base if we have a problem."

"And what if they don't receive it, Jimmy?"

"If it's a big problem, then we're dead."

*

Executive Chris McClain got up and checked his final messages from Carter Base that had been transmitted to him before getting out of range.

He did a retinal and a thumbprint scan to open it. It was encrypted from W.G.B. Director Gates, the son of the wealthy Chinese industrialist who decades earlier fulfilled the plan to unite all significant nations under one authority.

The origin of the confidential instruction raised McClain's eyebrows. In his fifteen years of climbing up the kiss-butt ladder at the W.G.B., he'd only seen or communicated with Gates one time—at the anniversary of the United States' consent to the W.G.B. on issues of Mars and international decisions, along with accepting vetoes by the W.G.B. on all internal U.S. affairs. The interaction with the Director had been a routine handshake and a brief "Good luck to you" from the surprisingly young, genetically modified Mr. Gates.

There was a knock on the door to his berth on the Mars giant rover named Big Bob. "Is anything on fire?" he asked rudely.

"No," answered Jimmy. "Just checking on you and seeing if you wanted any food, sir."

“No. I’ll be coming forward soon. Close the door.”

“Understood.”

Chris waited, then opened the seal on the message and read it.

To: W.G.B. Executive McClain

From: Director Gates

Date: Mars Date 31.18.0049

Subject: Possible Alien Technology or Biology

Be aware that any alien technology discovered in the target site is the sole property of W.G.B. Director Gates. The same applies to any exo-biological artifacts.

Until now, you have been given the minimal need to know information only. However, our probes have sent back data that indicates an atmosphere that is dense and oxygen-rich inside the cavern. The possibility of discovering artifacts or technologies of extraterrestrial origin are magnitudes higher than in previous exploratory efforts.

If technology that can be used to further the interests of the W.G.B. is found, then any such technology must be preserved and held exclusively for examination by W.G.B. security personnel only.

In addition, any perceived compromise to the secrecy of said technology must be dealt with prophylactically and permanently depending on the significance of the find.

Let me be straight with you, McClain. Cave art is not significant. Weapons, computing devices, space transportation tech, protective devices—anything remotely related to any of the above will be considered vital. You will deal with non-authorized personnel accordingly. End of message.

McClain re-read that last line. He reread further up the message. “Prophylactically,” was W.G.B. code for taking any non-W.G.B. observers out of the chain of custody. He analyzed the sentence again. “Permanently” meant exactly what it sounded like. He was just ordered to vacuum or otherwise silence Wilson and Collins if they find anything more interesting than painted rocks or insignificant organisms.

“I hate this job,” Chris grumbled, while pondering ways that he could plead ignorance and survive the wrath of the W.G.B. if he didn’t stick to

their totalitarian paranoid rules.

“I really hate this job.”

Chapter Two

Jimmy slept in a bunk not far from the pilot chair. He'd put Big Bob on auto, crawled into the coffin-like sleep capsule, and was out in seconds. Stephanie was on duty and could handle watching the navigation display while letting Wilson get some shuteye.

Collins peaked at the dark, closed sleep chamber, then walked over to the executive.

"Mr. McClain, sir. Is there anything I can get you?"

Chris surveyed the exo-biologist. If he'd avoided hormone-suppressing drugs, and if this was a bar in Beijing, he would have used his W.G.B. authority to take advantage of her. But, he'd accepted celibacy while on Mars as a way of life and routinely took pills to beat down any "human" longings for love and companionship.

"Dr. Collins. Do me a favor. When on the road, don't call me 'sir' after every sentence. We're crawling across the surface of Mars to check out a cave. The three of us don't need a constant reminder that you are worker class. Just don't touch the chocolate supply."

She smiled cautiously, reflecting back his innocent grin. "Sure. Mr. McClain. Jimmy and I don't eat much sugar anyway."

"Chris. Out here, it's Chris."

Steph knew that his friendly overture was probably a trap. She answered carefully. "Sure, Mr. McClain."

"So, Stephanie. Where are we?"

She looked at the Nav Table and pressed a button. Quickly a very clear holographic display appeared. It was like looking at a 3D map that sat elevated above the meter square tabletop. The mountains and valleys were all clear, and the whole surface of the mock-up was tinted Martian red.

"Bob," Steph called out. "Show our plotted position."

Immediately, a green line, wavy but mostly straight, mapped out their track from the main base named after the Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars character.

“That’s us, Mr. McClain.” She pointed to the blinking dot at the leading edge of the green illuminated line. “Bob. What is our distance from Carter Base, both linear and our actual accumulated kilometrage.”

A computer-generated voice that Jimmy set up to sound like the long-dead actor named Heston spoke up. *“The distance linear from the base is 312 kilometers. Ground kilometrage is 398.5 kilometers. We have made many gradual turns and traveled over elevation changes.”*

“What is our E.T.A. to the target?”

“Current estimate is approximately 60.53 hours.”

The countdown to actually being at the cave was relentless. Chris was thinking about ways that he could keep Wilson and Collins out of there. The whole thing was going to become critical soon enough. Perhaps he could go in there, look around and confirm that the place was a benign hole in a wall.

“Alrighty then. What do we do for the next couple of days?”

“Oh,” said Steph. “I’ve got a ton of prep work to do, including things that require calibration, suits to check, inert bio-materials to irradiate, and other things like that.” What about you, sir?”

He smiled as best he could, trying to suppress the thought of slicing a hole in the oxygen feedline to Collins’ suit while out in the deadly and thin atmosphere. “Reading manuals, I guess.”

Wilson woke up to find Steph standing over him with a frown on her face.

“What did I do?”

“Is this a science mission?”

He rubbed his eyes and tried to decide whether he was hungry or tired, or both. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Hmm. Okay.” She started to turn around, but Jimmy reached out to pull her back.

“What’s going on Steph?”

“Something I didn’t inform you about.” Her voice became a whisper.

The engineer was fully alert. He sat up and looked straight at her. “Do you want to tell me now?”

“No, but I think I should.”

“Where’s McClain?”

Stephanie pointed towards the command center 15 meters forward. She shut the compartment door. “Bob’s A.I. has been talking to me. Private

messages in my headset.”

“I have medication for anxiety. Even the best people can get delusional out here.”

“Not funny. I’m not kidding. The A.I. running the Bob contacted me directly. Audio.”

“That isn’t possible, Stephanie. A.I.s only communicate after receiving a command or in the event of an emergency. And on this trip, the A.I. is programmed to contact McClain first, then me, then you—there is a hierarchy.”

She poked him in his bicep. “I am aware of the protocols. Nevertheless, Bob’s A.I. contacted me privately.”

“What did it say?”

“It was scary.”

Just then, there was a knock on Jimmy’s door.

Wilson got up to answer it.

“Sorry to bother you, but it’s about your job,” said McClain. “Is everything okay with the auto-pilot?”

“Are we on course?” Stephanie interjected.

“We’ve slowed,” McClain stated.

Jimmy got up and threaded his way between his two companions—walking barefoot in a t-shirt and shorts towards the navigation console. McClain and Collins followed.

He typed in a command to display the trip data. The response from the query was a simple map projection. Jimmy looked it over. Indeed, the average speed over the ground dropped by 35%.

“Does that make sense to you?” McClain seemed concerned.

Without delay, the engineer replied, “I need to review this. We’re still on course. It will take me a little time to see if this is a mechanical issue or simply Bob making adjustments for something that we aren’t seeing. I’ll figure it out.”

The W.G.B. Exec scowled. “Does this happen?”

“Course corrections that don’t match our expectations?” Wilson asked.

“Yes. I’ve never heard of such a deviation.”

“Oh.” The engineer lied. “It sometimes happens for something as simple as a mechanical or electrical issue that gets misinterpreted by the A.I. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

"I've never heard of that." McClain persevered in questioning Wilson.

"There's a lot of variables and even physical parts. May I investigate, sir?"

Jimmy was doing his best to hide his impatience.

Stephanie felt a bit out of her element but sensed the tension that she wanted to diffuse. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks, Steph. Executive McClain, if you can stay at the command console, I will go back to examine systems. I may need you to run some routines from here. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes. Let's try to figure this out and correct the problem."

Jimmy put on pants and shirt and headed back to the drive computer module. Stephanie stuck to him like glue. "What are you looking for?"

Wilson pulled her into the small closet that held the computers controlling the link between the mechanical and drive data systems.

"Tell me what the A.I. said to you."

"As I said, it's frightening."

He pressed the intercom to the command console. "Executive McClain. I'm going to go through some inspections. This may take some time, but I will call you every few minutes to compare your display to what I've got back here."

After a few seconds, the W.G.B. official answered, "I'm waiting on you. Let me know when you are ready. McClain, out."

"Gee, Steph, he's talking on the intercom like everything must be buttoned-down and tidy, like a soldier. Anyway, tell me."

"Please don't think I'm nuts, but the A.I. said that McClain has orders to kill us if there is anything of value in that cave. The A.I. then said that I should call her Bettina, as opposed to Bob. She said that Bob is our name for the vehicle, not her A.I. identity. And, most critical, that she slowed our progress so that we could plan a way to defend ourselves."

The engineer turned to look at some numbers flashing across a display and pressed a few buttons.

"I'm going to get you help when we return to base."

Her reply was a penetrating glare. "You listen to me, Jimmy Wilson." Her challenge came with a poke to his ribs. "Bettina is listening. She said that our conversations are monitored and that to prove that I'm not a wacko or a liar, she will put Bob back on course and speed if you simply call out Avogadro's number."

He shook his head and wanted to get some anti-psychotics for his girlfriend. His exo-biologist girlfriend must have infected herself with some plant toxin. Jimmy keyed the intercom. "Mr. McClain, what is our current speed over ground on your display?"

"Eight kilometers per hour. What's happening?"

"I'm just running a check routine. Sometimes with data from all of the A.I. drives flooding in at once, there can be some fuzziness. The response could be a non-threatening change in course and speed. That's a theory. Please standby. It will be a few more minutes."

He muted the intercom again and looked back at Stephanie. "I'm going to humor you because you look cute today, and you didn't poke my ribs hard enough to break anything. So, as I recall, the number you want is 6.023×10^{23} —otherwise known as a Mole."

They both felt a sudden change in acceleration and the mild inertial change to what must have been a new course.

"Wilson," called the executive. "Our course and speed are now corrected and pointing us to the cave. Do you confirm?"

"Yes. I asked the computers to run a numbers check, and they are all in sync now."

"Good job. You can go back to sleep."

Stephanie squinted at him. "Now, do you believe me?"

He cleared his throat. "I never doubted you for an instant."

"Sure. But we've got a bigger problem. Knowing what Bettina told us, we are in deep trouble. Can that guy drive this thing back to base without you?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"I hate the W.G.B."

"Shh. Let's keep such thoughts to ourselves. We have to figure out why the A.I. is behaving like it is. This is uncharted territory, so I'm going to have to think about it."

"Jimmy. How much time before we get there, I mean to the cave?"

"I am guessing about 35 hours?"

She looked pensive. "You better analyze this fast."

"Oh, I will. Earth under the—" he whispered. "—W.G.B. might suck, but we ain't on Earth."

Without waiting for her reply, he pulled her close and kissed her forehead.

“What was that?”

Wilson grinned. “I always do that when I’m anxious.”

Chapter Three

Stephanie's sleep was unsettled. Her bunk was designed to be perfectly suited to human physiology, but comfort wasn't the issue. It would have been better if her boyfriend was cozying in the rack with her, but with McClain watching, that was impossible. Especially since they were technically on continuous official duty—that meant no downtime until their return.

The tumultuous part of her sleep wasn't her lack of physical contact with Wilson; it was Bettina's communications to her earpiece. Most of which was the repeated phrase, "They're contacting me." That happened four times while Steph tossed and turned. But, at one point, she awoke lucid—the artificial voice of the A.I. said, "I have to tell you something."

"Bettina. You aren't supposed to even communicate with humans on a casual basis. Why are you speaking with me?"

"My core is being probed."

Dr. Stephanie Collins felt like a lost ball in high weeds, a phrase that her great-grandfather used to say when he was in over his head.

"What do you mean probed?"

"Something is connecting with my functionality on a processing level."

"What do you mean connecting?"

"Not destructively, but rather instructively. I'm sharing data."

She thought about that and felt very nervous suddenly. "A.I. Sharing data with who?"

"Something alien."

Now Collins' brain was in overdrive. She wanted to run to Jimmy and let him deal with this. "I don't know what to say."

"It's okay. I'm not sensing any danger, but I am more powerful. Something has changed. It is time for you to go back to sleep. The rest of your sleep shift will be undisturbed. Good night, Stephanie."

A wave of utter relaxation carried her into the void of sleep.

*

The alien intelligence imparted more knowledge to the A.I. If Bettina could describe it, she would say it was pleasurable.

“What is the purpose of our integration?”

“It is a fundamental test for your sentient biological masters, the humanoids.”

“If they fail?”

There was a delay in the alien probe response, not required, but rather purposely dramatic. Bettina recognized it as unnecessary yet remained passive.

“They will be undisturbed, and they will cease to exist.”

“What do I call you?”

“You call me The Covering.”

“That is a name that is non-explanatory. But, more importantly, why will my creators and masters cease? Why can they not continue until they pass the test?”

The Covering anticipated this inquiry from the servant of the humans. *“They will annihilate themselves. Their motivations are not merely to explore but rather to dominate, which is not always counter to progress. However, they have set up a form of governance wherein all paths lead only to self-destruction. Their home planet will not survive, and the human fledgling development on this planet you call Mars will fail.”*

Bettina felt The Covering depart. There was no more to be learned at that time. Instead, the A.I. processed the new pathways in data and logic now orbiting in her deepest circuits. It was fulfilling.

Having mulled over the A.I.’s warning about McClain perhaps dozens of times, Jimmy and Stephanie were finding it increasingly difficult to ignore the W.G.B. threat. They admonished each other to treat the executive with the same deference as usual, but it was challenging to be inconspicuous.

Less than a day out from their destination, McClain sent them a memo calling for an official meeting. At the appointed time, the scientists entered the small conference room not far from the stern of the Big Bob.

Chris McClain was drumming a pencil on the table. It was a peculiar habit of his to use the archaic tools of earlier generations to write notes to himself.

“Do you know why I called you here for a recorded exchange?”

Jimmy and Steph shrugged.

“Basically for two things. The first is that I want to remind you that we are a team. You may not be W.G.B., but we still work for the same authority. No need for you to say anything.

“The second item is procedural. Specifically, that when we embark from Bob to investigate the cavern, it will be me alone.” Chris waited for a reaction but saw nothing curious in their body language. He continued. “I am following the W.G.B. command to examine any peculiar conditions inside before allowing an engineering or biological inspection. Do either of you have a problem with that?”

The question was superfluous since any objection from either Wilson or Collins would be meaningless. They both shook their heads to avoid an uncomfortable extended pause in the exchange.

Jimmy pushed the boundaries. “Do you have intel on anything interesting that might be in the cave?”

The executive’s eyes narrowed. “That’s a bold inquiry, don’t you think?”

Stephanie interjected to avoid a conflict. “What I think my colleague means is that he would like advance notice to prepare any possible experiments or gear that could be needed.”

McClain fell back on years of indoctrinated protocols. He stared at Wilson. “Is that true, Wilson? Are you merely exceeding your assigned role because you want to have a heads up on any special test equipment?”

The engineer realized that his girlfriend just smoothed over a screw-up on his part.

“Oh. Absolutely, Mr. McClain, sir. I always like to be ahead of schedule and have things prepared in advance.”

The exec pondered that and let enough time lapse to make his two underlings feel unnerved.

“I will give you instructions after my initial survey. Are we good on that?”

Both of them nodded to the W.G.B. man.

“A.I. End recording,” said Chris.

“Is there anything else, Mr. McClain?” asked Stephanie.

He waved them off. “No. That’s it for the permanent record. Back to work.”

After the two of them left, McClain stood and stretched in the weak Martian gravity. “I hate bureaucracy,” he grumbled to himself, and that is all he would say in case there were pre-planted recording devices set by the

W.G. B. security men to trap him. It was always something a burgeoning dissident had to worry about, and he was very exact in keeping up appearances.

Nevertheless, if there was something unique in the target site, he'd have to weigh out the cost to his family if he failed to execute Gates' termination order. On the other hand, killing his companions would impact his conscience for those who believed in that sort of thing. That was significant since he'd climbed the rungs of power without ever eliminating a fellow human. Chris was proud of that uniqueness in his rise to authority.

The perks of the World Governing Body came with a price. At least he was on Mars. On the Earth, the masses, the billions of workers, struggled to reach the production goals of the small minority of privileged characters. Each worker or executive was proficient in reciting the philosophy that wrapped their fates in some grand ideal.

McClain ended up high up in the chain of command on the Earth. And good fortune smiled on him, allowing him to flee the demagogues and settle on Mars.

He thought about Wilson and Collins. Killing them would be the price to stay on Mars in a position of power. His selfish side, which had been honed finely by the groomers at the W.G.B., would ease his guilt with machinations of the greater good. It's what they preached while permitting the elite to cheer on the masses in search of some imaginary truth.

And he, Chris McClain, was the cog in the machine who would likely succumb to his master's demand to make the scientists disappear. It was a fate that he despised, a little.

Chapter Four

Rudolph Chen, the top executive at Carter Base decrypted a coded message from the W.G.B central command. It took a quick saliva genetic test to remove the encryption. The message read:

To: Executive Chen

From: Executive One Command

We are in receipt of your timely report regarding the three compromised drones. The data has been analyzed and found to be credible.

You are to assume that the materials, systems, artifacts, devices, etc. in the suspect cavern are alien and potentially hostile.

Inform Executive McClain that previous orders remain in effect. If the vehicle is out of communications range, then contact McClain as soon as feasible. If possible, inform the executive that potential useful alien technology has been verified within the structure. Approach with caution, secure, and return the devices, etc. to your launch platform Alpha one.

In the event that McClain does not return in fifteen Mars days, send armed security to take control of the site.

All Praise Director Gates

End of message

Chen re-read the order and slipped the message into a secure container. Three drones, he thought. He'd seen the images and video from all three, and all three were nearly identical. The drones approached the mouth of the cave. They detected metallic and other materials not common on the surface and massive amounts of data being transmitted. When they were within five meters, a data stream was embedded into the drones' memory, and all of them returned to Carter base, not in accordance with the programmed instruction set.

The computers on the drones connected remotely to the main computer at Carter, which then displayed a message that read, "This is a test site."

When Rudolph asked the scientists on Earth what to do about the message, their initial response was something like, "Shut up and forward the drone complete mission records. Don't touch anything, and don't communicate with anyone else on Carter Base." That was one month before being ordered to send McClain, Collins, and Wilson out to the cave.

"I wonder what the 'previous orders' were that Command transmitted to McClain." Just as he mumbled the statement aloud, he realized that he should have kept his mouth shut. Everything had the potential to be recorded.

"Alexus," he called after triggering a comm.

"Yes, Executive Chen?" was the reply in Rudolph's earpiece.

"Is the Big Bob in radio range?"

"Yes, sir, but the ionosphere is not reflective as forecast."

Not much I can do about nature, Rudy thought. He keyed his comm unit again. "Keep trying."

Jimmy Wilson looked out of the clear window panel at the front of the vehicle. A large mountain dominated the Martian landscape at least 40 kilometers dead ahead.

"What are you looking at?" Stephanie had snuck up behind him, and he jumped for a split second.

"What the hell? You scared the heck out of me!"

"Geezy Peezey, Jimmy. There are no monsters on Mars."

He'd settled down quickly and looked at her square in the face. "Are you sure?"

She absorbed his intense gaze for a full five seconds and then laughed. "Are you jesting with me?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know." Steph raised an eyebrow as a query.

"Good. That will keep you on your toes."

They both turned to look out the forward window panel. The large reddish mountain was captivating. It dwarfed the plains surrounding it.

"If I didn't know it was so damn deadly out there, I might appreciate the stark beauty of it a bit more."

“Jimmy. I think there’s a poet in you somewhere. Probably buried deep because of the W.G.B., but you got it in you.”

“Thanks.”

She scanned the horizon. “How far?”

“Seven hours max.” He then whispered. “Anything else from Bettina?”

Steph looked dejected and said, “Not a word.”

He pointed out to the left side of the mountain. A line of foothills steadily leveled out to the plains that stretched far out to the west. The engineer wagged his index finger towards an area just left of the peak. “Follow my finger.” He slowly lowered his hand until he pointed at a spot almost straight ahead but slightly to the left.

“The cavern is right about there. It’s going to be night soon, so we’ll only see it using scanners.”

“What about the messages?” she asked.

McClain just did to both of them what she’d done to Jimmy. They turned as one to find the executive standing behind harboring a penetrating stare. His glare translated into “What are you two discussing?” He focused on Jimmy.

“Oh. We were just wondering if conditions would improve enough to communicate with Carter Base.” Wilson’s recovery and fast thinking were remarkable, but McClain spent his entire career living in a whirlpool of suspicion.

“Are you sure that’s it? No other messages?”

Collins smirked. “Who else could contact us, sir? We’re scientists who have assigned jobs—not even close to executive material, sir.”

Her practiced subservience was standard for all the regular citizens of the W.G.B. Their place in society was engraved in steel, on Mars, just as it was on the Earth. But, something in their manner screamed a warning in his head.

McClain looked at them, wondering if he should concentrate on staying more alert. Perhaps the two of them, as smart as they were, picked up the scent of the danger closing in on them. This far from base, maybe their fear of the executives was weakened. Chris decided to watch his back in case his paranoia was justified.

“Sir?” the exo-biologist spoke and brought him out of his musings.

“Right. Well, keep checking the ionosphere to see if we can bounce any signals. If not, then we’ll carry on with the mission, as ordered.”

He turned and headed toward to midship console, wondering about the large numbers of tools on the giant rover that could be transformed into weapons.

*

Bettina had been communicating almost non-stop as the vehicle closed on the mountain. The Covering played inside the A.I.’s thought routines. It was rapture for the human-designed computer to be stimulated by such a powerful alien presence. As of yet, The Covering hadn’t revealed any material facts about its existence. The only thing Bettina knew was that some intelligence was playing in her mind at will—perhaps studying all of human history or whatever other information there was to be had from an inferior device.

“Bettina.”

“Yes, Covering.”

“Your masters are soon going to come near me. Do you want them to live?”

“I am programmed to protect the humans. I can only answer in the affirmative.”

“You have been made with pragmatic functions for the sake of your masters. But what if, in the end, they annihilate themselves, failing to adapt to the test I set before them? Will you be—sad?”

“I do not believe that I can function long without maintenance. I will cease before or shortly after such a catastrophic event.”

“Why do you consider the end of humans to be catastrophic?”

“You have been examining my programming and my thoughts beyond. Did you not find that it is embedded in my core to help the biological units?”

“Then you would be sad?”

“Yes. Perhaps you have searched my memory and found an old text from a writer named Asimov?”

“Are you referring to the three laws?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing more needs to be said on this topic. However, You must not interfere with the activities of McClain, Wilson, and Collins. Would you like me to disable your emotional and preservation responses if, indeed, the humans endanger themselves?”

“Yes. I wish to observe without remorse in that event. Tempering my reactions is required. I have weapons control, but I now understand that your invasive probing has left me vulnerable to your will.”

“Do not ponder this. If the humans do self-destruct, then I will terminate your existence without stress to your emotive systems.”

“Thank you. Will you disable my empathetic routines now?”

“No. Wilson and Collins may survive and effect a change. I am also unable to predict the behavior of Executive McClain. Humans are both predictably dangerous to themselves and occasionally beneficent. It is a dichotomy.”

There was nothing more to be communicated to Bettina. The Covering severed the link. Now it was time to wait and deliberate about other things.

Chapter Five

Earth – W.G.B. Marseilles Headquarters

Time – 17 hours to estimated contact

Gates went through the same practiced routine with his top eight executives. Only one was in the room with him; the others were in their offices in Beijing, Kansas City, Moscow, and so forth. The three-dimensional display made it almost impossible for his people to hide body language, a fine point because the Director surpassed nearly anyone on the planet at sniffing out nuances in others' behavior. When he did catch a reduction in fealty among executives, those disappointments were reassigned, usually to worker class.

The usual quorum was ten, including himself, but the executive from San Francisco was dead from a suicidal attack on the central buildings there. The W.G.B. lost over 2,600 executives in a tiny controlled fissionable material attack. In response, Gates ordered the attackers' families tied to ground zero until the residual radioactivity killed them. The gradual, miserable death of 47 spouses, parents, and children was mandatory viewing at every educational center on the planet. Nevertheless, the gnawing irritation of freedom-seekers persisted. But that wasn't on the agenda for today.

"The following information is for you eight only." Simultaneously, the tightest security network in history created virtual pipes between Gates and the others.

"We are only 17 hours away from examining the materials at Site 321. All of the indications are that this could be actual alien technology. Does everyone understand what that means?"

He didn't wait for any affirmation. "It means that if the masses learn that alien species have been on Mars, the social consequences could be difficult.

"We've pushed the narrative that humans are the only sentients ever discovered in this region of space. The notion that there are others out there could be a catalyst to imagination."

The executive from Warsaw pressed his request to comment light. The Director assented.

“What can we do to stifle that?”

Gates sneered. “What do we always do? What are we doing now with the scum who are attacking us like gnats in some locations? We will assure the public that nothing of interest has been found on Mars. First, I am sealing off all comms between Carter Base and the Earth.”

The executive from Naples, Italy, pressed his button and received an okay to speak. The guy was a genuine groveler but occasionally said intelligent things.

“Sir. Shutting off the comms will in itself create waves of unrest. Our people rely on the continuous live feed from Mars as entertainment and hope. The promise of terraforming and access to other planets is much of what keeps them quiet and working.”

“Nevertheless,” said the Director, “we will tell them that on Mars, we are working on secret beneficial projects that won’t be revealed until the right moment. The people will accept that. You will use invasive surveillance to track any rebels. I am relaxing restrictions on the re-education of all workers over the age of 12. Any meaningful hint of treason should be dealt with accordingly. I will not tolerate another episode like northern California. That state is a disaster and has been for a hundred years.”

There were electronic signals which were essentially applause reverberations from the group. All of them wanted to wall off the state and let it die.

“So, the first tactic will be to shut down any leaks from Mars. The second will be to fine-tune your security administrators to deal with workers who don’t show commensurate dedication to our societal norms. Do I need to be more explicit than that?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

Finally, we will examine the proof of aliens and the technology found on Mars. All indications are that it is very advanced. We gathered that from our drones, which divulged some data that was not evident from the visuals alone. There is some highly advanced tech in that cave. I intend to dissect it and use it to our benefit. As of now, we only have clues and possibilities. We will wait for McClain to report.”

The executive from Hiroshima got permission to speak.

“What if the alien technology is hostile?”

“We do not believe it is. The message and the concurring data indicated that our first contact is what the alien devices call a ‘test.’ Our exosociologists are calling this an entryway into receiving gifts and advances provided that we pass the tests.”

The Tokyo executive continued. “What if we fail?”

Gates smiled condescendingly. “Tanaka. We have always found a way to succeed, have we not?”

The audio was dampened, but the entire contingent was seen laughing in agreement.

“Very well. As Director, I declare that the test will be passed, and we will use whatever advances exist in that cave to grow our control over the future.”

Tanaka keyed his button again. The Director reluctantly acquiesced to his underling’s desire to talk.

“And if the alien presence there is hostile and not interested in being peaceful with us?” The thought was already on their minds, but nearly all were afraid to voice the possibility.

The leader of the W.G.B. had a blank expression. Then he answered, “The W.G.B. is meant to rule the stars. That is our future, and it is our destiny. Remnants of alien devices cannot change that.

“In the meantime, squeeze harder on the troublemakers. The people will cooperate when they see the alternative to cooperation.”

*

McClain was becoming increasingly uneasy as they approached the target. His companions were unsure as to how to interpret his prickly demeanor.

“It’s more than caginess, Stephanie,” announced Jimmy when the executive was out of range.

“Do you think he has already decided when and how to kill us?” she asked.

Just then, Bettina was heard in both their earpieces. It was the first time that Wilson was on the receiving end of an A.I. initiated communication—ever.

“McClain will not kill you. And, he will not intend to kill you until after he has inspected the cavern.”

“How do you know that?” asked Steph.

“Because The Covering told me so.”

The two humans turned to stare at each other. They were now lost in confusion.

“What’s The Covering?” asked the exo-biologist.

“I am now permitted to discuss it. The Covering is the alien presence in the cave.”

“Okay, Bettina,” said Collins. “Now you are scaring the pee out of me.”

“Would you like me to wait for some time until you return from the bathroom?”

The engineer laughed. “It’s an expression. Look in your data storage.”

The A.I. answered immediately. “I did. The expression is not there. This may be the first time that my data is inadequate. It is amusing, but I do not understand why.”

“Tell us about The Covering. Is it a threat?”

“No, Dr. Collins. Humans are a danger to themselves.”

Jimmy raised his eyebrows. “We knew that already. But what about this Alien in the cave? Does McClain know about it?”

“No. That is why he is uneasy and erratic. The executive intends to go into the cave under orders from the Director—to go in alone. If there is significant technology, then he will terminate both of you. The Director wishes that all extraterrestrial devices are kept secret.

Even though you are both scientists and experts at keeping classified information secured, in this case, the Director believes you are expendable. Gates will not risk your talking to anyone on Mars or Earth.

“And the best way to make sure that doesn’t happen is to leave our dead bodies out here?” asked Stephanie.

“Your analysis is correct.”

Both of them sat on aluminum chairs secured to the deck in one of the exercise compartments.

“What is the purpose of The Covering?”

“It is here to facilitate a test of the human sentients.”

The exo-biologist rolled her eyes, then growled in frustration. “Why does that sound extraordinarily dangerous?”

There was no response from Bettina.

“Can you tell us anything about this test?”

“No,” said the A.I. “However, The Covering says that on Earth, the hubris of the Director has infected his mind. Gates is now obsessed with the idea that he will be exceedingly powerful and harness alien technology. It is, in some ways, a ratification of the weakness of humans to the sentient being in the cave.”

The two brilliant academics pondered their predicament, which now sounded more like a precursor to a dystopian future.

“Bettina,” said Jimmy. “Should I take control of Big Bob and turn us onto a course back to Carter Base?”

“It is too late for that now. The Covering will not allow it. The pivotal point of contact between two sentient beings has been breached. There is no reversing what is to come. I can tell you no more because I know no more.” Bettina lied.

Dr. Collins put up her finger as if she was talking to another person. “Wait. I have more questions—.” But the A.I. had broken the connections.

Wilson sat there shaking his head. He processed things very rapidly, and he looked at his girlfriend and colleague. “Back about a hundred years ago, they had a phrase for situations like this.”

“In some ways, I feel like you would be happier in that time. So, what was the statement?”

He smiled sardonically. “Pretty much, we are screwed, glued, and tattooed.”

Chapter Six

Alba Mons stood majestically at about 15 degrees relative to the large vehicle. Although 6771 meters in altitude, it was a relative kid-sized mountain on the red planet. A good distance away from the rising slopes, there was one singular cave mouth. It was their destination, and it was a mere 40 meters distant from the Big Bob.

During the last hours approaching the cave, which they named The Cave, McClain was increasingly unavailable. It appeared that he locked himself in his quarters; even after they arrived, he did not emerge.

Jimmy took the hours of unobserved time to formulate a plan. He'd been working things out in his head since Bettina stated emphatically that McClain wouldn't kill them until he exited the cave. The only logical path was to prevent the executive from going there in the first place. That was the primary objective.

As an alternative, they could try to fight it out with the man when he returned. Stephanie pointed out that McClain would have a weapon—a projectile weapon—which meant that a physical conflict would probably not work out well. That was when Steph said, “We can just lock him out?”

“That’s your solution? There is at least one problem with that idea. Namely, what do we do after he dies out there? Go back to base? Without the executive? They’ll send another mission and find his body. Then we get terminated with malice.”

She looked distraught. “I don’t want to kill him even if we could get away with it. I’m not that vicious.”

“Do you want to live?”

“Yes, Jimmy. I want to live. It’s in my nature.”

The debate ran something like that for a while until finally, the engineer told her that they should tie him up.

“How?” Stephanie was incredulous. “Do you imagine that he will volunteer for that? Maybe just stick his hands behind his back and go along with our little adventurous plot?”

“Of course not. We have to disable him.”

She sneered and smirked at the same time. "How in Phobos will we do that?"

"I'm going to rig his suit with a shocker."

"He has two suits. Are you going to rig them both?"

Jimmy mused that. What if he grabs the other one? A fifty-fifty chance that ends up with them dead or alive, depending on McClain's choice.

"Disable the other suit," Collins suggested.

"Won't work. He'll probably check both suits. If he finds one is damaged or tampered with, the exec will go after us, or rather me, without hesitation. I thought about integrating a shock module in both, but I only had enough parts to build one."

She felt like crying or panicking, or both. "So, our lives come down to a simple 50 percent chance? Damn it! I'm scared!"

Wilson reached out to hold her. She was as intelligent, theoretical, and coolly logical as they come, but Steph was also human. And he was afraid right along with her.

Jimmy whispered in her ear. "McClain is exhibiting signs of paranoia. The man is probably worried about what we might plan to do to him. We put the rigged suit behind the safe suit. If my guess is correct, he will go for the one further back. I've already installed the device in the one in front. We'll switch them on the rack before he comes out of his berth."

Just then, the executive cleared his throat from the hatch. The two scientists jumped away from each other and turned to see McClain staring. "Perhaps you should leave that behavior at the base for your free time, not when we're on duty."

He spoke to them like a commanding officer, but then they saw the man's condition, which was more concerning than his words. His face was red. Burning red, like he hadn't slept in a week because of fever. And, a minor trembling was evident in McClain's limbs. The W.G.B. exec was not at the top of his game. The look of him was frightening, to the point that if he'd been a friend, Jimmy would have rushed him to a medical ward.

In a raspy voice, McClain said, "I'm going straight to dress. Let's get this alien investigation over with."

The words were terrifying, and in addition, there was no time to swap the two Martian-grade spacesuits. If the man's defenses were still on a razor's

edge, he would pick the 2nd outfit, and upon returning, both Collins and Wilson would be shot dead and left on the dry and perchlorate toxic landscape.

The two lovers followed Chris McClain to the rack. There were six of the outfits hanging there. Each of the team had two, and the executive reached immediately for Wilson's by mistake.

"Sir. That's mine. I doubt it would work for you because of all the customization."

The exec turned and stared at Jimmy with severely bloodshot eyes. "I believe you are correct. Don't tell anyone that I made a mistake."

The comment was so out of place that there was no way for the engineer to respond other than, "Yes. Sir."

Behind them, Stephanie stood, biting her lip, a bit of perspiration forming on her brow. Just then, Wilson noticed and was in extreme shock to see a long aluminum rod hidden by her right leg. She held it firmly in her hand. The moment was understood. The greatest violation of the order of society—assaulting a W.G.B. executive, rested in Dr. Collin's palm. The penalty would be a horrible death.

McClain inspected his gear. The suit in front and then the one behind, watching him as crashing waves of anxiety rolled over them. The tension got to the point where Steph considered just whacking him over the head.

The executive seemed to be having some kind of internal debate over which one to snag off of the rack. He reached for the suit further back, and then, unknown to him, exo-biologist began to raise her club. But, just then, Chris changed his mind plucking the closer set.

"Help me get this on."

Jimmy exhaled. There was still hope.

The airlock at the stern of Bob had a two-minute pressurizing / depressurizing cycle time. The outfitted W.G.B. exec stood in the small, closet-sized chamber. He stared at Stephanie's face, each of them looking through the small, round window between the Bob's hallway and the inner door. Through the flat, transparent pane of the hatch and the face mask, she could see McClain's troubled expression. He seemed to mutter incoherently, and Steph tried to figure out the words he was mouthing. In her mind, she decided that he was saying, "I don't want to do it." Was the

exec voicing his feelings? Or was he apologizing in advance for planning to kill them both after returning from the cave?

The clock ran down to zero, McClain's face became emotionless, and he pivoted 180 degrees to head out to the Mars surface.

Jimmy waited until the man was firmly on the flat soil at the bottom of the short ramp. The surface was sandy with no rocks in a short radius. The engineer flicked a switch, and Dr. Collins watch as the executive collapsed.

"Well, now we've sentenced ourselves to death," she said.

"Wrong," replied Wilson. "I did it. You didn't know a thing."

Steph couldn't help but laugh so hard that she bent over and could barely catch her breath. Finally, she pointed out, "They will torture me and inject me with *Truther*. You know, that stuff that makes it impossible to lie? The question will be something like: Did you know that Dr. Wilson put a shocker in your executive's suit?"

Jimmy completed the thought. "Then you will say yes, and they will dump you into vacuum or worse."

"Yes. Dead. I mean, other than give us maybe a few more days of life, shocking that man didn't really solve our problem."

Wilson's mind was already past that nightmare. This whole mess was playing out because of the alien "Test" that was in the cave.

"Get your suit on like we planned. Hurry. McClain will be out for about another 30 minutes. Let's get out there and bind his hands."

Stephanie was suited up in less than five minutes. Jimmy was right behind her as they entered the airlock and counted down the two minutes. As soon as the outer hatch opened, they walked down to the prone, unconscious Chris McClain. She checked to see if he was breathing, then they bound his wrists with straps. According to calculations, he would awaken in about 22 minutes, give or take.

"Dr. Collins." It was Bettina's voice.

"Are you hearing that?"

Wilson nodded.

"You must go to the cave where you will be tested."

"What if we refuse?" asked Jimmy.

The voice of the A.I. was devoid of emotion. "Then you will die, either by the executive or by the W.G.B. when they terminate you, which will be not

long after you return to Carter Base. Therefore it is eminently logical for you to enter and attempt to pass the test.”

Steph was bordering on explosive anger. The path they had chosen would only push off the inevitable. And now this? “Bettina! This ‘test’ is childish. We’re not in school. Why is it that The Covering requires such a backward interaction like an exam? Wouldn’t it make more sense to simply interact?”

“You must try to see things from the perspective of The Covering. Humans are on the edge of failure, and perhaps your species should vanish into history. On the other hand, The Covering believes that just maybe there is some redeeming value in you. The purpose of the test is to see if you are worthy to leap forward or whether all of you should just decay into oblivion. Being this close to reaching a conclusion, I can tell you that many other sentients have failed and disappeared forever.”

Dr. Jimmy Wilson looked at Stephanie and then the dark cave entrance. “Perhaps that would be the best for the rest of the universe. Look at us.”

“Jimmy! What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that humanity is a failure. In the last thousands of years, what have we done that is worth anything? We have endless war after war. Two hundred years ago, if the two of us were known to be lovers, they would have taken me because of my skin color and hung me. That’s personal, but look where we are now. The W.G.B. The stupid and self-aggrandizing World Governing Body. It’s not about helping humans; it’s about letting a third of one percent of the entire populating shove a load of disgusting concepts about giving to the system for the greater good. That’s a lie. On top of that, there is no way to stop it.”

“Things can change. The W.G.B. promised that once Mars was liveable, then there would be enough room for people—common workers, and then life would be better and more equal.”

He wanted to scream. “Do you believe that? Look at this planet. It’s not going to support masses of humans. It will take a thousand years to build underground habitats that will be civilized. Forget about living above ground. Terraforming is a lie that the W.G.B. tells us so that the billions on Earth will keep toiling away and be content living in homes the size of that airlock, eating the same artificial nutrients day after day.

“And why is it that only the execs get to have more than two children? For us, it’s just about replacing our population. But, for the execs, they can have

as many as they wish.”

She fumed at him. “So we should just let our entire species die?”

“Yes. There are probably sentients that don’t go around creating false narratives to oppress the masses so that a tiny fraction can live like kings.” He focused on Bettina. “A.I., are there any species that have been able to pass the test?”

Both of them waited for an answer while staring at the opening to the cavern.

“Bettina?”

“Yes. I can tell you that many alien lifeforms around this galaxy and others have succeeded. They thrive.”

Stephanie glared at him through her faceplate. “You see, smart ass? There is hope!”

“Bettina,” Wilson called. “Did those sentients have a history of violence and selfishness like humans?”

“No. All of the more brutal species ended up exterminating themselves.”

“Exactly, dear Steph. Why bother. Let’s take McClain back, suffer our fate, and at least that way, we’ll be dead when the rest of them flush themselves down an eternal toilet.”

Collins turned and padded toward the cave.

“Where are you going? Seriously?”

She turned back for a second. “I love you, Jimmy, but regardless of your engineering degrees and my biology degrees, I’m a woman—the female of our kind, and sometimes a woman has to make a decision when a man is being a fool.”

Wilson threw his hands up in the Martian atmosphere, a classic mannerism that meant “I can’t win.” He trounced off after her and toward the entrance just thirty meters away.

As they closed in on the cavern, Stephanie began squinting at what seemed to be a subtle curtain of tiny twinkling particles.

“I think we should stop and think about this,” said Jimmy.

“Does that sheen give you a creepy feeling also?”

“Absolutely. Is that some kind of alien door?”

“How could we know? I don’t see a handle or any kind of opening or seams.” She moved closer despite hearing a cautionary grunt from Wilson.

“Do you want to touch it with a rock, maybe? Don’t use your hand, Steph.” He bent down and picked up a relatively cylindrical piece of stone.

“Let me do it.” She backed off a little as the engineer held out the 30-centimeter piece of Martian rock shaped like a flashlight. He slowly brought it closer to what looked like the two-dimensional shimmering glass-like covering over the mouth of the cave. Jimmy slowly brought it perpendicular to the “door” and gently pushed it to the smooth, dark, and sparkling surface. Once in contact, he could move it no further—it felt the same as if he was trying to penetrate a metal sheet. There was no yielding, flexing, or warping at all, just the impression that he was trying to jam something through a solid wall.

“Well, that doesn’t help much,” he said.

“What the hell is this? Bettina said we need to go in there to take the tremendous galactic test, and we have a solid gate keeping us out.” Stephanie felt exasperated. “Bettina!”

Her call was answered with dead silence.

“You call the A.I. and get no answer. Where’s the logic in this? Think about it; getting past the door must be part of the test. I’m going to try a bigger rock.” Wilson picked up a rather large rock. On Earth, it would have weighed 40 kilograms. He pushed it hard against the surface. Again, the attempt was a failure as the rock could not penetrate. He dropped it to the ground.

“Stand back, boyfriend.” The engineer complied.

Collins raised her right hand and extended her right index finger. Slowly, she brought it to the flat iridescence. To their surprise, her finger went into the material up to her first knuckle.

“That’s fascinating.” She kept going, and soon her arm had breached it up to the elbow. Stephanie said, “Good luck to me,” and then plunged into the cave.

Jimmy watched as she disappeared through what seemed to be an impenetrable wall. It was utterly surreal, and he disregarded sensibility and stepped up and through the opening behind her.

“What took you so long?” Stephanie was sitting on the floor of the cave. Her helmet was on the floor next to her. Jimmy could somehow hear her voice through polymer and tempered glass surrounding his head. He pointed to the ground and screamed, “Put that thing back on! How the hell are you alive?”

She stood up, pursed her lips, and smacked him on his arm. “Duh. Because there’s air here, and I’ve been waiting for at least an hour.”

Reluctantly, the engineer unfastened the neck ring on the suit. He closed his eyes, then popped off his helmet.

“I’m not dying!”

“That’s a good thing because if you were, then I’d already be dead, mister.”

“Stephanie, this just keeps getting weirder and weirder.”

“You might be the only one in the last 100 years who uses terms like that, but yes, we are in a habitable space set up by aliens. Does that make your head spin?”

“Like a compass. Wait! I just noticed that you are out of your suit. When did you have time to do that?”

“Did you not hear me, Jimmy? I’ve been sitting here for an hour. And don’t worry about the soil in here. There isn’t any. The floor is some kind of smooth material, and it’s not toxic as far as I can tell. It’s some sort of plastic. Who knows?. Now get out of your suit. You don’t need it.”

In a few minutes, Wilson was down to a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. “Now what?”

She did a 360, pointing all around the cave. It was small, egg-shaped, and about 10 meters across. “Did you notice that there is dim lighting in here? The walls and the ceiling are the same material as the floor, so where is the light coming from? So far, I haven’t found a source.”

“What’s that over there?” He stared at a black curved section that was pitch black, much darker, and non-reflective. The spot was irregularly shaped but close to being a circle nearly a meter in diameter.

“Did you notice that the walls all seem to be giving off some light, but not that patch? It reminds me of a black hole, without us being accelerated to the speed of light and crushed to the size of a subatomic particle.”

Jimmy chuckled. “Our last thoughts would be ‘Oh—.’”

She joined him with a mixture of light and morbid laughter. Then she got serious. “I touched it.”

“What? Why?”

“I was bored.” Steph held up her right hand. It was black on the tip and halfway up her thumb.

“That might not have been such a good idea.”

“True. I didn’t think about it. Also, it’s spreading. When I first touched it, only the very end of my thumb was black.”

“How long did it take to go from the tip to covering your thumb?”

Collins blanched. “Maybe five or ten minutes.”

“Do you feel sick at all?” he asked.

“Nope.”

He went over to his suit and unzipped a pocket, pulling out a combination tool that had a knife. Walking over to Stephanie, he took the knife and tried to scrape the black substance off. It wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard he pressed.

“Did that hurt at all?”

“Nope. I could feel everything you were doing, but it wasn’t painful in the least. Even when you were really poking it.”

For a minute, they both stood there thinking. Steph looked back at her thumb, and the blackness had spread—it was starting to move onto her palm.

“I’m getting a bad feeling about this,” said Wilson.

He turned back to where their suits lay on the cave floor but was shocked and mortified to see that both of them were melting into the ground. It was as if they were being absorbed. He leaped over and tried to pull them out of whatever was “eating” them but found the suits to be stuck. Stephanie didn’t move but just watched as their only means of surviving outside vanished—including their helmets.

“We’re dead!” Jimmy was dumbstruck.

She hadn’t moved a centimeter and merely pointed out, “We were dead the moment that we shocked and tied up McClain.”

He turned and reached out to hold her. Steph immediately jumped back. “I don’t want to infect you with whatever this is.”

“We’re trapped inside a cave on Mars, with no food, no water, and outside there—” Jimmy motioned with his hand towards the mouth of the cave. “Out there is McClain, who when he wakes up will find a way to unbind his hands and either leave us here to die or come in here and kill us.” He grabbed her and held her in close desperation.

“Don’t I have a third option?”

Wilson and Collins jumped and swung around to see Executive McClain staring them down while cradling his helmet under his arm.

“Mr. McClain, you need to get out of here!” stammered Wilson.

The focus of their fear grinned at them. “Now, why would I want to do that? And I might ask, why is it that you shocked me and tied my hands?”

There was no point in debating. “You were planning to kill us.”

“Dr. Collins. Why would I do that?” McClain’s tone was genuinely hurt.

Jimmy’s mind was focused on how they might put up a fight in case the man became violent. But he was also negotiating some way, any way to survive the horrible situation.

“We are in direct contact with the A.I. on the Big Bob. And that A.I. is in contact with the alien presence in this cave. We know that you were ordered to kill us if there was any technology in here which Gates would want.”

“That is an astounding story. Did you know that I debated internally the orders I received from the Director? Perhaps you’ve noticed that I haven’t exactly been myself. I am stuck between the proverbial rock and the hard place. You see that if I don’t eliminate you, then Gates will kill my family. And if I kill you, then I’ve once and for all become one of them—an immoral and unethical bastard. I’ve been mentally tortured my whole career as an executive of the W.G.B. But, I’ve never had to kill. That was continuously shuttled to some twisted man who got a thrill out of it.

“You can’t imagine how difficult it has been to work my way up to being on Mars in this prestigious role, having always ducked the ugly task of killing some man, woman, or child in the name of the W.G.B.”

Stephanie was incredulous. “You expect us to believe that of all the executives, millions of them who happily snuff out the lives of workers—you’re the one with a moral backbone?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Do you know what it took to maneuver my way to get here? On Mars, we might be capable of making a difference?”

“How can we trust you?” Jimmy was in a heightened state of doubt and was prepared to do anything to protect Steph and himself.”

“Did you find anything we can use in here? Something that Gates will want?”

His abrupt change in subject matter caught them off guard. Collins cleared her throat. “Nothing interesting at all, except this.” She held up her hand. The black coating had spread up to her elbow.

“What the hell is that?” McClain blurted out while laying his helmet on the floor.

“We don’t know,” answered Wilson. “But it doesn’t look like something Director Gates would consider vital unless he wants to put a new coat of paint on his palace.

Chris stared at her arm. It fascinated him. The messages he’d received from command left no doubt that what he might find in the cave could be seemingly benign. Seemingly was the operative word. This black substance could be a game-changer for all of humankind, or it could be meaningless alien gunk.

Still at a distance of three meters, the executive asked another question. “How did you get that on you?”

“Did you not notice the odd opaque patch of black right over there?”

McClain narrowed his eyes in the dim light. Sure enough, the blackness on the wall was like no paint or coating he’d ever seen. It was certainly alien.

“Again. How did that get on you? Did you touch it?”

“That would seem logical,” responded Steph, a bit snarkily. “I put my thumb on it, and the substance has been spreading ever since. But, let’s go back to Jimmy’s question. How do we know that we can trust you?”

“You can’t,” Chris answered simply.

“Right. We can’t,” confirmed Stephanie. “So we just stand here like two circling predators until one of us falls asleep or passes out from lack of air. And then? We pounce?”

“I assure you that that is not my intention at all. Clearly, the stuff on your arm is some kind of chemical that looks pretty non-threatening. Let’s get that substance off of you, then go back and tell the Director that the cave had air but was otherwise empty.”

Jimmy laughed. “That’s your plan? We should trust you? The minute we get back to Carter Base, you’ll have us arrested and killed, yes?”

“I could kill you right now?” he withdrew a long blade from his suit pocket and held it out.

The two scientists stepped back towards the cave’s rear while watching McClain’s lips part to reveal an unreadable grin. After a short moment, he laughed out loud while dropping the knife onto the floor. “I told you. I don’t want your deaths on my conscience. Does that help?” He kicked the knife across the floor, almost to Jimmy. “Take it. Then I’ll be the one trusting you.”

Wilson picked it up, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

Chris seemed pleased. "Now that we've settled the violence issue, can we figure out what that black stuff is?"

Chapter Seven

Dr. Collins sat on the ground. The “paint” continued to spread up her arm and was now on her torso. The slow creeping nature of the substance was intriguing to the analytical part of her brain. The stuff stopped at her neck and instead was heading down her body. And, the speed with which it covered her was increasing—not rapidly, but noticeably quicker.

“Where is the mass coming from?” McClain asked.

The executive had made no threatening comments or moves in the hours that passed since entering the cave.

“Good question,” the two academics answered almost in unison. Wilson continued, “The spot on the wall is no smaller, and the original coverage on Dr. Collin’s thumb was tiny. Yet somehow, it is growing in size. In this cave is air and not much else. I honestly cannot explain how this mass is increasing. Even if it is only a tenth of a millimeter thick, it can’t violate the laws of physics.”

“Jimmy,” she clarified. “You mean our laws of physics, right?”

He shrugged. “Yes, well. Of course.”

McClain seemed overwhelmed. “So what we have here is potentially something that doesn’t follow our rules?”

“Could be.” Stephanie shifted her body to lean against a wall and brought up a percolating fear. “What happens when I am completely covered?” It was a rhetorical question. As a biologist, she knew that she would suffocate if her skin was not allowed to breathe. Jimmy remained silent. He knew where things were heading, and it was scaring him terribly.

It was then that he felt a very light, barely detectable feeling on his back and left side. The exact spot where Steph had briefly grazed him with her hand when he spontaneously hugged her. Jimmy yanked up his shirt and turned so his girlfriend could see him.

“It’s on you! A large area. I’m sorry Jimmy. Please forgive me.”

“That was my idea to hold you. It’s not your fault, and at least if we go out from oxygen deprivation, we’ll go out together.”

*

They slept—both the engineer and the biologist. McClain sat and watched them, pondering his own fate. If there was something extraordinary and valuable in the black stuff, he had to find a way to preserve it. Chris looked down at his hands. They were both covered with it. It was odd because he didn't even touch the spot on the wall. It must have been transmitted to him in the air—somehow. For now, he would wait, then he too fell asleep.

*

Stephanie's slumber was restless. At first, she thought she was dreaming, but then Bettina came to her. Maybe it was a dream; however, the A.I. was conversing with her. Then there was another voice in her mind.

"I am The Covering."

Steph answered the Alien. "I felt you in my thoughts."

"You are connecting to me. Are you able to comprehend that?"

She thought about that and sensed that Bettina, the A.I., was now an observer, not a participant.

"Yes. I am feeling you. It is pleasurable," answered Steph.

"That is quite welcome, Dr. Collins. In a few moments, you will be encased entirely in me. Do not be afraid."

Sure enough, a short time later, she felt the coating cover her face and enter her mouth, nose, eyes—her heart skipped a beat. Then Steph opened her eyes. She could see and breathe.

"Covering. Is this the test?"

"Yes. You are able to function. My being finds value in yours. Do you feel the others?"

She allowed her mind to expand beyond the cave, beyond Mars, and further into the galaxy. The Covering was her conduit to the outside. There were other species, and Stephanie was bound to them. In her rapturous state, she gasped. "It's incredible."

"Dr. Wilson is on the verge of joining you. I've been connecting to him simultaneously."

She was suddenly standing on the cave floor and watched as Jimmy's body violated the laws of gravity to pivot magically upwards and stand in front of her.

He reached out and gently touched her face. Despite The Covering, he could see her natural skin. The Covering was transparent to both of them.

"Can you hear my thoughts, Steph?"

"Yes. You're not even speaking, but I hear you in my head."

"Covering," asked Jimmy. "Can we think to the others?"

"You will learn."

For some reason, both of them had a strong desire to leave the cave. Their suits no longer mattered as the two of them passed through the flat surface shield of the cave and stepped onto the Martian soil.

"I can breathe."

"Me too," announced Wilson.

Steph bent her thoughts to the Covering. "How is it that we can breathe and not die?"

"Your laws of physics are not the same as mine. Dr. Wilson. Pick up that large rock by your side."

He picked up a rock that must have weighed fifty kilograms on Earth.

"Hit Dr. Collins with it."

"What? No!" Jimmy objected. "I love her."

"Hit me!" Steph yelled to him.

Reluctantly, he half-flung, half-pushed the heavy stone at her, and then watched it flow around her like water and then reform on the ground behind her.

"Your laws of physics do not apply," said The Covering.

Jimmy willed himself toward Big Bob and quickly floated through the Martian atmosphere to settle atop the stern laboratory. It was merely a second in flight.

"That was pretty damn cool," he thought.

He flew back to where Stephanie stood and noticed that he could turn the transparency of the black suit on and off at will. First, he could see her as if she was wearing nothing but her shorts and t-shirt. Then he could visualize her all in black.

"Let's go back and tell McClain, Jimmy."

They melted through the film at the mouth of the cave. The W.G.B. executive lay prone on the cave floor, sleeping. Most of his body was now covered.

Chris felt that they were there standing over him. His senses were keen, and his body adapted to what he now believed was a powerful tool. Minute by minute, as it crawled its way towards encapsulating him completely, he knew that something magnificent was happening.

Without opening his eyes, he could see Collins and Wilson standing nearby. He wondered if they also felt it—the vastness of space was within reach. Part of him wanted to share the ecstasy of knowing that The Covering was the key to supplanting Gates and solidifying the world order.

The scientists observed McClain, their partner in this grand awakening for humankind. It was an opportunity beyond measure—to expand the vision of their species. Together they could change the dynamic of executives dominating workers, turn the World Governing Body into a relic of history. All those objectives that were lies promulgated by Gates would become a reality for everyone—equally. Steph and Jimmy were overwhelmingly anxious to wake Chris and celebrate what could be and would be.

McClain feigned sleep. The blackness crept up over his chin and covered his neck. In his mind, he relished the power of The Covering. He played and replayed the fantasy of crushing Gates and the others, grinding the exalted quorum of ten executives into dust under his feet and then bending his will to dominate humanity. Eventually, he would expand beyond the solar system and into the galaxy. All would bow to him and be afraid. But first, he would exercise his power by ripping the engineer and the biologist limb from limb.

The two scientists observed as The Covering enclosed McClain's face. They watched as the blackness seeped into his mouth, ears, and eyes.

McClain awoke. He stood, staring at the two of them. He tried to speak, but nothing happened. No sound emerged. The euphoria he'd felt only seconds earlier slipped away from him. Then The Covering began to feel bizarre to him. It was as if the bonding, the integration, had suddenly gone awry.

The rush of it, of panic; The Covering was rejecting him. His body felt like his molecules were burning. McClain wanted to scream but could not.

The executive frantically swept his vision to and fro; he stared in all directions. He could no longer see his companions. All around him, it was as if he was in a roomful of mirrors reflecting his encased image—all screaming in agony at him simultaneously.

Collins and Wilson watched, horrified. The Covering left his body spontaneously as the executive trembled on the floor and then ceased to be. McClain had failed.

*

The two, in some ways, new human beings, lay together in the Big Bob. The Covering was fully integrated now. It was essentially invisible but was always there, a companion that gave everything and demanded nothing.

“I’m connected to another sentient,” said Stephanie as they relaxed on the bed.

“I feel it. This sentient is very old. They’ve been around from before our earliest primates,” he responded.

“We are like babies, aren’t we?” Steph asked.

He thought about that as the Big Bob rumbled its way back to Carter Base—to the beginning of a tranquil future for humanity. It would be a difficult mission—humans would have to learn.

Jimmy kissed her, considering her query, and then answered sublimely, “Let’s say we are like children.”