

# WARNED

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## **Dedication**

*To all those open to change in our ever-changing world.*

*It's never too late.*



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## Prologue

“Mr. President, the Russians and Chinese have mobilized their forces.”

President Unitas closed his eyes and rested his hand over his mouth while he thought silently to himself. “Clarify,” he said after a time.

Secretary of Defense Wolf looked puzzled. “Sir?”

“Bombers, carriers, subs, what?”

“Everything.”

President Unitas opened his eyes and stood, placing his hands upon the finely polished table aboard Air Force One. “Everything. Well, where are they heading?”

“It’s too early to tell, sir,” Wolf said, clearly troubled. “My best guess is they’re simply flexing their military muscle. Although...”

“Although what?”

Wolf let out a sigh. “Although if they know what we know, there’ll be a whole lot more than flexing.”

After a few moments of deep thought, the president spoke, breaking the unmistakable hum from the massive Pratt and Whitney jet engines that roared just outside the fuselage. “I’m going to address the nation. Ah, hell, let’s just call it what it is: an address to every man, woman, and child who resides on this planet. Because if Jon and Levi’s model is half as bad as you make it out to be, there won’t be a single soul that’ll escape this horror.”

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Secretary Wolf straightened his tie. “I understand your urgency, Mr. President, but until we’ve ascertained the true nature of their intentions, an address would simply elevate the situation.” He edged closer to the president’s desk as he thumbed the manila folder he held in his hands. “I have reason to believe China and Russia are simply privy to the fact that our world is changing, unfortunately for the worse. They’re simply letting any would-be aggressor know that an attack would be futile.”

The president took a seat once more, the air having left his sails. “And you think these actions are directed at us?”

Wolf rolled his eyes to the ceiling, pondering his words carefully. “Not solely at us, but by acting in lockstep with China, the message is clear.”

President Unitas brought his hand to his cheek. He began to play his palm softly over the stubble that had formed there, something he often did when thinking deeply on a troubling matter. “So you’ve concluded that China and Russia are working together.”

Secretary Wolf blinked with great force as he adjusted his thick-rimmed glasses. “There’s no other explanation, given the recent developments. Their actions don’t signal an internal conflict between the two, but rather a cooperative military action.”

The president shook his head in a mournful fashion.

“Neither of their forces could stand up to us alone,” Wolf added. “But when combined, we’re looking at an entirely different scenario. Things could get a little hairy.”

President Unitas sighed as he looked out the window to his left. Soft clouds drifted through the haze of the afternoon. “This is a becoming, more and more, a world that isn’t seeking oil or gold.”

Secretary Wolf chuffed. “No, it’s water, land, and raw materials for construction we crave.”

The president nodded.

“China and Russia know this,” Wolf added. “And the land mass they control is among the richest on earth in those resources.”

Unitas walked around to face his defense secretary. “Contact Jon and Levi. Tell them I need to know all they know, and that I need to hear it directly from them.”

Wolf made his way for the door. “What about the address?” he asked over his shoulder.

“At some point in the near future,” the president said, “I’ll have no choice but to address the people. But we’ll have to wait until we have enough information.”

“Very good, sir.”



# Chapter 1

*Mars*

*July 30, 2045*

“*Quintessence*, this is *Imagine*.”

Static returned from the line. Dr. Jon Castel’s hands quivered as he pressed the button on his shoulder mount once more. “*Quintessence*, this is *Imagine*. Jon here. Do you read me?”

A few more crackling seconds passed, and Jon grew short of breath. Then, just as he was about to turn to question the others on his team, a voice came through.

“Yes, Jon, this is *Quintessence*. Joseph. I’m here with Claus.”

“Did you reach the surface okay, Jon?” came another voice—this one unmistakably that of Claus. His heavy German accent projected through the airless Mars like a stage whisper.

Jon looked to his fellow travelers. His best friend, Levi—Dr. Levi Clarke—returned his gaze like a mirror, and in it Jon read his own mounting trepidation. To Levi’s left stood Dr. Mariah Hirsch, a mechanical engineer and MIT professor with whom he shared more than just a simple history. Gone was the tentative care she normally held for him in her eyes. It was replaced by what looked like crippling fear.

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“No, Claus,” Jon breathed. “We had some ... problems on entry.”

“Go ahead, Jon,” Joseph said, his voice urgent, tense.

The astronaut gritted his teeth, his blue eyes squinting. With the emptiness of space all around him, the weight of the two living souls standing behind him could not have seemed heavier. “The crew weight, *Quintessence*,” Jon said. “We failed to reconfigure the crew weight before EDL. Originally we were sending seven astronauts down, not three.”

A gasp came over the line. Then a garbled sort of mumble from the other end. Joseph and Claus spoke frantically, but Jon could only catch snippets here and there.

“Jon?” Claus said after a time.

“Yes, *Quintessence*? ”

“How far off trajectory were we? ”

Jon glanced back at his friends, who only seemed to have eyes for the red soil all around them. “We overshot the target by nearly five hundred miles.”

Levi sighed, patting at the side of the lightweight compression helmet framing his head.

“Guys,” Jon said, “if you could come up with something quick, we’d appreciate it. We only have about four hours of oxygen left.”

Mariah turned away. Jon’s heart skipped at the sight of the tear streaming down her cheek. It glinted in the sun, far brighter here than it ever would have been on earth.

“Yes, Jon,” Joseph said. “We’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

“Okay,” Jon said with a sardonic cheerfulness. “We’ll be here.”

A great wind tore down from the north, whipping over a crest of somber red rock. The sound of it whistling past his suit chilled Jon to the bone, but he did his best to hide it from the others. Here, he knew, he would need to be strong. Show poise. Keep it together. He tried not to

look them in the eyes, for he knew it would weaken him to see their despair. They had landed here on this marvelous planet—had been the first people *ever* to land on this marvelous planet—but the joy and excitement of the science they could gather was snuffed out by the fear.

The plan had been simple: land at a predetermined location and begin scouting for water. The tools they would need had already been dropped in a Mars lander. More importantly, the vehicle they would need to get back to the *Quintessence* would also be waiting for them there. If not for a slight miscalculation on crew weight, they would have hit the mark without issue. But now here they stood on this unforgiving landscape—nothing around them but an unfamiliar sky and red ground—five hundred miles separating them from their only reasonable chance of escape. Five hundred miles. Five hundred miles and only four hours of air.

Despite the chill, sweat began to bead up in the curls of Jon's blonde hair, and dripped down through his days-old stubble. He bent to the ground and ran his gloved hand through the fine Martian sand. It was grittier than the sand on earth. Rocky and more glasslike. He sighed and looked up at his friends. They both stood staring at him. Mariah had apparently collected herself. Levi simply stood with a blank sort of expression—as if he weren't sure whether his friend of fifteen years would scream or sing or cry. They both seemed to be waiting for him to speak. To offer a solution, or at least a condolence. But what could he say? Five hundred miles. Four hours of air.

He crossed one foot over the other and sat down in the sand. The effort might have been difficult back home, but here his weight was far less and he lowered himself down with ease. He sat cross-legged, his hands on his knees, silent as Buddha in space.

"Jon," Levi said softly.

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"Look, there's no point wasting air on this now," Jon interrupted. "Until we hear back from *Quintessence*, we won't know..."

The radio on Jon's shoulder began to crackle as if on cue. "Jon, this is Joseph," came the voice. "Do you read?"

"Yes, Joseph." Jon stood. "Give me the good news."

"There's a freight-launching vehicle located about ten miles to your southwest." The way Joseph spoke, it sounded almost like he couldn't believe it himself.

"That's lucky."

Joseph chuckled in a nervous way. "Actually, it's not a coincidence that there would be a NASA craft there because NASA has landed many crafts in this region for the last thirty years."

Jon pumped a fist in the direction of Levi, who broke into a slow smile.

"This is a particularly fertile place in NASA's mind, evidently," Joseph continued. "The soils and possible water located in the region, along with the flat valleys, would've made for easier landings."

"Yeah, yeah, Joe," Jon said, waving a hand at the air. "Enough with the history lesson. How do we get out of here?"

"Ten miles," Joseph repeated. "If you can reach that freight launcher before your oxygen runs out, you might be able to use it to release from the atmosphere and dock back up here with the *Quintessence*."

Jon grunted. "What do you mean *might*?"

A long silence followed.

"Joseph, are you there?"

"I'm here, Jon." The tension in Joseph's voice seemed to return. "It's just that I have no way of knowing whether that craft is operational. All I know is what it *is*."

"And if we go trekking halfway across Mars to find a dead spacecraft, then what?"

Joseph's deep sigh echoed over the radio. "If you can't launch it, you might be able to disconnect the power source and bring it back to the *Imagine*."

"And what? Rig us up a booster?"

"I'm sorry, Jon. I'm doing my best here."

Jon nodded, gathering himself. He looked once at Mariah, who bit her lip that way she often did when nervous. "I'm sorry, Joseph," he said after a time. "It's just... Well, there's just a lot of stress down here, you know what I mean?"

"Understood," Joseph said. "If you return with a power source, it's likely to have at least enough power to fire up the rockets on *Imagine*. I know it's not perfect, but it's better than nothing."

"No, Joseph, you're right," Jon said. "It's great. We'll make it work."

"We're here if you need anything."

"Got it, *Quintessence*. Will report back when we find the craft."

Jon nodded to Levi, then Mariah, and pointed due north. Levi shook his head and pointed back behind Jon. He glanced down at the compass on his wrist for a moment, then pointed again.

"Southwest is that way," he said.

Jon chuffed. "I guess lack of direction translates well on any planet."

He couldn't be sure over the hiss of the intercom system that allowed the three of them to communicate, but he could swear he heard Mariah giggle—a soft, melodic sound that brought a strange and unexpected confidence to his step. "Let's go, then. I'm hungry. Feel like I've lost a good hundred pounds already since we landed on this planet."

Levi laughed, but there was little mirth in it. "You *have* lost a hundred pounds since we landed. You weigh what, one eighty?"

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“That’s right.”

“Well, then, you weigh about seventy pounds on this planet. The effects of gravity are different here and—”

“I know, Levi,” Jon interrupted. “I was just having fun with you.”

Levi blinked in that way he always did when knocked off of one of his pontificating rants. “Oh.”

“Now shut up and breathe slowly.”

The three marched on for a full hour. Their suits were climate-controlled, but there was no denying the intensity of the sun on this barren planet. Jon felt himself sweating almost from the moment he first set foot toward the south, despite the frigid outside temperature. The land was methodical and boring. Earthlike striations of rock bent and flexed in patterns that suggested unrelenting wind. Here and there was evidence of old water—dried riverbeds, empty natural pools—but all else was powdery and red. The flat land that Joseph had spoken of from above was actually a huge basin. The *Imagine* had landed on the northernmost end and, if Joseph’s calculations were correct, the freight launcher could be found somewhere down the line, well within the rim of the basin. The only problem was, even after they had walked five of the ten miles, there was still no spacecraft in sight.

“What do you suppose visibility is here?” Jon asked Levi.

“Oh,” Levi said, bending his sight to the sky, “maybe three miles with all this dust.”

“You two aren’t supposed to be talking,” Mariah said.

Both men turned to look at her with surprise in their eyes.

“What?” she said defensively. “Don’t waste O<sub>2</sub>.”

Levi grunted and Jon smiled. The three travelled on.

Another hour passed and a heavy wind drove visibility lower. The dust was so thick and so red that the crew was

forced to walk along the base of the cliff lining the edge of the basin. Jon tried to remember an occasion when he'd walked more than ten miles in one stretch before, and he honestly couldn't think of a time when such a ludicrous thing would be necessary. He'd imagined his feet would ache more. But here, each step felt like his first.

From behind the others, Jon checked on the condition of his team. Mariah seemed to be having the hardest time. She stumbled here and there and, over the intercom, Jon could hear that she was having trouble catching her breath. He trotted up alongside her.

"Do we have time for a break?" she asked breathlessly.

"We're almost there," Jon said, trying to sound reassuring.

"I think the climate control on my suit is failing."

Jon's heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean?"

Mariah motioned to the crease in her suit, just below the neck. "I'm hot, then cold, then hot again."

Jon turned and motioned to Levi, who joined them. They walked next to Mariah, one on each side. She put her arms on their shoulders and they helped her walk. They went on this way for another mile or so before Mariah's breath returned to her and she could continue on her own. She thanked Jon with her eyes, then pressed on as if nothing had happened.

As quickly as it had come, the wind departed and the curtain of red dust faded away. Up ahead, a large shape loomed.

"Is that it?" Mariah asked.

"No, can't be," Jon said. "It's too big."

When the dust settled further, Jon could see that he'd been right. The shape was no spacecraft but, rather, yet another of the unwieldy striations on the ridge of the basin.

"How far have we come?" Levi said, sounding desperate.

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Jon checked the instrument panel on his wrist. "Nine."

"Miles?"

"Yes, Levi. Nine miles."

"We should be able to *see* it by now, then!"

Jon shook his head and stared at the ground in front of his feet. All at once, the weight of the journey crashed down on him. On this planet, space was nothing. Nine miles might seem simple on foot. But time was everything. Only two hours of oxygen remained.

"There!" Mariah yelled.

Jon snapped his attention in the direction Mariah pointed. She stood ahead of him, so he couldn't yet see what she was indicating. But as he caught up to her, he could see around the bend of the cliff before them. There, nestled in an alcove along the sheer rock wall, was the unmistakable outline of twisted metal. The freight launcher.

A hollow joy sprang up in Jon's heart. He filled his lungs fully with air for the first time since they had set out and then trotted in the direction of the craft. "Joseph, this is Jon," he said. "Do you read?"

"Yes, Jon. I'm here."

"We've found the craft."

"That's excellent!"

Jon nodded, though he knew it was ridiculous as Joseph couldn't see him. "Quintessence?"

"Yes, Jon?"

"I've been wondering, why is there a freight vehicle out here in the middle of nowhere, anyway?"

"Prime landing spot, as I said."

Jon lost some ground on the others, preoccupied as he was with riddling things out. "I get all that, but there are thousands of prime landing spots on Mars. Why here? Why a freight launcher?"

Joseph was silent for a time, apparently thinking things over. "My records suggest that there are many of these

freight vehicles on Mars. As you know, I can't communicate with NASA, but my instinct tells me they are there for future construction."

"But there was no *need* for that before everything—"

"I know, Jon," Joseph interrupted. "But NASA might have been thinking forward. Perhaps the real reason those vehicles are there is to claim land."

"How do you mean?"

Another short silence from Joseph. Jon jogged faster. The craft came closer into view.

"When you see it, Jon, you'll understand."

At those words, Jon finally got close enough to make out the features of the spacecraft. It was a simple vehicle with large, heavily rutted tires and an open steel frame. But all around its hull it was tattooed with the flag of the United States. Every flat square inch bore the red, white, and blue. Jon laughed.

"See what I mean?" Joseph asked.

"Yes," Jon said. "Now I see."

"I think NASA landed so many of these on the surface as a claim to the territory all around. Like the British did when building their empire over the Third World. With this flag-strewn freight vehicle, the US can claim ownership of the crater and land around it. There might be precious metals or water located there. So, in a few decades, as we're constructing our cities on Mars, the US will have rights to those metals and water."

"Makes perfect sense," Jon said, coming up along the vehicle. It looked cold and almost rusted from lack of use, but he knew that any appearance of rust was simply due to the long, hard years under the unforgiving sandstorms.  
"So, will it be safe?"

"I don't know, Jon," Joseph said. "You three will have to make the call. It should be operational. It should also have fuel. But it won't be equipped with those plasma rockets

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you're used to. It'll have old chemical rockets. Might make docking with us a little troublesome?"

"Why?" Jon asked. "Even if it's not equipped with autopilot we'll be able to bring it to the right altitude, and the *Quintessence* will do the rest."

The garbled bickering came back through the radio: Joseph arguing with Claus.

"That should work," Joseph said after a time.

"Good," Jon said. "We'll see about getting this bird in order, then."

He nodded to Levi, then panned around for some sign of Mariah. He found her seated on the far side of the vehicle, her back resting against the cold steel. He gave her a reassuring look, which she returned with one of gratitude. The exhaustion was evident on her face. Jon could see that of all of them, she had the least time to spare.

"This thing is..." Levi said over the din. "*Old!*"

"Probably been here for ten years? Maybe more. I can't imagine how many dust storms it's encountered."

Levi ducked and darted around the front end of the craft, prodding tubes and examining wires. From what Jon could see, despite its dirty appearance, the craft seemed to be in fine working order.

"Only one problem," Levi said.

"What's that?"

"It's obvious this craft wasn't meant for people."

"Yeah," Jon said distantly.

"This craft was designed for freight and freight only." Levi pointed here and there on the ship as he spoke. "No seats, no onboard computers, no cockpit."

"It does have these," Jon said with a smile as he lifted one end of a long strap that appeared to be intended for holding freight in place on the deck.

"How do you even control this thing?" Levi said, as if to himself.

Jon wheeled his gaze around, settling on the back end of the craft, which seemed to be docked with a large and rather heavy-looking control station immediately adjacent. “You launch it from the ground.”

“What about steering?”

“Looks like you have to steer from down here, too.”

Levi’s eyes lit up with horror. “But that means...”

Jon nodded, looking over at Mariah, who seemed to have dozed. “One of us will have to stay behind and drive.”

“Oh, God.”

Jon kept his eyes on Mariah as he formulated the plan. He knew immediately what he had to do—and, just as immediately, he knew that Levi would never agree to it. “This craft should be able to dock with the *Quintessence*,” he said. “We’ll strap Mariah into the back and you to the front. You should have enough oxygen to last until you dock.”

Levi scoffed. “You’re making it sound like you’re not going.”

“Someone has to stay back and launch this thing.”

Levi’s eyes grew desperate. “Can’t you just press launch, then run and jump in the craft before we fire?”

Jon made a move to rub the bridge of his nose, but his hand was stopped by the visor of his helmet. He offered a dark smirk at himself. “Levi,” he said with a sigh, “you and I both know that won’t work. The computers won’t let me launch until the door’s been sealed.”

“Well, can’t you just bring the launching controls inside the craft? There might be enough room.”

“C’mon, my friend,” Jon said, losing patience. “You can see for yourself how big that thing is. It was probably designed to be heavy enough so it wouldn’t blow away in a dust storm. There’s no way it’d fit.”

“How are we supposed to *steer*, Jon?” Levi said. “There are no windows, to say nothing of a stick.”

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Jon walked around to the control panel, studying it for a moment. “Here, yeah,” he said. “All I need to do is plug in the desired altitude, which will put you on the same orbit as the *Quintessence*. Once you’re there, *Quintessence* will just ... scoop you up.”

Levi laughed in an ugly tone. “That’s all well and good, my friend, but why should you be the one to stay?”

Jon grew angry at once. “Levi, we don’t have time to argue.”

“But, Jon, I—”

“To put it simply, *I* can’t perform the climate tests that you can. *I* can’t drill for water like Mariah can. Once you dock with the *Quintessence*, you should be able to land back at the HAB and then utilize everything awaiting you there.”

“So what, you’re doing this for the good of humanity?”

“Something like that,” Jon said, already firing up the control panel, which proved to be an abundantly loud machine. “Just make sure you adjust for the proper weight before you EDL next time,” he yelled over the mechanical roar.

Levi stood for a moment, shaking his head in defiance. Then, he seemed to stare at Mariah for a long time. She breathed softly as she rested in the dirt. If she were conscious, she didn’t show it. Jon found himself glad that he wouldn’t need to say goodbye.

“Alright, Jon,” Levi said finally. “You win.”

“Believe me,” Jon said, striding around the control panel and scooping Mariah into his arms, “I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t have to, but there’s no other way.”

Jon went to set Mariah in the cargo hold of the ship, but Levi stopped him by grabbing his arm. Jon looked into his old friend’s eyes.

“I’m sorry about accusing you earlier, for not calculating the crew’s weight,” Levi said.

“No worries, my friend,” Jon said with a half-smile. “Just complete the mission objectives so this wasn’t all for nothing.”

Jon watched as his friend strapped Mariah in place, then himself. Levi ran a quick check of the straps, then turned to offer one final glance at Jon. The glance seemed to pain him, for he didn’t hold it long.

“Is there any way we can get back here before your oxygen runs out?” Levi asked.

“I don’t think so,” Jon said. “I don’t even have two hours left.”

“But, Jon—”

“Get to *Quintessence* as fast as you can. And if you find a way back, I’ll be here.”

Levi nodded. “We’ll find a way.”

Jon huffed and stepped down from the edge of the space-craft. But he didn’t have time to take even one step toward the launching pad before Levi stopped him again.

“Jon, one more thing.”

Jon turned.

“How are we going to tell Mariah? Because I don’t think I’ll be too popular with her if I leave and you’re still here.”

“Just don’t tell her there’s a chance I’ll survive. You and I both know how she’ll be.”

“But, Jon, she’ll be...inconsolable.”

Jon felt a pained lump form in the back of his throat. In truth, out of everyone, he would miss Mariah the most. He found himself both grateful and frustrated that he wouldn’t get the opportunity to say his goodbye. “Just remind her that this is bigger than any one of us or any of our... issues. This is for mankind.”

“Jon—”

“When she wakes, you tell her I love her.”

“You know I will.” Levi appeared ready to cry. “It’s been a pleasure working with you.”

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Jon stared his friend straight in the eye as he reached to close the door. “If you remember anything about this meeting, Levi, remember this: I’m thankful that you wrote me on that day some four years ago. Thankful that you brought me along on this. *Thankful* that I had the opportunity to help beat the threat back on earth.”

“Jon,” Levi breathed.

“Just shut the door, old friend,” Jon insisted. “I’ll get you back home.” With a nod from Levi, he stepped down to Mars’ surface.

Just as Levi went to close the door, Mariah came to. “Hey, what are you doing?” she called.

Levi pulled the door shut, then sealed it. Through the metal frame, Jon could still hear her. She suddenly grew hysterical.

“Why isn’t Jon in here?” she screamed.

To his credit, Levi remained silent and kept the door closed. Jon listened to the last long screams of his Mariah laced just beneath the sound of the humming engine. He hit the launch button, then watched the powerful rockets ignite, propelling the craft from the surface, kicking up dust and rock in its wake. As the dust cleared, Jon watched the craft soar higher and higher. He was unsure whether it would make the *Quintessence*. He was unsure of what would become of him.

## Chapter 2

*Mars*

*July 30, 2045*

The marooned astronaut watched the heavens for any sign of the freight transport docking with the Mars orbiter *Quintessence*, though he knew it was futile given the altitude. All he could do was hope. He knew the odds of the dock going smoothly were about equal to launching a rowboat in pursuit of an Atlantic cruise liner. But he also knew that if anyone could make it happen, Levi could.

He thought of Mariah as he watched the jet trails left by the rockets fade into the Martian atmosphere. It was her eyes he would miss most. Those soft, wise creases at the corners whenever she smiled—the crow’s feet she abhorred but he adored.

When the sky returned to black, Jon checked the data readout on his dirty and heavily worn spacesuit. The level of breathable oxygen approached a mere ninety minutes.

*Like torture*, he thought. *Enough oxygen to really think about the shit I’m in, but not enough to survive until they return.*

He ran the numbers in his mind once more and came to the same conclusion: it would take a minimum of three to four hours to dock and return on a rescue mission. He’d been crunching numbers like these for long enough to

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know that he wasn't wrong, but just this once he hoped he might be.

His feet began to ache, as if the weight of his predicament had replaced the missing weight of his body. He brushed his dust-covered visor and searched for a suitable place to wait out his death. He found it in a hulking, jagged boulder not twenty yards behind him. Slowly he ambled toward the rock, then sat down and leaned back against it. He took his first deep breath in quite some time.

"No sense in conserving air now," he whispered. "You're stranded. Alone. Cold on this Martian soil. And you've lost the only woman you've ever loved all over again." A tear trickled down his cheek and settled in the stubble on his prominent jaw. It was a tear that would have fallen faster on earth—an irony not lost on Jon Castel.

Ten minutes of rest. Ten minutes with his unquiet mind. Dying on Mars. It was a possibility he'd considered many times in the long journey from his home planet. It was the kind of reality that a man could convince himself he was prepared for. "Sure," he would tell himself, "I'd be okay with dying in the name of science." But to conceptualize something and to live it were two very different things. There was no swallowing the reality of dying alone on a dead planet.

"Nothing for it, doc," he said to himself. And so he stood, having decided to try to enjoy his last moments on the red planet. Now on his feet, he found that the short pause had left his feet and lungs feeling refreshed. He walked, examined the stars, dug under the soil, observed how far he could throw a rock, and conducted various experiments on the topography that he knew would make any earthbound scientist jealous.

He was just finishing with a test on the ionization of the soil when he saw it. A sparkle caught the corner of his

eye. He panned the ground around him, finding the tell-tale shimmer just along the heavily-sloped horizon. The shine was reminiscent of a diamond, and here on the dull Martian soil it stood out even from a hundred yards away. He cocked his head to one side, grunted and made his way toward the unexpected sight.

When he came upon the spot, he couldn't believe his eyes. The shine was produced by what looked like shimmering soil. He had never seen soil of its compare on Mars or Earth. He knelt and ran his fingers through it. Even through his gloves, it felt fine to the touch, yet remained shiny and reflective. He noticed that he could see his own image in the soil, an effect similar to watching his reflection over rippling water, save that here the ripples didn't move. It was as if someone had constructed a tiny mountain range out of mirrored glass, and he found his own image reflected in its uneven surface.

"What the hell is this stuff?" he asked himself. He'd been a student of science for more than half his life—indeed, tops in his doctoral class at MIT—but he had never encountered anything even remotely similar to this. It didn't strike him as a simple anomaly, however. There was something more to this soil. Here, for the first time in his life, he looked upon something that lay beyond his realm of knowledge.

A strange feeling came upon him then. But he was so lost in the riddle of the soil that the feeling appeared slowly, rising up as if out of a thick cloud of mist. It was a warm yet distant feeling on the back of his neck. It was the feeling of being *watched*. First he chuckled, laughing off the feeling as lonely paranoia. But it persisted.

"Who's there?" he whispered, his eyes panning the horizon. When he saw nothing, he scoffed at himself. "Pull it together, man." But then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught movement. A shadow. A silhouette drifting down

## WARNED

the sheer face of the basin. The shadow moved quickly, growing larger with each passing moment.

“Who’s—” But he couldn’t continue. The rapidity of the silhouette’s movement froze him with fear. He found himself unable to breathe, let alone move.

He clinched his eyes, closing everything out, seeing nothing, feeling nothing but fear, hearing nothing but the Martian wind that, until this moment, he had been so certain would be his death knell.

He could hear footsteps in the sand to his right now. His heart raced, but he dared not open his eyes. He cringed, waiting for whatever it was that approached to strike him.

“Hello,” came the voice. It was perfectly clear English spoken in an unusual yet calming tone, and it transmitted over the speaker inside his helmet.

Jon felt his lungs evacuate. He fell to the ground, rigid and afraid. He opened his eyes, though he kept them trained on the ground, away from whatever had just greeted him. “Hello?” He spoke as if questioning the very reality of his response.

“Yes, I am here.”

His breath quick and his brow dripping sweat, Jon looked up in the direction from which the silhouette had come. Nothing in this world or the next could have prepared him for what he saw.