

Chapter 1 – Tharsis

In retrospect I should have been alerted to the dangers ahead when a young brunette woman brushed past me as I was about to enter the bathroom.

“Excusé moi, monsieur,” she said. “I forgot my perfume.”

Her long brown locks and the look of her stylish clothes aroused my curiosity. She reached for a small bottle sitting on the shelf above the washbasin. I caught a glimpse of the label which bore the words ‘Eau de Parfum’. I noticed the care with which she placed the bottle into her handbag, as if its contents were precious. When she squeezed past me on the way back to her seat, I also noticed that she did not bear any trace of the scent of the fragrance.

The year was 2076, fifty years since man first set foot on Mars. I was travelling there with my grandmother, widow of the commander of Tharsis 4.

We had departed from the Richard M. Nixon Lunar Base just over two weeks earlier, and were now approaching and preparing to enter the Martian atmosphere. When my grandfather and his crew of seven travelled to the red planet, it took them nearly eight months. The four new magneto-uranium powered rockets on our spacecraft each had a thrust of 0.5 million Newtons, capable of accelerating the spacecraft to speeds exceeding 250,000 km/h or, to put it in layman’s terms, about 200 times the speed of sound in air. At that speed, the 98 million kilometre journey took just seventeen days.

We each had a cabin where we’d been living during those two weeks, but as the craft prepared to land, we all had to take a seat in the main section of the craft.

This reminded me of the way people used to travel around the earth in passenger aircraft – ‘like sardines’, I remember somebody describing it. I’ve no idea what a sardine is. I hadn’t experienced that kind of travel, of course, but I’d seen them at the movies. Thank goodness we have more comfortable ways to travel these days; apart from take-off and landing, that is.

My fellow travellers in the first class section were a strange bunch. As I glanced around the cabin, I realised that I hadn’t met most of them. During the flight, we’d kept pretty much to ourselves. I’d had to speak with members of the crew, of course, but apart from Grandma, the only other passenger I’d spoken to was the man sitting on my left across the aisle. He’d introduced himself as “Sam Brent”. I can still feel his sweaty handshake, and smell the stink of garlic on his breath.

I speculated that Sam must have been in his mid-fifties. He was a burly figure, but tall and muscular, not fat. He had a distinctive scar on his left chin, which was as hairless as his bald head.

The young woman I had met in the bathroom sat in front of Sam. I wondered why she was travelling to the red planet. Next to her sat an elderly man in a tweed jacket. His attire and grey beard made me think that he must be some kind of academic.

A young couple sat in front of Grandma and me. Both wore strange clothes and both had long hair. They wore beads, and looked like they wouldn’t seem out of place in the hippy days of the 1960’s. They each had headphones, and their heads nodded to the rhythm of music. What kind of music were they listening to? Not twenty-first century classics like me, I’m sure.

An old woman with short grey straight hair sat in the front seat, and two men sat behind us in seats on opposite sides of the aisle.

The remainder of the passengers sat in the economy section to the rear. They were for the most part new colonists arriving for a permanent stay on Mars.

I was disturbed from my thoughts when the young woman got up from her seat and passed between me and Sam as she made her way once again to the bathroom at the rear of first class.

When she passed on her return to her seat, I detected the pleasant odour of a waft of perfume; very expensive perfume, I surmised. I recalled our chance encounter earlier when there had been no such odour. Then I noticed that she had applied a bright red lipstick. Again I conjectured why such a lady was travelling alone to another world.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your commander.” Why do they always interrupt when you’re listening to your favourite music? “We are about to enter the Martian atmosphere. You will soon notice a sharp decrease in our speed when we apply reverse thrust to the magneto-uranium rockets and then revert to the conventional liquid oxygen rockets for our descent. During that time, you will experience severe g forces, so you must all return to your seats and wear your body harnesses. The crew will not be available to assist you once we start to decelerate, so make sure you are buckled in correctly. If you have any doubts, call a member of the crew as soon as possible. I will speak to you again once we are safely in orbit.”

A fat man, wearing long trousers with braces and a checked shirt came shuffling along the aisle. He puffed as he eased himself into his seat behind us. A thin man with glasses, sitting on the opposite side of the aisle, glanced in his direction, a look of disdain on his face. He picked at his teeth with a toothpick.

“What are you thinking about, dear?” Grandma’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Nothing. I’m just looking at our fellow passengers,” I whispered. “See that old woman with grey hair sitting in the front seat ...” Grandma nodded. “... well, I don’t think she’s going to make it. She’ll likely have a heart attack when we start decelerating.”

“Don’t be silly. She’s not much older than me. I’m as fit as a fiddle. Remember, I had to have a medical examination before we left Earth. They don’t let us travel unless we pass the examination.”

I glanced in Grandma’s direction. She was quite fit for an eighty-six year old. Nevertheless, despite advances in medicine that have curtailed the aging process, she was beginning to show some of the signs of old age – grey curly hair and a few wrinkles under the eyes. With a replacement hip, she needed a stick to help her walk.

“Look Grandma.” I changed the subject and pointed out of the window to our right. “Isn’t it beautiful?” I could see a landscape of red, potted with craters and intersected with deep valleys. Other physical features closely resembled shorelines, gorges, riverbeds and even islands. On the horizon a huge mountain caught my eye.

“Is that Olympus Mons?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. It looks very high.”

“Yes,” Sam Brent interrupted, “it is Olympus Mons, the highest known volcano in the solar system. It’s nearly 15 miles high and over 300 miles wide at its base.”

“Wow! That’s nearly three times as high as Everest. Is it active?”

“I don’t think so, but is any volcano ever really extinct?”

“Look,” I said with excitement, “there are clouds.”

“The Martian atmosphere contains only about one thousandth as much water as Earth’s, but there’s still enough for clouds to form, riding high in the atmosphere and swirling around the slopes of Olympus Mons and the other volcanoes.”

“How do you know so much, Mr. Brent?”

“Call me Sam. I’m a Martian geologist. I’ve lived for nearly twenty years at Tom Price. I’ve travelled extensively around the Tharsis and Cydonia regions. I’m just returning from leave back home. I’ve been away for six months.”

“How do you travel around on the surface?”

“We have special vehicles called marsmobiles.” He laughed. “Original name, eh? Their shells are built with a strong plastic that can withstand the cold temperatures and is opaque to the ultra violet rays. They have caterpillar treads like a tank and can go over almost any kind of terrain.”

“Wow! How do you get to travel in one of those things?”

“Tell you what, kid – what did you say your name was?”

“Brian ... Brian Appleby.”

“Appleby ...you’re not ...”

“Yes, Colonel James Appleby was my grandfather. And this is my grandmother.”

I turned to Grandma and pulled her attention away from the window.

“Grandma, this is Sam Brent. He’s a geologist working on Mars. Sam, this is my grandmother, Celia Appleby.”

“I’m honoured to meet you, ma’am. Your husband is a legend ... a hero. Are you travelling to Mars for some reason?”

“Yes, Mr Brent, it’s exactly fifty years next week since Tharsis 4 landed. We are attending a memorial service and other commemorations.”

“Of course, I’d forgotten. It seems that man has been on Mars for ever, it’s hard to believe it’s been only fifty years.”

“Yes, we’ve come a long way in that time,” I said. “Sam, do you think you could arrange a trip for me in one of those marsmobiles? – after the commemorations are over, of course.”

“No problem, Brian. Here’s my card. You just give me a call whenever you’re ready. I’m due to start work again in another week. I take it you’re not leaving before then?”

“No. We’re booked on the next flight back to the Moon, but that’s not for another four weeks.”

“Good. I’ll be hearing from you, then.”

“Look Brian.” Grandma’s excited cry interrupted my conversation with Sam Brent.

By this time the craft had engaged its reverse rockets and had slowed to just a few hundred km/h, and continued to decelerate in preparation for the landing. I followed Grandma’s gaze out of the window. The red desert landscape had given way to a panorama of glass.

“They’re the greenhouses,” Sam said. “They’re made from a special kind of plastic glass that will allow the heat and light to penetrate, but not the ultra violet. They also have a lens shape that bends the light and infra red rays to concentrate on focal points where the plants are situated. Under that canopy, the harvests of Mars are growing – just like in the fields back home on Earth. These greenhouses cover nearly ten thousand hectares. There’s all kinds growing there – wheat, rice, potatoes, every kind of vegetables, apples, oranges – you name it.”

After we had passed over the greenhouses, the landscape changed back to the familiar red desert. However, a two-laned highway was clearly visible, criss-crossing the varied landscape. Ahead, the town of Tom Price peeped its head above the sands and to our right lay the unmistakable shape of the landing strip and the Mars Space Terminus.

When I say Tom Price peeped its head above the sands, that's exactly what I mean. All that was visible to the observer from above was the protective roof that covered the whole of the town.

The landing was a smooth one. We returned to our cabins to collect our personal belongings. Then we had to wait a few minutes until a special access tunnel, sealed to protect us from the unfriendly Martian atmosphere, was in place and tested before the door was opened. We exited the craft and walked through the tunnel into the terminus. We passed through immigration by which time our luggage was ready for collection. Then we proceeded to customs.

We travelled to the town in specially constructed, solar-powered buses. I later found out that all vehicles on Mars are solar-powered. Although Mars is cold, the thin atmosphere allows the sun's rays to penetrate and makes the transformation from electro-magnetic energy to electrical energy a highly efficient one.

I had just put our hand luggage in the overhead locker and slid down next to Grandma when the brunette woman brushed past me.

"Pardon, monsieur," she said.

A thrill passed through my body, and I wondered who this alluring woman was. I determined to catch up with her later.

There were at this time no clouds in the sky; only the unrelenting sun shining down through the thin atmosphere of carbon dioxide. The information screen at the front of the bus showed that the temperature outside was -57°C.

The highway from the terminus to the town was a straight two-lane road, but there was no other traffic in sight. Very few vehicles make the journey except at the time of a spacecraft landing or taking off. Every fifty metres or so on alternate sides of the road, I saw strange machines.

“What are they?” Grandma asked.

Sam sat behind us. Seeing my hesitation, he was quick to answer Grandma’s question. “They’re blowers,” he said. “They blow the dust and sand from the road. They’re turned on automatically every ten minutes and blow for thirty seconds. They’re really necessary to keep the road clear.”

Apart from the blowers, there was little to see except a red desert plateau extending in all directions. Far to the northwest three volcanic peaks stretched in a line.

“This volcanic plateau, where the town of Tom Price and the Mars Space Terminus are located, is in the western hemisphere of Mars and is called the Syria Planum. It is part of the broader region called the Tharsis Bulge,” said Sam. “Those three mountains you can see lined up on the horizon are known as Arsia, Pavonis and Ascraeus. Arsia and Pavonis are about six hundred kilometres away, Ascraeus about nine hundred. Olympus Mons is even further to the northwest.”

“Why is the town called Tom Price?” Grandma asked.

“Some of the earliest settlers here were miners from Australia who had previously worked in the iron ore mines near a town in Western Australia of the same

name, although the original town was in fact named after an American geologist called Tom Price.”

“Is there much iron ore on Mars?” I asked.

“The Tharsis region is what we call a ‘large igneous province’, and has large deposits of metal ores including iron, copper, nickel, chromium, titanium, and platinum.”

The bus came to rest outside the entrance to the Mars Hilton Hotel. A mobile access tunnel sealed against the elements, similar to the one at the Space Terminus, moved to engage with the door of the bus. As I reached up to take my hand-luggage, I became aware of the young woman looking in my direction. She smiled.

Grandma and I alighted from the bus and descended to the reception area of the hotel.

After we checked in, a bellboy grabbed our bags and led us to the lift which took us down to our room on the fourth floor below ground level. As we entered the room, Grandma gasped.

“I expected that there would be nothing but artificial light, but the room is flooded with sunlight,” she said.

“Each room is fitted with a special periscope connected to the outside,” the bellboy said. “Mirrors and lenses magnify the light from the sun.”

The room was warm and well-ventilated, and in most respects was indistinguishable from a hotel room anywhere on Earth. There was no live TV, of course, but five channels of continuously running videos were enough to satisfy the needs of most guests.

After taking a shower and a nap, I left Grandma to sleep and decided it was time to explore the hotel, and then go for a drink before supper. I discovered that the

Mars Hilton had all the amenities of most large hotels on Earth – a heated swimming pool, a sauna, conference rooms, shops, restaurants, and bars. I entered the Voyager Bar, sat at a table and ordered whisky on the rocks.

After a few minutes, the young woman entered the bar. She looked stunning in a white two-piece suit. As she approached, I stood and asked if she would care to join me.

“Thank you very much,” the woman replied. “I’d love to.”

“My name’s Brian, Brian Appleby.”

“And I’m Simone Moreau,” she replied.

“You’re French?”

“My father was French. My mother is English. I was brought up in England.”

“What is your work?”

“I am a geologist. I was sent here by the United Planetary Organisation to conduct some research into Martian soils.”

“Would you care for a drink?”

After the waiter had brought Simone’s vodka and orange, we continued our conversation.

“Where are you from?” asked Simone.

“I’m from New Zealand.”

“And why are you here?”

“I’m here with my grandmother for the fiftieth commemoration of the first landing on Mars. My grandfather was the commander of Tharsis 4.”

“Really?”

She looked sad, so I asked, “How about you?”

She hesitated before she replied. “My ... my father died here.”

“Here on Mars?”

“Yes, he was also one of the first astronauts to visit here in 2042. André Moreau. He was killed when Coloniser II exploded as it was taking off to return to the Moon.”

I shuddered as I recalled the event. I had been only eight years old, but the catastrophe of Coloniser II’s destruction had been important news at the time, and it had set the Mars programme back by five years.

“So, are you also here for the commemorations?” I asked.

“You could say that,” she replied. “I’m hoping to play my part in making this commemoration an occasion to be remembered.”

Chapter 2 – Assassin

Three weeks earlier, the United Planetary Organisation headquarters in London had been besieged by a demonstration of thousands of people, mostly young, protesting against the colonisation of Mars.

Some of the protestors held placards with the single word STEM, an acronym for Save The Environment of Mars. Other placards carried messages such as ‘Hands off Mars’, ‘Save the planet’ and ‘You’ve ruined one world. Don’t ruin another’.

There were violent confrontations as the demonstrators clashed with a line of riot police. The police held ballistic shields, and were armed with teargas canisters, pepper spray, electric stun guns and rubber bullets.

When the police closed in on the crowd, the protestors locked arms and sang the words of ‘We will overcome’. Seeing that the crowds refused to comply with orders to clear the area, some police officers walked up to the line of protesters and attempted to pull them apart.

When the crowds failed to disperse, the police fired tear gas, some of which reached onlookers who were watching innocently or filming the incident. The actions of the police came in for a lot of criticism on social media.

In a statement after the event, police justified their actions by claiming that some protesters had thrown items such as stones, liquids, and other projectiles. More than eighty people were arrested.

Among those arrested was a young red-headed woman called Ophelia Fox, otherwise known to the authorities as ‘The Vixen’. The police had dragged her to the ground when she had been seen throwing a piece of wood with nails.

The Vixen was held in custody overnight and charged with three counts of violence, causing a public disturbance, and inciting a riot. In the preliminary hearing the following day, she was granted bail for £1,000,000 and was ordered to surrender her interplanetary passport. Her trial was set down for a date five months later.

Her father had posted her bail and was ready waiting for her when she was released from custody.

“Hi Dad. Thanks for rescuing me.”

“You’ve got to stop this nonsense, Ophelia.”

“What nonsense?”

“Hanging around with these crowds, protesting and all. That’s not how I brought you up.”

“I’m just trying to stop these criminals ruining another planet. This one is already shot, and it’s just a matter of time before they trash Mars too.”

“Ophelia, it’s not your concern.”

“I’ve made it my concern, Dad, and I’m going to do something about it.”

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Later that evening, after she arrived back in her flat, Ophelia sent two private encrypted messages.

The first message was to her old friend Tobias Trent, also known as ‘The Tarantula’. It read: “Tarantula, I’m going to Mars and I need a fake interplanetary passport. Please prepare everything and call by my place tomorrow afternoon, Vixen”.

The second message was to an associate who she had never met whose code name is ‘Scorpion’. “Scorpion, I need the stuff. I’m depositing the money into your account. Please deliver to private box number 601 tomorrow morning, Vixen.”

Early the next morning, Ophelia left her apartment and walked to the superstore two blocks away where she purchased dark brown hair dye, a bottle of her favourite perfume and a red lipstick.

Then she visited the Parcel Office where she bought three prepaid parcel bags. At the front of the Parcel Office there was a separate section that housed the private boxes. She opened box 601 with her electronic key and saw a package addressed to ‘The Vixen’.

Hiding behind a pillar, Scorpion watched her remove the package and smiled. He let out a sigh of relief when Ophelia treated the package as if its contents were made of glass, and saw her slide it into her bag like she was delivering a baby.

Two hours later there was a knock on the door of Ophelia’s apartment.

She peered through the peep hole, and then opened the door when she recognised the tall, broad-shouldered hirsute man.

“Vixen, is it you,” Tobias asked. “I love your new look. The brown hair suits you.”

“Less of the chat, Tarantula. All I need from you is the passport. Have you got everything?”

“Yes, I have prepared the passport, but first I need a photograph and you must supply a signature. Your name is Simone Moreau by the way. You are the daughter of

the astronaut, André Moreau. That provides you with a plausible reason to travel to Mars.”

“Just get on with the photograph. You are being paid well, so hurry up.”

A few minutes later Tobias had completed the passport which had an authentic water mark and electronic chip, and a genuine embedded signature signed by Simone Moreau. The details on the passport said that Simone was 1.8 metres tall, had dark brown hair and worked as a geologist. There was nothing that would alert the untrained eye that this was anything but a genuine Western Hemisphere interplanetary passport in the name of Simone Moreau.

“There’s one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

Ophelia pulled out a notebook. “See these three samples of handwriting, can you copy them?”

“Not a problem. But it will cost you another five hundred.”

“Do it,” she said pulling ten more notes from her purse. “Here, copy onto the address panels of these three packages. The first is for Sir Geoffrey Glover, CEO of the United Planetary Organisation, the second is for The Honourable Sally Patterson, Minister of Planetary Colonisation. Here are the addresses.”

“And the third?”

“Professor Jackson Silva, Oxford University Department of Earth and Martian Sciences, South Parks Road, Oxford.”

When Tobias had finished, Ophelia paid him and shoved him out of the door with a brief “Thanks Tarantula.”

She switched on her tablet and requested the interweb for flights to Mars within the next two weeks.

“The next flight to Mars departs from the Richard M. Nixon Lunar Base in six days from now,” the robotic voice on the tablet informed her. “The connecting shuttle will leave Heathrow Shuttleport next Tuesday, two days earlier. Do you wish to make a reservation?”

“Yes.”

“Name?”

“Simone Moreau.”

“One way or return?”

“One way.”

“Please make your payment for £125,000.”

Ophelia typed in the command and waited for the response.

“Payment received and booking confirmed. Please print out your ticket.”

Then Ophelia reached for her bag and slid out the package that Scorpion had delivered. She slit the soft material across the top of the package and peeled it back to reveal a small vial protected by several layers of bubble wrap.

There was nothing to identify the liquid inside the vial but Ophelia knew that it was the deadly nerve agent VX-002 produced in the laboratories of the Eastern Hemisphere secret service. This was the ‘stuff’ that she had ordered from Scorpion.

She put on a pair of latex gloves before carefully removing the stopper from the vial. She turned the vial on an angle and squeezed the plastic sides between her thumb and index finger, forcing five droplets of the thick oily substance to drop onto a handkerchief, which she placed inside the first package addressed to Sir Geoffrey Glover. Then she repeated the process for the other two packages.

She returned to the Post Office and posted the three parcels.

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The next day a package arrived at the Ministry of Planetary Colonisation, addressed to The Honourable Sally Patterson. Her personal assistant always vetted the mail and had been trained to put aside parcels from unknown sources or posted from unusual places. She also looked out for anything suspicious, such as a parcel that was very heavy or has excessive wrapping or contains grease marks, or one with an unusual odour. Such parcels were routinely passed on to the Parliamentary security services for investigation. However, the PA recognised the handwriting and was satisfied that this parcel was from Sally Patterson's husband. She placed it in her boss's in tray for her to open personally.

The minister was excited to discover what kind of present her husband had sent her. He often liked to surprise her and it was only a few days before their wedding anniversary. When she pulled out the handkerchief, she was unaware of the colourless, odourless, tasteless liquid soaked into its folds. The nerve agent was quickly absorbed through her skin and travelled to the nerve cells where it blocked a naturally-occurring enzyme designed to break down the chemical acetylcholine. Acetylcholine is a neurotransmitter, but an excess build-up of the chemical disrupts the nerve signals that control muscle function and causes the muscles to repeatedly contract. Acetylcholine began to build up between the politicians nerve cells.

When her lung muscles contracted, Sally Patterson was unable to breathe. This was followed by spasms throughout her body, foaming of the mouth and bowel malfunction. Within a couple of minutes, she was dead.

A few minutes later, a similar scenario played out in the office of the CEO of the United Planetary Organisation. Sir Geoffrey Glover was found by a colleague on the floor of his office, writhing and foaming at the mouth. Despite the emergency services arriving within five minutes, Sir James Glover was unconscious and died in hospital later in the day.

The package addressed to Professor Jackson Silva was intercepted by the security officers at the University of Oxford Mail Service, and passed on to the police.

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Three days after the murders, a woman identifying herself only as ‘The Vixen’ phoned the Times Online, admitting responsibility for the killings, claiming that these people were responsible for “the rape of Mars”.

An hour later, the woman who called herself Simone Moreau began her journey to the Moon.