

Prologue

Arthur ran his gloved hand back and forth over the top of the rock, brushing away eons of dust. The job seemed pointless, but there'd be hell to pay if he didn't come back with what they wanted. He glanced at Jenna and stepped back to let the cold Martian sun glisten on the exposed surface. "What do you think?"

Jenna flipped the magnifier into position on her faceplate and squatted so her shadow didn't obscure their quarry. She studied it with care, tracing a finger along one of the red lines that permeated the gray substrate. When her finger reached the end, she rose.

Arthur took a geologist's hammer from his tool belt and chipped away at a corner of the boulder until a piece the size of a baseball fell free. He picked it up and handed it to Jenna, who added it to the collection in the cart. "Good one, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"I think we should come back here tomorrow and dig. I bet you a back rub we won't have to dig far. They're down there."

She didn't return his smile. "Art?" she murmured.

"What?"

"I don't like this. The others must be getting suspicious."

He turned his back to her and the sun and stared out past the horizon. "Jenna, we've had this conversation before. You know I don't care, and you shouldn't either. Let them talk. We won't confirm a thing until you're ready."

She sighed. "I don't like them even talking. I think you should consider my feelings a little more."

"Listen, I'll make you a deal."

"What?"

"We can discuss it all you want tonight if we drop it for now. We need to cover more ground before we run out of air."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Which way do you think?"

Jenna flipped the magnifier away from her faceplate and replaced it with a colored filter. She was scanning the barren terrain when their suit radios crackled with the attention tone. They looked at each other, startled, as a voice, breathless and shrill, assaulted their ears.

“Arthur, Jenna. Are you there?”

“Yes,” they replied in unison.

“We have an emergency here. Repeat, emergency. Return to base now.”

Arthur covered the distance to the Rover in four bounds, took his seat, and looked over his shoulder. Jenna was kneeling down, gathering their tools and tossing them in the collection cart. He waved at her to hurry as a second voice came from the radio.

“Tell them not to come in.” The voice was fainter than the first, the speaker apparently far from the microphone.

“What sort of emergency?” Jenna spoke into her suit radio as she sprinted toward the Rover.

“We have a fatality, unknown cause.”

“Fatality? Emergency? What the hell are you talking about?” Arthur’s ears rang from his own shouted questions.

“Who died?” Jenna asked before Arthur’s question got an answer.

The voice at the other end said only, “Leave your suits on when you come in. We’re calling for help now.”

The sound of a few distant rustles came over the radio, and the connection broke. They stared at each other through dark faceplates, engulfed in silence.