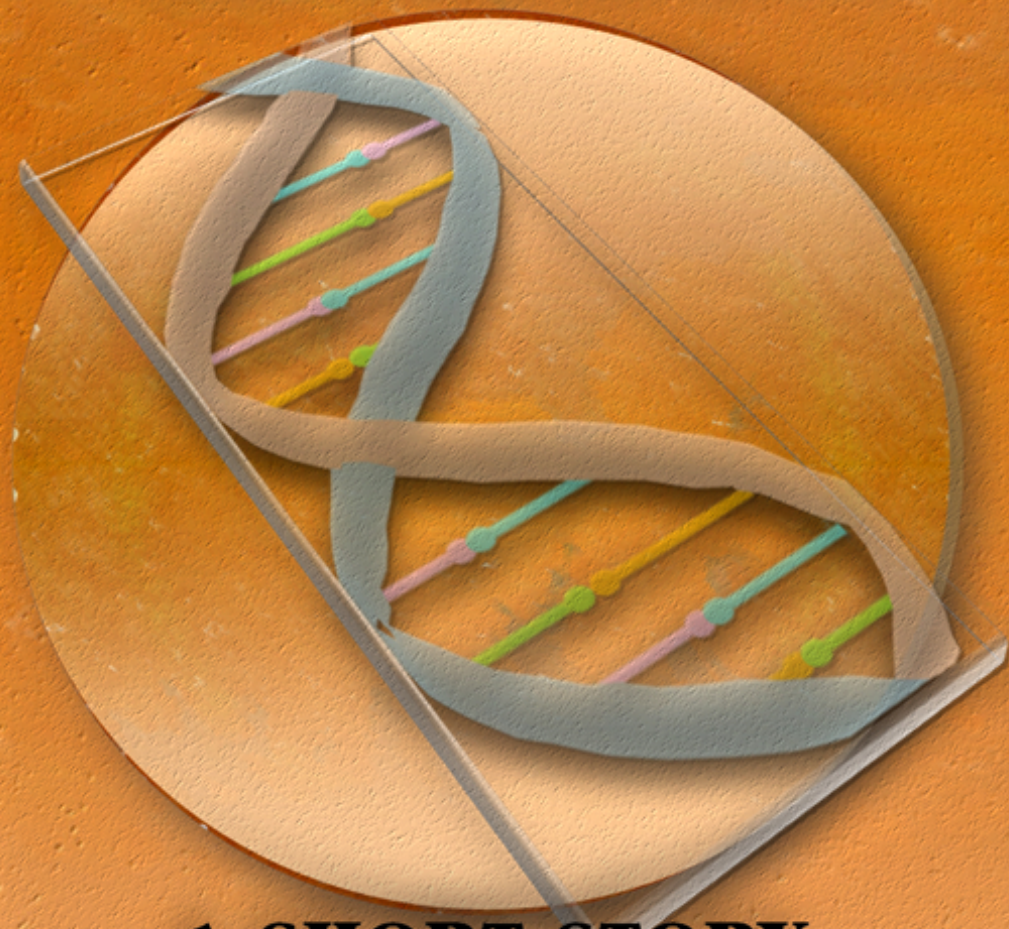


MARS ASCENDING



A SHORT STORY

Sunskerry
*****Press

Mars Ascending

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Sunskerry Press
Scotland
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MARS ASCENDING

“But I’m Mars-born!” Zenith Limcrist turned to her older sibling in fury at the second shock of that sol. “Where does that leave me? I don’t want to leave Mars, it’s my home!”

“Life’s tough when you’re young: look what happened to your twin.” The taunting voice was heavy with meaning. “You don’t know Earth, but it’s a lot better than *this* rock.”

“Hah! I don’t know it because I’ve never seen it, except as a shiny spot in the night sky. Why do they want to go back there?”

“Because it’s their home and markets are drying up here. Pa has enough patented know-how to ship out, start a new business with his contacts there and make a big profit,” her brother informed her.

Zenith turned her back on the warmth of the family hub and hid her face in the dark shelter of a weather-viewer that was recessed into the side wall. Her eyes and heart were as stormy as the scene outside, where the Dome and its outlying structures were receiving a buffeting from the high winds and wind-borne regolith that swept across the sand-scoured terrain of Aeolis Planum. Typical, she thought rebelliously. Not only had her parents burdened her with a ridiculous name but they’d produced Leo as their first-born. An afterthought was all she was, a means to an end: a Mars-born child that gave her parents and Earth-born brother the right to stay on Mars indefinitely without becoming citizens. Well, good luck to them, trying to adapt to gravity Earthside after all these years on the red planet. She would not be accompanying them. She was now well beyond schooling and legally an independent national. A Mars national.

“Can’t be done,” Leomis Limcrist told her, accurately reading her rigid back view. “You’ve nowhere else on this planet to go, and the pixy amount of credit you pick up for working in that downmarket gem-cutter operation is nowhere near enough to rent a billet in a

back street. You should've stayed in the family business like me." He sounded smug.

Like him, Zenith thought. She was nothing like him, nor indeed did she physically or psychologically resemble either parent. A proverbial fish out of water, she certainly had no inclination for the economic speculation that sat very ill with their clinical therapeutics business and which seemed to take up most of their waking hours. She had always been excluded anyway as being too young. As she studied her reflection in the sides of the viewer, she could see the leering grin on Leo's face. They had had this planned for years, she thought with sudden sharp awareness. All those hours they spent on high-gee training exercises, the frequent trips Earthside on company business and, come to think of it, her father's distinct coolness when her wish to continue to college before entering the family business had been broached as she was leaving high school. She had gained sufficient educational credits to merit a place on a degree course and her family was very well off by Martian standards. She turned suddenly, suspiciously, and looked Leomis full in the face.

"Why wouldn't Pa let me go to college and do a degree?"

"Do you know how much that costs?" he countered after a pause too fractional to be natural. "Too much," he added glibly by way of explanation when she failed to respond, his pale face gleaming greasily in the light. With his smooth artificial smile crookedly lifting the corners of his mouth, he looked like the joker in a pack of holocards.

"You make me sick!" she stormed at him. "In fact, you make everybody sick!"

This was not so very far from the truth, given the family business was partly genetico-pharmaceuticals and Leomis was a leading light of that part: he had been put through a college education and had majored in genetics and pharmacology.

Zenith turned on her heels and almost ran from the apartment. Fury bore her swiftly to her own small room and she set her privacy button with a vicious flick of her fingers. Sitting down heavily on the edge of her bed, she drummed her clenched fists on her knees, sending out a hissing stream of furious invective at Leo and at the absent Ma and Pa Limcrist. She was interrupted by the chime of her wrist-comm unit.

“Hi Zen, how goes it?” asked the face smiling up at her as she activated the device and checked the caller.

“Not good,” was the mutinous response. “Need to talk. Can I come to yours?”

“Yep, come on over. We’ll go out, my folks are in and so’s half the planet, it’s mayhem here. I have something to show you in any case.”

“Thanks, Sylvie, you’re a mate. Be there soonest.”

Zenith deactivated the unit and made for the hygiene cubicle to cleanse her face of its traces of recent emotion and slap on sufficient face paint to make her feel able to face the planet before sliding into her boots, grabbing her carryall and wrap and heading for the exit and the freedom of the road.

+ + +

Sylvie Jensilk’s family home on Road Three was smaller than the Limcrust establishment but friendlier by far and often a hive of rather boisterous badinage. There was always diverse distraction to be had, be it sports holos or scientific debate. The current topic was Mars independence and being a rest-sol, the family hub was bursting at the seams with vociferous disputants. Sylvie’s family was long-established on Mars, miners once by profession but now artificers of fine gem-craft at a modest workshop in Dome Central. A school-bred friendship, when Sylvie had relocated from elsewhere, had linked the two girls and the warmth Zenith had found at the Jensilks had been a revelation when contrasted with the lack of affection she met at home, where Leomis was most definitely the favourite and favoured child. She had always been welcome at the Jensilks, first as a visitor and latterly as an employee: she had recently begun as a trainee data-gem analyser at Jensilk Gems, a position far superior to the year-long administrative assistantship she had previously held in the Limcrust office. At least at Jensilk Gems she was not expected to dance attendance on everyone from senior manager to cleansing operative and be paid a pittance for the privilege.

“Just let me grab my cloak.” Sylvie, dressed in her familiar but bewilderingly colour-shifting costume of chameleon fabric, called over the head of a cacophony of greeting from various habitués of the home unit whilst her mother, Stenella, handed a cold drink and a savoury nibble to the newcomer.

It was not long before the two, threading the cool Road Three and then the main Avenue, found themselves at Dome Central and a small eatery of their acquaintance. They had hardly chosen their table, ordered up a pastry and iced frappé apiece and set full privacy before Zenith began to pour out her troubles in an urgent whisper.

“The sol I’ve had so far!” she began. “You’ll not believe this – Leo’s just told me I was a twin...”

“You what?” Sylvie’s face registered shock. “No way! How on Mars did he let that slip?”

Zenith outlined her exchange with Leomis earlier in the sol. She knew that her family were still livid at her career change and the move to Jensilk’s without their authorisation. In consequence, Leo had been elected to read her a few home truths – the first one being that her twin sister, Nadir, had died before drawing breath.

“Nadir?” questioned Sylvie. “You *are* joshing me, right?”

“That’s what he told me, along with a few other unpleasant things. Apparently I was formulated – that’s his word – at a DNA med facility. I asked which one and he said Mars Six, but that was minewash. He always slides his eyes sideways when he lies. And that I was the stronger twin. But I don’t get it, there’s no need to grow more than one embryo to full term, why were there two of us? They only needed one to allow them to stay on Mars without adopting citizenship – and having to pay Martian taxes. And then he drops the next nuke: we’re headed back to Earth in the next half-year, me included. Business is dropping off or something. So I can kiss my career at Jensilk’s goodbye, he told me. I’m not going to!” Zenith raised anguished eyes to her friend’s face. “What do I do?”

“Firstly, you stop worrying about it. Keep chill. We’ll sort something out.” Sylvie put a hand on her friend’s arm. “Wonder if it’s anything to do with the latest rumpus over citizenship and Mars’ rights that the independence movement is grouching about?” she continued. “Why colonials need Earth-issued ident-permits to go to Earth but Earthers don’t need them to visit the colonies? Why are non-citizens allowed to set up businesses here and make credit out of us? Not that I’ve paid much attention, politics is most definitely not my thing.”

“That might be part of it,” Zenith sighed, partially reassured. “Sorry for going on about it... I needed to let it out. But you’re

right: I should slack a bit and think. It's a rest-sol. Let's change the subject – you said you had something to show me?"

"This is chill," Sylvie grinned, looking surreptitiously around her as she pulled a small box from her carryall and flipped it open. "A new toy..."

Inside was what appeared to be a crystal rectangle set into a black matte bed. Sylvie lifted the edge of the crystal and it slid back and upright until it stood at ninety degrees to its base. With another look around to make sure they were unobserved through the filmy mist of the privacy shield, she twisted the crystal around on its axis. It began to emit an eerie blue glow that pulsed as it strengthened and then began to change to red. A holo-note materialised, accompanied by a light beam that was directed straight at Zenith.

"What is it?" Zenith asked curiously, interrupting the beam with a finger, causing it to waver and shimmer.

She looked up at her friend and her smile vanished. Whatever the device was doing, it was not what Sylvie had expected. The latter, after a quick gesture of perplexity, put a finger to her lips and stared fixedly at Zenith, shaking her head meaningfully. As Zenith opened her mouth in incomprehension, Sylvie repeated the signal more forcefully, waving her other hand to reinforce it.

"Oops," she said with forced brightness and a wide, false grin. "Doesn't seem to be working right – it's a mini-holo-generator for showing tri-dee epics. I'll see if I can fix it."

She ran rapid fingers over the holo-note and the light-beam tightened. She gestured Zenith to move slightly to one side and the beam finally settled on her friend's carryall.

"Here's our order," Sylvie called lightly as the service hatch to the side of their table opened to reveal the drinks and pastries. "I'll sort this thing later. Let's see the colour of your credit chit!" She nodded pointedly in the direction of Zenith's carryall, which the latter obediently set on the table.

"Empty it..." Sylvie mouthed silently.

By now burning with curiosity and alarm in about equal measure, Zenith did so. "I know there's a loose one in here somewhere," she added for good measure, acutely aware that a play was being played out, as she set out the bag's contents for inspection.

The light beam had swivelled and was still directed at the carryall, which Sylvie picked up and turned inside out. She inspected its

internal pockets minutely and finally picked out a tiny, flat, metallic disc, hardly larger than a fingernail, raising it up to eye-level and exchanging a searching gaze with her companion. Zenith's mouth dropped open. She knew what it was. And she knew that it was practically indestructible.

Sylvie was no fool. She extracted her friend's credit chit and slipped it into the card reader, requesting that it reduce the bill by half. She repeated the manoeuvre with a credit chit of her own and then picked up her crys-glass of frappé.

"Here's to us!" she said cheerfully, her changeful green eyes speaking volumes.

Zenith picked up her own glass and echoed the salutation. She then began at a tangent on the quality of the pastry they were about to consume, construing correctly that the location bug was as capable of picking up conversation as it was at precisely pinpointing its own position. As both ate and doggedly pursued an inane conversation about pastries they had known and eateries they had patronised, Sylvie grimly studied the device, using her new toy surreptitiously in a way mysterious to her friend, but which involved some holo-note manipulation.

At length, having finished their snacks and exhausted both their stock of small talk and their patience, they looked at one another askance.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I need to visit the comfort station." Sylvie stood up, deactivating the privacy shield and holding the bug up with a meaningful glance.

"Me too," Zenith responded with forced cheerfulness, collecting her belongings.

Once within the restaurant's empty hygiene facility, Sylvie turned before entering a cubicle. "See you in half a jiffy."

Several minutes passed before the older girl returned. Her grin was reassuring. She held up the crystal rectangle, its bed now acting as a grip, and proceeded to sweep it around and over Zenith, who stood perplexed.

"You're clear!"

"Of what?"

"Of any other bugs," Sylvie told her flatly. "You know what that was? A highly sophisticated surveillance tool."

"I figured. But where is it now?"

“Swimming through the Dome sewerage system,” Sylvie told her, pointing to the floor. “I think I was able to deactivate it with my boot-heel, but I’m not totally sure. Hopefully whoever planted it will imagine you dropped it in here. It’ll take some time to retrieve.”

“But if it’s deactivated, how can...”

“It can still be recovered. It’ll have a nano-coded security marker that will see to that. We are going somewhere private. We need to talk.”

+ + +

Some little time later, Sylvie led her friend into an inner office at Jensilk Gems. Zenith had by now voiced her deduction that Leomis had planted the bug, but why, and how he had come by it, was beyond her. She thanked her lucky stars that Sylvie had brought the scanning device, a new invention of her father’s using crystal data-capture technology, which was being developed for military use – apparently, Kyrsk Jensilk had military contacts for whom he often produced bespoke pieces, making quite a good living thereby. The Crystal Data Sensing, Retrieval and Diagnostic Storage Array, or Crysrad for short, was a prototype straight off his design station and Sylvie had been given permission to show her friend the device’s minor uses in data retrieval, storage and analysis, and its hologeneration facility. An inbuilt protection sensor had detected the location bug and produced the silent warning.

“Sit there, drink this and tell me what’s really been going on in your place over the last few months,” Sylvie instructed, passing over a dispo-mug. “This – showdown – has been brewing for some time hasn’t it?”

Her shoulders sagging in relief, Zenith nodded. Her humdrum existence as one of the lowly in the Limcrist office had been grinding her into Mars-dust, as Sylvie well knew. But it was only recently that she had become acutely conscious, with an awareness bordering on anxiety, that something was in the offing: discussions between the other three Limcristis which halted when she came into the room; supplementary med-tests she had been obliged to undergo; speculative glances that she sensed when she was looking elsewhere; unspecified business that took them off-planet more often than usual. Some inner prompting had led her to say nothing when the offer of a place at Jensilk’s had materialised and her transfer there was achieved during one of their absences. The storm

of fury on their return had been weathered and had apparently abated a couple of weeks ago – that was presumably when the bug had been placed in her carryall, as it was the one she always took to work and it was rarely far from her. The aloofness with which she was habitually treated at home had been replaced by interested but icy disfavour although it caused her little added distress: she rarely saw her family, they being ostensibly fully occupied with business.

Sylvie listened with grave attention and then smiled into her friend's eyes. What they would do, she advised, was maintain an apparent status quo, on the assumption that a new bug would be placed. Meanwhile the two of them had better be seen somewhere public and at a distance from the Jensilk premises. How about a games sim at the Arcade? A session on their favourite hunter-prey holo would sharpen their reflexes and provide them with a thorough workout.

Zenith agreed with measureable relief. Sylvie, older and more mature in outlook, had always taken the lead and she trusted her implicitly, never having been let down. She followed her friend through a series of narrow corridors leading to the back of the building and out through the services area. Once they had made it onto the street it was a short walk to one of the main thoroughfares of Dome Central and within a very short time after that they found themselves in the Arcade.

Being a general rest-sol, the place was busy and the twosome lost no time in booking a games suite. They planned to while away the waiting time by wandering around the facility on the premise that they might meet someone they knew. Barely a few minutes had gone by when Zenith's wrist-comm unit chimed.

"What the... It's Leo!"

"Better answer it," Sylvie said quickly. "Have a care."

Zenith tabbed the unit. "Yes Leo, what is it?"

The glib smile was attempting nonchalance. He was just checking in to let her know that he would probably be out when she got back, as he was meeting friends; Ma and Pa were still over at the main lab and wouldn't be back until late. Where was she anyhow? Having a good time with Sylvie, he hoped.

"We're at the Arcade, waiting for a games sim suite – you know how long it takes on rest-sols. We had a pastry and iced frappé at Pearl's and now we're looking around the stores until our suite's

free. We might go for a meal after the sim, we haven't decided. Was there anything you wanted in particular?"

Leo's face creased in an unflattering grin as he assured her there was not and then told her not to be too late in. He would probably see her morrow-sol.

"So how did he know you were with me?" Sylvie enquired when Leo had linked off. "He may have guessed, you usually are, but..."

"I wonder how many other bugs are planted among my things," Zenith worried.

"We could go to yours and check, if you like, after the sim? There's the buzzer now."

"I would like, but let's do our game for now. I'll make sure one of the hunters has Leo's face and I'll fragment him."

+ + +

Thoroughly exhausted after the games sim and all the better for it, the two gathered their belongings and headed out into cool Dome air, where the lighting had shifted into evening mode, mimicking the planet outside the plas-crystal covered and radiation-shielded settlement. They headed out on foot to Dome edge and onto the moving walkway of Schiaparelli, one of the four main Avenues leading to the subsidiary Domes of the Complex. They passed Road Three and the Jensilk home unit, heading for Road Seven, which branched off the Avenue further down on the right. The night was clear and mistily overhead through the shielding, a dark sky pricked with stars could be seen.

Zenith fished out an identity locket on a neck-chain and held it up to the security pad of the door panel, which slid sideways. The Limcris home unit was in darkness but brightened as she stepped through the portal, followed by her friend.

Sylvie had her Crysrads in hand and set to scan. "There's no-one else here," she confirmed, watching the holo-readout. "But, hell's bells, what on Mars..."

"What is it?" Zenith asked quickly.

"They'll know we've been here – they're counting us in, and will be counting us out. And they'll know every apartment we go into: this place is bristling with surveillance kit, probably vis-audio. Just a sec..."

After a deal of manipulation lasting rather more than several seconds, Sylvie straightened, sighing. "I've deactivated the main

controller, housed just back of the panel there, and scrambled the last hour's data. Hopefully it will look like a short, but it's one of the most sophisticated systems I've ever seen."

Zenith's eyes gleamed, puzzled, in the light. "One of the most sophisticated you've ever seen? You mean you've..."

The response was an expletive. Sylvie had turned towards the exit. "No time to explain, we're away from here now! What's the quickest way out back?"

"The service area where the surface-hover lockup is..."

"Let's move it! Now!"

Catching the urgency, Zenith turned and darted along the passage, Sylvie on her heels. "Through here," she panted, leading the way into a small utility room and thence to a panel let into the wall. She tabbed the exit button. "It's locked from this side!"

Another expletive rent the air as Sylvie hauled a small sidearm from her carryall, ordering her friend to stand back. With a short burst of energy, the lock-plate fizzed with static and the panel slid sideways. "Out, now!"

By this time totally terrified, Zenith hung back, but was abruptly hauled over the threshold and into the dark and empty building beyond, hearing the voice behind her swearing softly.

"It won't reseal! I'll scramble the lock-code on the inner door. You wait here."

In seconds Sylvie was at her side again, pulling the face from the outer lock-plate. She manipulated a few switches and the panel slid shut, leaving them in the dim light of her flashbeam. She replaced the lock-plate cover and turned, pulling Zenith across the lockup, through the external portal and into the alleyway beyond.

"I take it this is self-locking?" she whispered.

"Yes, but what's going on?"

"In a min. We have to get away from here. They've stopped out front, but they might be round to dock their vehicle."

Sylvie led the way back to the Road, melting into the wall, almost invisible in her chameleon clothing that took on the shades of its surroundings. She peered around the corner, weapon in hand, consulting the Cysrad, which was now attached to her wrist, and then turned back, her face close to her friend's. "Trust me, Zen," she whispered. "We go *down* the Road, away from the Avenue. Keep to the wall and freeze if I give the word."

Road Seven dwindled into an indeterminate distance. Zenith knew that beyond the larger habitations the Road gave onto an agglomeration of shoddily-built clustered accommodations that were principally subterranean in nature and housed ancillary and similarly low-paid workers. After that the Road dead-ended, as far as she knew, never having been that way and having been well-warned to keep away from it. She followed Sylvie, her trust severely shaken but still unaccountably holding, and without further alarm they soon found themselves beyond the last of the tenanted buildings and at a small domed construction.

"It's a monitoring station for the overground waste conduit system. We can follow the attached service tunnel as far as Road Three," Sylvie told her.

"Road Three?" Zenith asked dazedly, breathing heavily. "Your place?" She paused, uncertainly. "I want to know what's going on or I'm not going anywhere."

"In here, then, out of view."

"Out here," Zenith said firmly, though shaking internally and totally out of her depth.

Sylvie paused, scanning her face. "Fair enough," she said. "Let's just sit and get breath." She slid down the wall of the domed edifice to the ground and sat, her arms around her bent knees.

"How long have you known me, Zen?"

"Over three Mars Years now," Zenith said, sliding down beside her. "Why?"

Sylvie's green eyes gleamed in the dark. "I've known you most of your life."

"What?"

"I'm a lot older than you. Oh, I know I don't look it," she put in quickly, forestalling the question. "But then... Look at me, Zen. Do you trust me? Open your mind – what do you *really* feel about me and about what seems to be going on in your life?"

Zenith fixed her eyes on Sylvie's face, scarcely discernible in the gloom. Her own eyes widened. "I feel I trust you... I feel you're looking after me. I sense – trouble – around me. I don't know what it is but it frightens me. I think it's coming closer." Suddenly she stiffened. "There are people coming this way! I'm sure of it!"

Sylvie lifted the Cysrad, scanning into the darkness beyond. "You're right: two of them. We need to move now. It's asking a lot

of you Zen, but you must come with me. First we get into that station. We're not going to follow the service tunnel but we want them to think we are..."

As she spoke, Sylvie was manipulating the security entrance to the monitoring station. Within seconds she was inside and down the few steps, Zenith close on her heels. In the dim light of her shuttered flashbeam she withdrew a small torpedo-shaped device from her carryall, ran it over herself and her friend and launched it along the low-lit tunnel that stretched into the distance.

"They're close!" she panted. "It'll take them a couple of minutes to get through the door; I've scrambled the lock code. There's an exit just up here, we can lock that behind us."

Zenith needed no bidding – the anxiety that had been preying on her mind was increasing second by second. Somehow she knew that there were pursuers behind and that their intentions were malignant. She followed Sylvie up the tunnel as far as a dark recess let into the wall that terminated in a low door. The older girl swiftly unlocked it, and pushing Zenith ahead of her, turned to sweep the area behind them and the door itself with a blast of attenuated light from her sidearm.

"I'm removing any genetic traces of us that they might be able to follow," she explained in a low, urgent tone. "They should follow the decoy and with a bit of luck they may not notice this exit – maybe."

"I feel like I'm still in the holo-suite and this is a new games sim."

"You wish. I can't risk tampering with this lock-plate. Let's make for the desert. I know where we can get a pressurised sand-buggy." Sylvie's tone was matter of fact.

"We're not going outside the Complex?" Zenith whispered, horrified.

"Not for long or very far," was the consoling response. "But we need to get away from this area and that's the quickest way I know. Something's been triggered and until I find out what, we take as few risks as possible. Those two must be inside the station by now and I'm not registering any more traces of life close by. Back this way and maintain hush."

With infinite caution and testing every step, Sylvie led the way along the visible exterior line of the tunnel, past the dark bulk of the

station and back towards the huddle of semi-subterranean buildings that rose as shadowy shapes before them. Confidently, the older girl skirted a couple of windowless domed excrescences, her boots scuffing up the dust of neglect and decay. It was bitter cold: Dome Council spent very little on the upkeep or comfort of the rag-ends of Roads at the outer edges, where there were few registered voters to complain. In a poorly-lit lock-up whose door gave easily to the proffered key card and a well-aimed low kick, a small but serviceable buggy stood in a pool of dim blue light engendered by their entrance.

“Meet Rusty,” Sylvie grinned. “She’ll warm up in a few minutes. You get in and web up,” she instructed as a wide hatch retracted to reveal a tight bucket seat.

She strode around the other side, opened the pilot’s hatch and dexterously inserted herself into the control seat. “You coming?”

“I need to pee.”

Sylvie laughed gently. “Poor Zen! What a dance I’m leading you! The comfort cubicle’s over in that corner, be quick.”

The engine was thrumming smoothly as Zenith returned to the craft and gingerly lowered herself into place, obediently securing the safety webbing around her. The hatches closed and a rising hum culminating in a swish announced that pressurisation was achieved. Sylvie turned off the internal lights and in stealth mode slowly moved the craft out of its unlikely hangar.

“There shouldn’t be many footpads around this time of eve but if there are, this’ll look just like a normal surface-hover that’s strayed into unfamiliar territory. I’m heading for an old airlock that the constructors used when they built the Roads.”

“But don’t you need security clearance to leave Dome?”

“I don’t,” Sylvie said briefly. “Besides, this is an old dual sand-racing buggy and when did a racer ever stop to ask permission?”

The dark pressed close as the buildings receded and the overhead shielding height reduced, its plas-crystal scoring now visible as a misty haze. Zenith breathed deeply and tried to still her mind, mentally gathering up the threads of circumstance over the past several months that had led to her current situation. She had been aware of a tighter than normal rein on her activities during her last weeks at Limcrist which had probably provoked her into jumping ship to Jensilk’s so precipitously and without informing her kin.

Sylvie's family had been very much a port in a sandstorm. And if Ma and Pa Limcrist had actually been monitoring her scarcely-concealed infuriation, bordering on hatred, at them in the privacy of her own room and of her conversations with Sylvie there and elsewhere... She grew hot at the thought. But *why* had they been monitoring her? Leo's greasy face drifted across her consciousness and she could see now in acute clarity the pale features and lidded blue eyes so unlike her own that were hiding something.

Zenith was brought back down to Mars by a spatter of small stones on the outer hull as the buggy scraped a groove in the gravelly terrain. "Where are we?"

"In a small cave not far from the external end of Road Eleven off Schiaparelli," was the reply. "There's sufficient magnetic flux in the rocks around here to scramble any sensors. We won't risk going back Dome-side until we get a green light." Sylvie eyes glinted in the semi-darkness. "Ask whatever you like. You should know who and what you are."

"I should know who and what I am?" Zenith returned, baffled. "Who and what I am?" she repeated and paused, reflecting. "I'm not a Limcrist, am I?"

"No. Far from it. You were right in supposing that initially you were a ticket to Martian residency for the Limcrist, which is probably one of the reasons they wanted you kept close. It looks like they are now aware that the experiment that produced you was a success and that's why they need to get you away from Mars at all costs – before your powers develop more fully."

"My powers?"

"Zenith and Nadir," Sylvie said, shaking her head. "It's funny the Earthers chose those names. "You and your twin – code-named Faith and Grace – were part of a secret programme to secure a future for Mars that was really Martian. You are one culmination of genetic manipulations over decades attempting to enhance certain genes without adversely affecting others. In your case, the telepathic genetic tendency was enhanced but at the expense of a compatible predisposition to longevity; in your twin Grace, the longevity gene was boosted over the telepathic. The result you know... The embryonic Grace did not apparently survive. You – Faith – did."

Silence. At last Zenith spoke. "But, but, telepathic tendency? I don't... do I?"

“I think you just proved it, back there.” Sylvie’s voice was considerably gentle. “It was speculated for centuries that humans had some inherent telepathic ability you know, but little came of it. Not until something was found, a very long time ago now: ancient Martian DNA preserved in floodplain deposits that appeared to be compatible with Earth-bred DNA. We don’t know the who or the why or the wherefore, but early results of splicing-in cloned genetic elements from the Martian moieties led to organisms – including higher organisms – that appeared to possess, amongst other traits, enhanced lifespans despite poor environmental conditions. There was naturally military interest in extending the programme to humans; survival for one thing and not only for long-term space missions. We’re still dependent on Earth for so much you know: it can cut off essential supplies that would leave us totally vulnerable and we need an advantage. So human embryonic manipulation began. Naturally, it was highly secret – given the colossal ethical implications it *had* to be. There were numberless failures over the decades, but what became increasingly apparent was that in some cases, telepathic tendencies were developing. So one division of the programme was refined to identify the fine-tuning necessary to produce long lifespan with advanced telepathic ability.”

Zenith looked across at her friend. “You’re part of this programme too...”

“Well done. You’ve got more than the well-developed intuition that preludes full-blown telepathy. Yes, I was an earlier prototype, with enhanced longevity plus limited telepathy and one other trait, a spontaneously-generated attribute that no-one else has. I’m based on different genetic crossings than you, perhaps more primitive... or not. And I was placed with the Jensilks – I do share their genes, they were part of an even earlier programme.”

“So why did I get the Limcrist?”

“You didn’t.” Sylvie was grim. “They were brought in by someone in the upper echelons – Limcrist Geneticopharm put up patented technology gratis, but in return they demanded and were granted controlled access to certain projects. They must have scented big credits in terms of profits to be made Earthside so they were determined to stay on Mars. They insinuated that they were expecting an addition to their family – their own company had the permissions to direct embryo emplacement at any genetic facility,

state or private. Soon after, two embryos were reported as having been accidentally destroyed along with all the data relating to them. Limcrist was one of those suspected, but given the nature of the operation, no-one could dig too much lest outsiders got hold of it. Later, when Limcrist relocated here and you were registered at the med-centre, clandestine tests were run – the programme has a long memory and long arms. You don't have Limcrist DNA..."

"Thanks be for that!"

"You were recorded as an officially donated adopted embryo. But you matched the few project records surviving for Faith and Grace. And that meant that you were one of the missing, allegedly destroyed, embryos. The other did not survive as far as we know. The Limcrist brought you up as theirs, one, because you gave them the right to stay on Mars and two, you and the DNA you carry are their passport to big credits back on Earth. Especially as it's getting too hot for them on Mars. They knew that your telepathic abilities would kick in and grow but not how strong they would be. Once your talent began to manifest, you would be able to figure out what was going on and thus be able to damage them. And before you could do that the Limcrist had to get you to Earth – and to who knows what? But now we're here. You can't go home and until we know how far the Limcrist and any collaborators have got, neither can I. We are on our own, little one."

"And you?" Zenith asked, perplexed. "How do you..."

"I've been your Guardian since your childhood. I've always been close. As I said, I'm older than I look. And we share much of the same DNA. Martian DNA."

Zenith looked into the depths of the green eyes opposite. They were old, old, reflecting a thousand lifetimes of knowledge in their slowly changing intensity. "You know, I think I've always felt that I'd known you forever...but how..."

"I mentioned that I had another attribute that had come into being spontaneously and has never been replicated... look at me, Zenith, all of me that you can see."

Sylvie's form seemed to shimmer, become insubstantial, melt into the background, grow into part of the craft wall behind her. Zenith shook her head and rubbed her eyes.

“Chameleon,” Sylvie said. “I always wear chameleon fabric because it matches me. This is what *I* am, this is what my genetic manipulation makes me.”

Zenith’s words dropped into the silence like tiny pebbles into a pool, sending out rippling echoes through the dark. “But who am I... what am I?”

“You are a Martian, as I am. And as for what we are – for Mars, we are the future.”

END

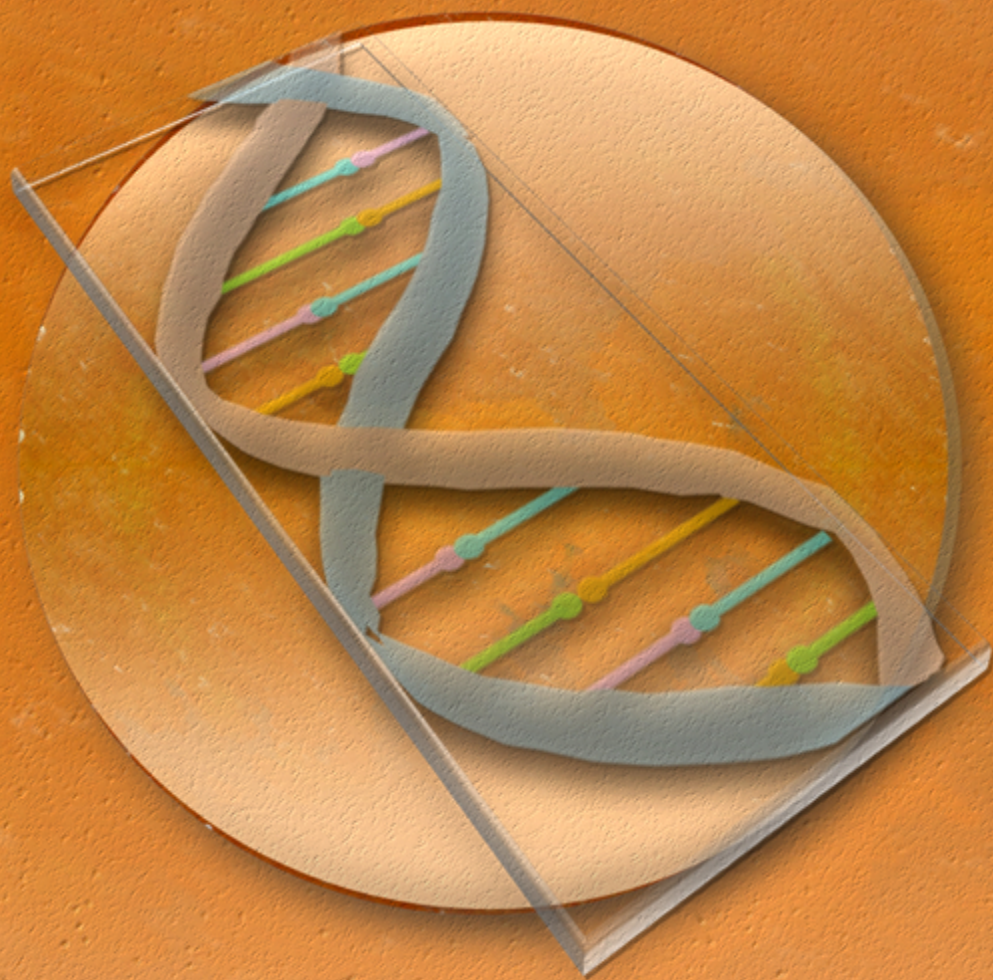
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