

Prologue

The thin wind whistled shrilly along the knife-edged ice. Needles of ice and scallops of ice thrust out of the compacted sand into the wind-borne grit. Gargoyles of ice hung from cliffs a kilometer high, brooding over the polar plain.

The wind was too thin to sustain a living thing but not too thin to carry the abrasive grit. The grit etched the rock and heaped the sand and carved the ice and the hard stone into arches and buttresses and buttes. The thin wind was a digger.

The hole it was digging now, in the sand beneath the ice, had a piece of metal in it. The metal was shiny and hard, not so hard that it had not been shattered—who knows when or how—but so hard the wind-borne grit could not mar its mirror surface.

Something else had etched the metal and dug channels in it. The channels were different from each other but all the same height and width and depth. They ran in straight lines. There were three dozen different kinds of them, but they repeated themselves in various sequences until the total number of them, etched in the metal, was a thousand and more.

A Martian year after the wind dug the etched mirror out of the sand beneath the ice, a man in a pressure suit came along and found it lying exposed there and carried it away.

“You’re crazy, Johnny, you can’t keep a thing like that secret. How you gonna make money on somethin’ looks like nothin’ nobody’s ever seen before?”

“Are you sayin’ it’s not valuable, Liam?”

“I’m sayin’ it’s too valuable. It’s one of a kind. You won’t get no money fer it, under the table or over.”

This was about as private as you could get around here, in the poker nest under the pipe rack in the drill rig dome, where the booze and the dope were cached. The crew boss knew all about it; he didn’t give a squeak, as long as nobody showed up high on any company monitors. But you had to whisper in here. These damn domes carried sound from one side to the other just as good as a phone link, and you never knew who was standing over there listening in.

“Huh. Never thought I’d be accused of bein’ in possession of somethin’ *too* valuable.”

“Quit poor-mouthin’. You been takin’ plenty off us.”

“Yeah, and I’m plannin’ to do it again tonight. You got one more chance before the others show up. Front me to these pals of yours in Lab City, you can keep a third.”

“Forget it. Best turn it straight in. That way at least you’re a hero. Every day you keep it you’re askin’ fer a ticket to jail.”

Passage doors popped, away on the other side of the dome. Somebody’s belch echoed off the stacks of pipe.

“What if I said there’s more out there, Liam? Other stuff with this funny writing. And stuff I can’t tell what it is.”

“You tryin’ to con me, Johnny?”

“Hell, no.”

“A lot of stuff?”

“Make up your mind first.”

“I’ll mull it over.”

“Boo, you guys.” A laugh sounded right behind them, slung over the arch of the dome. “It’s game time.”

“I want no tales circulatin’, Liam”-hardly even a whisper now-“You’re the only soul on Mars knows what I got.”

“You can trust me, John.”

“Good. We’ll both stay healthy.”

A week later, already four days behind schedule, the crew finally got the rig up and started to sink pipe. The sun went down in the red Martian sky, taking a pack of sundogs with it. Liam and Johnny were working the drillhead. They’d been hard at it for four hours and they were already down to permafrost when the pipe kicked-nobody ever did figure out how it happened, but it was no surprise, this was not a tight ship-but then Johnny really screwed up and it got away from him and the business end of the pipe blew a hole in the ice. Which normally would have resulted in maybe some people getting a quick ride back to the unemployment line in Labyrinth City, except right underneath them there was a big pocket of pressurized gas in the permafrost and it blew too, and the whole pipe rack went way, way up like a bundle of straws, and then all the straws came back down on Liam and John.

A man’s fine blond hair fell to within millimeters of the etched metal where it rested on the green baize desktop. “How did he come to be in possession of this exquisite thing?” The man was big-boned and tall, but his movements were precise and delicate. As he bent to inspect the plaque, he was careful not to let a hair touch it; he was reluctant even to let his breath cloud its shining surface.

“He must have picked it out of the sand, sometime within the past two months. Certainly he hadn’t the slightest idea of its worth.” The other man was older, pinstriped and crewcut. He flicked a holomap of the North Pole onto the mapscreen. “Our crew has hit these four sites since they went out in the spring. Spent roughly two weeks in each.” His blunt index finger pushed at four glowing dots that formed a ragged curve around the terraced ice. “The discipline was appalling, Albers. People took rovers and went joy-riding whenever they liked. Just where to is anyone’s guess. I’ve sacked the foreman and the district manager. Not in time to do us any good, I’m sorry to say.”

The tall man, an archaeologist, straightened and pushed his hair back. The sadness of his wide, down-turned mouth was offset by eager gray eyes, exuberantly bushy eyebrows, and a forehead that climbed to the high latitudes of his skull before disappearing under his blond hair. “This couldn’t possibly have been an isolated artifact. Surely there’s an incomparable treasure out there.”

“And we’ll do our best to find it,” said the executive. “Can’t hold out much hope, though. At least this piece is in your good hands now.”

Together they studied it in silence. The drilling man’s reverence was as profound as the

archaeologist's.

The blond archaeologist had spent ten years following the drilling crews, searching the frosted sands, tracing Martian watercourses that had dried to powder a billion years ago. He and his colleagues who specialized in paleontology had found fossils in abundance, simple forms highly adapted to a climate that had swung between frightening extremes of wet and dry, cyclone and calm, cold and colder.

But what drew archaeologists to this sparse ground were the scattered remnants of a different order of life-not fossils, not scraps of shell or bone, but the remains of what might have been implements made of novel alloys, and here and there tantalizing hints of what might have been structures. All these creatures-the abundant life that had crept across Mars and wallowed in the wet sands beside the desert-scouring flash floods, and the beings, whatever they were, who had left only hints of their advanced development-all these had flourished and vanished before life on Earth had evolved to anything more complex than blue-green algae.

Now the metal mirror on the desk, incised with a thousand characters, gave testimony that a billion years ago Mars had been host to a high culture.

"I suppose Forster knows of this already."

"Yes, I regret to say," the driller replied. "The word spread fast on the grapevine. Forster's on his way from Earth now."

A smile flirted with the archaeologist's mournful mouth. "It will be amusing to see what he makes of it."

"He's already held a media conference, you know. Already given the makers of this a name."

"Oh? What name?"

"He calls them Culture X."

The sad archaeologist allowed himself an amused grunt."Dear Professor Forster. Always energetic. Not always very original."

"That at least is to our advantage."

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No efforts of drilling teams or scientists ever found any trace of a treasure hoard on Mars. But ten years after the discovery of the Martian plaque, a mining robot on the surface of Venus-a planet as different from Mars as hell from limbo-was prospecting in a narrow canyon near an ancient beach, a beach a billion years old. The robot's diamond-edged proboscis cut through a wall of rock and came upon strange things. Within hours news went out across the solar system that Culture X had been, without doubt, a spacefaring species.

PART ONE

CONCERNING RESEARCH INTO LOST TIME

Sparta closed her eyes, stretched in the tub, and let her chin bob at the water line. At the threshold of sound, the water fizzed. Droplets condensed on her eyelashes; invisible bubbles tickled her nose. The odor of sulfur hung lightly over the baths.

The precise chemical formulation of the minerals in the water appeared unbidden in her mind's eye; they changed every day, and today the water cocktail mimicked the baths of Cambo-les-Bains in the Pays Basque. Sparta analyzed her environment wherever she went, without thinking about it. It was a reflex.

She floated easily; she weighed less, and the water weighed less, than they would have on Earth. She was a long way from Earth. Minutes went by and the warm water rocked her into relaxed drowsiness as she savored the news she had long awaited and only today received, her orders from Space Board headquarters: her assignment here was ended, and she was recalled to Earth Central.

“Are you Ellen?” The voice was quiet, tentative but warm.

Sparta opened her eyes and saw a young woman standing shadowed in the mist, naked but for the towel wrapped around her waist. Her straight black hair was tied in a bun.

“Where is Keiko?”

“Keiko was unable to come today. I'm Masumi. If it is all right with you, I will give you your massage.”

“I hope Keiko isn't ill.”

“A minor legal matter. She asked me to apologize for her, most sincerely.”

Sparta listened to the woman's soft voice. She heard nothing but the simple truth. She rose from the tub. Her slick skin, rosy with heat, gleamed in the filtered light from the terrace. The diffuse light played over her dancer's small taut figure, over her slight breasts, over her flat stomach and abdomen ridged with muscle and her slim hard thighs.

Her disheveled blond hair, soaking wet in back where it had been submerged, fell straight to her jaw line; she kept it chopped off straight, with little regard for fashion. Her full lips were perpetually parted, tasting the air.

“Here's a towel for you,” Masumi said. “Would you like to go on the upper terrace? We still have an hour of Venus-light.”

“Certainly.” Sparta followed the woman along the row of steaming tubs and up the steps to the open roof deck, brushing the water from her shoulders and breasts as she walked.

“Excuse me a moment, please. They forgot to take the tables in before the last rain.” Masumi spilled the film of water from the waist-high massage table and rubbed it dry while Sparta stood at the low rail, swiping at the last drops of moisture on her flanks and calves.

She looked down over the houses and gardens of Port Hesperus. The flat roofs descended below her in steps, like the roofs of a Greek village on a steep hillside, each house with its enclosed courtyard of citrus trees and flowering plants. At the bottom of the hill were the parallel main streets of the village, and between them, gardens of exotic shrubs and towering trees, redwoods and firs, tall poplars and yellow ginkgos. These famous gardens, landscaped by Seno Sato, were what made Port Hesperus a destination worth a wealthy tourist's visit.

The streets and the gardens curved sharply up to the left and right and met high above Sparta's