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DANNY GOES TO MARS

Pamela Sargent

"Mars is essentially in the same orbit [as Earth]. Mars is somewhat the same distance from the sun, which is very important. We have seen pictures where there are canals, we believe, and water. If there is water, that means there is oxygen. If oxygen, that means we can breathe."

—J. Danforth Quayle, Vice-President of the United States, as quoted in *Mother Jones*, January 1990

The Vice-President had known that this White House lunch would be different. For one thing, the President's voice kept shifting from his Mr. Rogers pitch to his John Wayne tone, and that always made Dan nervous. For another, the former Chief of Staff was there as a guest, and that bothered him.

John Sununu might have mouthed off in public about how much Dan had learned on the job, but away from the cameras, his big M.I.T. brain couldn't be bothered with even saying hello to the Vice-President. Not that it really mattered, since Nunu, as most of the White House staff called him behind his back, had pretty much treated everybody that way, except when he was having a temper tantrum. Almost everyone had been relieved when the former Chief of Staff had been eased out of that position.

Now, here he was in the White House again, sitting around at this intimate lunch as if he still had the President's full confidence. Maybe the President needed Big John's help on some scientific deal or other; Dan hoped it was that, and not something political. He squinted slightly, thinking of Robert Stack. That was the ticket, putting on that Robert Stack I'm-a-nice-guy-but-don't-mess-with-me kind of expression.

"A squeaker," the President said, "a real squeaker. Almost didn't pull it out. The Democrats—bad. Attack from the right—even worse. Got something up our sleeve, though—they'll say Never saw *that* coming."

The Vice-President tried to look attentive. Sometimes he couldn't figure out what the President was talking about. Once he had worried about that, before discovering that many members of the White House staff had the same problem.

"Council on Competitiveness, and, uh, the space thing, too—you're our man there," the President was saying now. Marilyn had guessed that the President might be toying with the idea of a space spectacular, and Big John, whatever his lacks in

the political arena, was one of the few advisors who could understand the scientific ins and outs. It made sense, what with that big breakthrough in developing an engine for space travel. Dan didn't know exactly how it worked, but it could get a ship to the Moon almost overnight—if there was an "overnight" in space.

"Mars," the President said. "About time."

"Mars?" Dan sat up. That was an even better idea than going to the Moon.

"We're sending out feelers." The former Chief of Staff adjusted his glasses, looking as if this project was his idea. Maybe it was; maybe that was how he had gotten back into the President's good graces. "The Japanese have hinted they might foot most of the bill if one of their people is among the astronauts. The Saudis'll pick up the rest if we get one of their men on board. The Russians would do almost anything to take their people's minds off the mess over there, and we can use one of those long-term habitat modules they've developed for the crew's quarters. Putting a cosmonaut on the crew in return for that would be a hell of a lot cheaper than sending more aid down that rathole."

"Impressive," the President said. "Won't cost us."

"We can get this going before the mid-term elections," Big John muttered. "America's reaching for the stars again—that should play pretty goddamned well, and you can use the brotherhood angle, too." He shifted his stocky body in his chair. "A crash program for building the ship will create jobs. The crew can be trained, and the ship ready to go, by the summer of '95. Two weeks or less to Mars, depending on where it is in relation to Earth's orbit, and back in plenty of time for the Presidential primaries."

"With the new nuclear fission-to-fusion pulse engine," Dan said, "that's possible." He'd picked up a few things during his meetings with the Space Council. He was a little annoyed that no one had even hinted at the possibility of a Mars trip, but then he was usually the last guy to find anything out. "With that kind of engine, we could cross from, say, Mercury to Jupiter in less than a hundred days." He had heard one of the NASA boys say that. Or had it been less than thirty days? Not that it made that much difference, at least to him.

The former Chief of Staff lifted his brows in surprise. Sununu had a habit of looking at him like that sometimes, the way Dan's high school teachers and college professors had looked at him when he actually managed to come up with a correct answer.

"But you know," the Vice-President continued, "you could take longer to train the crew, and have this whole Mars deal going on during the primary season. That might actually help me more, having it happen right while I'm running."

"Two terms," the President said, sounding a lot more like John Wayne than Mr. Rogers this time. "Straight line from nineteen-eighty. I want a Republican in the White House in two-thousand-and-one. Maybe the Navy band could play that music at the inauguration, you know, the piece in that movie—"

"*Also Sprach Zarathustra*," the former Chief of Staff said, then turned toward

the Vice-President. "The theme from *2001*." He had that funny smile on his face, the one that made his eyes seem even colder.

"What I was thinking, though," Dan said, "is that people have short memories." That was a piece of political wisdom he had picked up, partly because his own memory wasn't so great. "So it might make more sense to have a ship on Mars right in the middle of the primaries. It'd sure be a help to be able to make speeches about that, and—"

"Unless something goes wrong. That could really fuck up the campaign, a big space disaster." Big John folded his arms over his broad chest. "But we'll just have to see that doesn't happen. Besides, that sucker has to be back before the primaries." His smile faded. "See, the thing is—"

"On the crew, Dan," the President interrupted. "Still young, and you're in good shape—think it'll work."

The Vice-President set down his fork. "What would work?"

The former Chief of Staff unfolded his arms. "The President is saying that he'd like you to go to Mars."

Dan was too stunned to speak.

"If you'll volunteer, that is," the President said.

The Vice-President steadied himself, hoping his eyes had not widened into his Bambi-caught-in-the-headlights look. Big John might be willing to shove him aboard a ship heading for Mars just to get back in the good graces of the White House, but the President, for a guy without a whole lot of principles, was a gentleman. A man who never forgot to write thank-you notes wasn't the kind of person to force his Veep on a risky space mission.

"Well." Dan frowned. "Do I really have to do this?"

Big John said, "It may be the only way we can get you elected. It sure as hell would give you an edge, and you're going to need one. The President was getting it from the right, but you're going to be getting it from the moderate Republicans." He sneered. "We're only talking a two or three week trip, hardly more than a Space Shuttle flight. Come back from Mars, and you wouldn't just be the Vice-President—you'd be a hero." He said the words as if he didn't quite believe them.

"Hard to run against a hero," the President said. He pressed his hands together, then flung them out to his sides. "Moderates—trouble. But it's up to you, Dan. Think you can handle this Mars thing—make sure there's good people on the crew with you—but you gotta decide."

The Vice-President swallowed, trying for his Robert Stack look once more. He was about to say he would have to talk it over with Marilyn, but Big John would give him one of his funny looks if he said that.

"I'll consider it very seriously," he said. If Marilyn thought this was a good idea, he might have to go along with it.

"You do that," the former Chief of Staff said quietly.

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He explained it all to his wife after dinner. There would be the months of training, but a house would be provided for him, and the family could visit him in Houston. They could even move there temporarily, but Dan wasn't about to insist on that. His son Tucker was in college, so it wouldn't much matter to him where they lived, but the move might be disruptive for Corinne and Ben.

"I can see it, in a way," he said. "If I do this, I might be unbeatable. On the other hand, it didn't work for John Glenn."

"But this is *Mars*, honey," Marilyn said. "John Glenn didn't go to Mars." She brushed back a lock of brown hair, then frowned. Dan had the sinking feeling that this whole business had already been decided. Whatever his fears about the journey, he was more afraid of facing the President and telling him he had decided not to volunteer. Besides, this space stuff might finally put an end to all the mockery. Maybe there wouldn't be any more jokes about his lousy grades and his golf trips and being on beer duty during his stint in the National Guard. Maybe that bastard Garry Trudeau would finally stop depicting him as a feather in his *Doonesbury* comic strip.

"I'd miss you a lot," Marilyn said.

"I'd miss you, too." He slipped an arm over her shoulders. "But it isn't like it's going to be one of those three-year-round-trip deals. If that's what it was, I would have said no right on the spot. They said it would be safe."

She rested her head against his chest. "Nobody could top this, you know. I doubt you'd have any challengers in the primaries afterwards, and the Democrats won't have the easy time they expected against you. Even then—"

He owed it to Marilyn. He wouldn't have gotten this far without her; in a way, it was too bad she couldn't go to Mars with him. She'd had to give up her law practice in Indiana when he was first elected to Congress, and later, her hopes of finding a job when he was running for Vice-President. She had wised him up after his election to the Senate, after the story about his colleague Tom Evans and that Parkinson babe broke; if he had listened to Marilyn in the first place, he wouldn't have been in Palm Beach with them that weekend. She had given him good advice and sacrificed plenty for him. The least he could do was make her First Lady.

"What should I do?" he asked.

Marilyn drew away from him and sat up. "There's only one thing to do," she murmured. "This is too big for us to decide by ourselves, so we have to put it in God's hands. He'll show us what's right."

He folded his hands, bowed his head, and tried to summon up a prayer. He definitely needed the Lord's help on this one, but had the feeling that God was likely to agree with the President.

###

When Dan agreed to become an astronaut, it seemed that a great weight was lifted from his shoulders. The announcement brought the expected press and television coverage, along with varying reactions from stunned commentators, but the conventional wisdom was that he could probably handle his Vice-Presidential duties as well in Houston or on Mars as he could anywhere else.

There was a press conference to endure with his four fellow crew members, and the interviews, but he got through them all without any major gaffes, except for calling the moons of Mars Photos and Zenith. That snotty nerd George Will had tried to get him on some old remarks he had made about the Red Planet having canals, but Dan had muddied the waters with a bunch of memorized statistics he had mastered in the years since, along with a comment about having been under the spell of some Ray Bradbury stories. It was smart of his staff to feed him that stuff about Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* along with the other information. Dan had not only made Will look like a bully, but had also given viewers the impression that the Vice-President actually read books.

In Houston, at least, he would not have to do many interviews, on the grounds that they might interfere with his training. This did not keep some reporters from trying to get leaked information about his progress.

There was little for them to discover. Surprisingly, the training was not nearly as rigorous as he had expected. The other American on the crew, Ashana Washington, was both a physicist and an experienced pilot; she would technically be in command of the expedition. Prince Ahmed was also a pilot, although the ship itself would be piloted automatically during the voyage. Sergei Vavilov and Kiichi Taranaga each had a string of degrees in various subjects requiring big brains, and since they, like Prince Ahmed, spoke fluent English, the Vice-President, to his great relief, would not have to try to learn a foreign language.

Basically, Dan knew, he would be little more than a passenger. Learning about the Mars vessel and its capacities was more interesting than Cabinet meetings, and messing around with the NASA computers was a little like those video games he had sometimes played with Tucker and Ben. The crew had to be in good shape, but he had always jogged and played a fair amount of tennis. He often missed Marilyn and the kids, but they had been apart for extended periods during political campaigns in the past, and their weekends together more than made up for it. He didn't have to talk to reporters, although occasionally he didn't mind posing for photographers in his NASA garb with a Robert Redford grin on his face. Once a week, some of his staffers and the President's would fly down to brief him on various matters, but Washington often seemed far away.

He had wondered if his fellow astronauts would take to him, since they would have to spend at least a couple of weeks in isolation with him—longer if NASA decided they should remain in a Martian base camp for a while, which they might have to do if they found anything really interesting. Within three weeks after his arrival in Houston, however, he was golfing twice a week with Kiichi, jogging in the mornings with Prince Ahmed after the Saudi's morning prayers, and playing tennis

with Sergei, who, despite his small size, had one hell of a backhand.

Only Ashana had intimidated him just a little. The tall, good-looking black woman was too damned brainy and formal for him to regard her as a real babe—not that he, as a married man and a future Presidential candidate, was inclined to dwell on her apparent babe qualities anyway. Maybe Ashana thought that she was commanding this expedition for the same reason Clarence Thomas was on the Supreme Court. That was another reason to keep his distance. It wouldn't help his chances for the White House if Ashana turned into another Anita Hill.

He might have gone on being distantly polite to her if, a month and a half into his training, he hadn't been drawn into a pick-up basketball game with a few of the NASA staffers. Ashana came by, and before he knew it, she was giving him some good advice on how to improve his jump shots.

Basketball was the glue that sealed their friendship, but Dan had nearly blown it when Ashana had come to his house one weekend to meet his family and watch a game. "I should have known," he said as he settled into his chair, "that you'd be a hoop fan."

Ashana's face suddenly got very stiff. Next to her on the sofa, Marilyn was rolling her eyes and giving him her I-don't-believe-you-just-said-that look.

"Exactly why should you have known?" Ashana asked in a small but kind of scary voice.

"In your official biography—I mean, you grew up in Indiana, didn't you? Everybody's a fan there."

Ashana relaxed, but he didn't quite understand why she had laughed so hard afterwards.

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He admitted it to himself; if he had to be a hero to win the election, this was the way to do it. His crewmates were the real experts, so he could leave all the major decisions to them. He would, of course, do his best to be helpful. Sergei would use him as a subject in some medical experiments, and he could also help Kiichi sort his soil samples. That would be great, if they actually found life on Mars, even if it was only something like the mildew that sometimes showed up in the Vice-Presidential mansion.

People were really getting psyched about this mission. After all the economic bad news of recent years, putting people to work on the ship, now called the *Edgar Rice Burroughs*, and its systems, as well as expanding the size of the Russian and American space stations to house those who had to work on the *Burroughs* in orbit, had given the economy a boost. Part of that was the new jobs, but most of it was simply that the country was regaining its confidence. This Mars thing would propel him into the White House on a wave of good feeling, and he would lead the country into the next century during his second term. By then, the economy would be booming along under the impetus of a revived space program. Dan wasn't exactly sure how this would happen, but would let his advisors figure that out when it was

time for them to write his speeches.

It was, when he thought about it, amazing that the Mars mission had won such widespread support. There were, of course, some people who had to bitch, like those protestors who showed up at the Johnson Space Center or Cape Canaveral to protest the ship's technology, but they were the kind who panicked whenever they saw the word "fission," especially if "fusion" was sitting right next to it. A comedian on David Letterman's show had said something about how a dopehead must have thought of putting the Vice-President aboard, and so maybe they should have called the ship the *William S. Burroughs*. Dan didn't see what was so funny about that, but it didn't really matter. Most of the clippings Marilyn brought to him on her visits had optimistic words about the mission and comments from various people about his bravery and increasing maturity.

Almost before he knew it, he and his fellow astronauts were being flown to Florida, where they would spend their final days before liftoff; a space shuttle would carry them to the *Burroughs*. The President would be there, along with several ambassadors and any other dignitaries who had managed to wangle an invitation. A whole contingent of family and friends were coming in from Indiana to view the launch, which would be covered by camera teams and reporters from just about everywhere. Everything had gone basically without a hitch so far, although they were going to be late taking off for the *Burroughs*; the Shuttle launch had been postponed until October, what with a few small delays on construction and testing. Still, the Mars ship and its systems had passed every test with flying colors, and this had inspired a number of articles contending, basically, that American workers had finally gotten their shit together again. More kids were deciding to take science and math courses in school. There was a rumor that *Time* magazine had decided early that Dan would have to be their Man of the Year.

Only one dark spot marred his impending triumph. That creep Garry Trudeau was now depicting him as a feather floating inside a space helmet and referring to him as "the candidate from Mars."

###

The *Burroughs* wasn't exactly the kind of sleek ship Dan had seen in movies about space. Its frame held two heavily-shielded habitat modules, the lander, and the Mars base assembly. The large metallic bowl that housed the pulse engine was attached to the end of the frame. The whole thing reminded him a little of a giant Tootsie Roll with a big dish at one end, but he felt confident as he floated into the crew's quarters through an open lock. The President and Barbara had wished him well, and Marilyn and the kids had looked so proud of him. If he had known that being courageous was this simple, maybe he would have tried it sooner.

Inside the large barrel of this habitat, five seats near wall screens had been bolted to what would be the floor during acceleration. He propelled himself toward a seat and strapped himself in without a qualm. The *Burroughs* circled the Earth, then took off like a dream; Dan, pressed against his seat, watched in awe as the globe on the screen shrank to the size of a marble.

The ship would take a little while to reach one g, at which point the crew could get up and move around. The *Burroughs* would continue to accelerate until they were halfway to Mars, at which point it would begin to decelerate. The faster the ship boosted, the more gravity it would have; at least that was how Dan understood the matter. Even though it might have been kind of fun to float around the *Burroughs*, he had been a bit queasy during the shuttle flight, and was just as happy that they wouldn't have to endure weightlessness during the voyage. He had heard too many stories about space sickness and the effects of weightlessness on gas; he didn't want to puke and fart all the way to Mars.

Dan had little time to glance at the viewscreens when he finally rose from his seat. The others were already messing around with the computers and setting up experiments and generally doing whatever they were supposed to do; his job now was to monitor any transmissions from Earth.

He sent back greetings, having rehearsed the words during the last few days. He didn't have anything really eloquent to say about actually being out in space at last, but a lot of astronauts weren't great talkers. When he was about to sign off, the NASA CapCom patched him through to Marilyn.

She had cut out James J. Kilpatrick's latest column to read to him. The columnist had written: "Lloyd Bentsen once said of the Vice-President, 'You're no Jack Kennedy.' This has been verified in a way Senator Bentsen could never have predicted. This man is no Jack Kennedy. Instead, he has donned the mantle of Columbus and the other great explorers of the past."

That was the kind of thing that could really make a guy feel great.

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There was little privacy on the *Burroughs*. What with the shielding, the engine, the Mars lander they would use when they reached their destination, and the base camp assembly that would be sent to the Martian surface if NASA deemed a longer stay worthwhile, there wasn't exactly an abundance of space for the crew in the habitat modules. The next ship, which was already being built, would have the additional luxuries of a recreational module, along with separate sleeping compartments, but NASA had cut a few corners on this one.

The bathroom, toilet and shower included, was the size of a small closet; their beds, which had to be pulled out from the walls, were in the adjoining module, with no partitions. The whole place smelled like a locker room, maybe because the modules had been part of the Russian space station before being recycled for use in this mission. The food tasted even worse than some of the stuff Dan had eaten in the Deke house at DePauw.

But their comfort was not entirely overlooked; the *Burroughs* had a small library of CDs, videodiscs, and books stored on microdot. Within twenty-four hours, Dan and his companions had worked out a schedule so that each of them would have some time alone in the bed compartment to read, listen to music, or take a nap. There was no sense getting on one another's nerves during the voyage, and some

solitude would ease any tensions.

Dan went to the sleeping quarters during his scheduled time on the third day out, meaning to watch one of his favorite movies, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. He could stretch out on one of the beds and still see the screen on the wall in the back. He nodded off just as Ferris Bueller, played by Matthew Broderick, was calling up his friend Cameron on the phone; he woke up to the sounds of "Twist and Shout." Matthew Broderick was gyrating on a float in the middle of a Chicago parade.

Dan had missed most of the movie. He must have been more tired than he realized, even though he didn't have as much to do as the rest of the crew. Sergei had said something about doing some medical tests on him. He looked at his watch, set on Eastern Standard Time, which they were keeping aboard ship, and noticed that it was past 8:00 P.M. He stared at the screen, not understanding why the movie was still on until he realized that the player had gone back to the beginning of the disk and started running the film again. It was Ahmed's time to use the compartment now, so why wasn't the Prince here bugging him about it? On top of that, nobody had come to get him for dinner.

He sat up slowly. A weird feeling came over him, a little like the nervousness he had felt before calling his father about trying to get into the Guard. He got to his feet and climbed the ladder through the passageway that connected this module to the next.

The hatch at the end of the short passage was open as he came up. His shipmates were slumped over the table where they usually ate, their faces in their trays. Dan crept toward them, wondering if this was some kind of joke. "Okay, guys," he said, "you can cut it out now." They were awfully still, and Sergei had written something on the table in Cyrillic letters with his fingers and some gravy. "Okay, you faked me out. Come on." Dan stopped behind Kiichi and nudged him, then saw that the Japanese had stopped breathing. Very slowly, he moved around the table, taking each person's pulse in turn. The arms were flaccid, the bodies cold.

"Oh, my God," he said. "Oh, my God." He sank to the floor, covered his face with his hands, and sat there for a long time until a voice called out to him from the com.

"Houston to *Burroughs*. Houston to *Burroughs*." He got up and stumbled toward the com. "Come in, *Burroughs*." He sat down and turned on the com screen.

Sallie Werfel, the CapCom, stared out at him from the screen.

"They're dead," he blurted out. "They're all dead." Not until after he had said it did he remember that NASA had planned a live broadcast for that evening. "Oh, my God."

Sallie gazed back at him with a big smile on her face; it would take a while for his words to reach her, since signals had to work harder to get through all that space. Then her smile disappeared, and she was suddenly shouting to somebody else before turning to the screen once more.

"We're off the air," she said. "All right, what the hell do you mean about—"

"They're all dead," he replied. "At the table. Turn on the cameras and take a look. Sergei wrote something next to his tray, but it's in Russian."

Sallie was whispering to a man near her. Some more time passed. "All right, Dan," she said very quietly. "I want you to stay right where you are for the moment. We've got the cameras on the others now. You're absolutely sure they're, uh, gone."

"Yeah."

A few more minutes passed. "We're looking at Sergei's message. A couple of our people here know Russian, so we should have a translation in just a little bit. While we're waiting, I want to know exactly what you were doing during the last few hours."

"Not much," he said. "I mean, it was my turn for some private time—we had, like, a schedule for times to be alone, you know? So I went to the other module thinking I'd catch a movie." He was about to say he had been watching *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, but thought better of it. "What I remember is that Ashana was on the treadmill working out, and Sergei and Ahmed were checking some numbers or something. Kiichi was in the can—er, bathroom. I fell asleep, and when I woke up and looked at the time, it was past dinner. Then I came out and—" He swallowed hard. "Oh, my God." He waited.

"Take it easy, Dan," she said finally. "We're opening up a line to the White House right now."

An alien, he thought. Some creepy blob thing, the kind of creature they showed in old sci-fi movies, had somehow found its way aboard the ship. He imagined it oozing out to kill his companions during dinner, then concealing itself somewhere aboard the *Burroughs* to wait for him. Except that it wouldn't find too many places it could hide in the crew's quarters. Maybe the alien was concealed in the Mars lander by now, waiting for him. He shuddered. It couldn't be an alien. There wasn't any way for one to get aboard.

"We've got a translation," Sallie was saying. Dan forced his attention back to the screen. "We know what Sergei wrote." Her eyes glistened; he held his breath. "Not the food. Fever. Feels like flu."

"What?" He waited.

"Flu. Influenza." She lifted a hand to her temples. "He's telling us it wasn't anything in the food, that it felt as if they were coming down with something."

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Everything had happened awfully fast. The whole business might be some sort of weird assassination attempt; maybe someone had figured out a way to poison the main module's air system. It was pure chance that he had not been sitting there with the others. But why would anyone want to assassinate him? Only the Democrats had anything to gain from that, and they had so many loose cannons that somebody would have leaked such a plot by now.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or not when Sallie contacted him an hour later and gave him NASA's hypothesis. They suspected that his comrades had been the victims of an extremely virulent but short-lived virus—virulent because the others had died so quickly, and short-lived because Dan, in the same module breathing the same air, was still alive. They had come up with this explanation after consulting with the Russians, who had admitted that milder viruses had occasionally afflicted their cosmonauts. The closed ecologies of their modules had never been perfect. What that meant was that things could get kind of scuzzy in there.

The next order of business was to dispose of the bodies. Dan put on his spacesuit and tried not to look at the food-stained faces of his dead comrades as he dragged them one by one into the airlock.

They deserved a prayer. The only ones he knew were Christian prayers, but maybe Kiichi and Ahmed wouldn't mind, and he suspected Sergei was more religious than he let on. He whispered the Lord's Prayer, and then another he had often used at prayer breakfasts. Too late, he realized that a prayer said at meals might not be the most appropriate thing, given that his companions had died over their chow.

He looked up from the bodies as the outside door slid slowly open to reveal the blackness of space. His comrades deserved a few more words before he consigned them to the darkness.

"You guys," he whispered, "you were some of the best friends I ever had. You were definitely the smartest."

It took a while to get the bodies outside. As he watched them drift away from the ship, tears rose to his eyes. He was really going to miss them.

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Sallie contacted Dan an hour before the President was to address the nation and the world. The most important thing now was for Dan to seem in control of himself when it was time for his own broadcast. The NASA scientists were fairly certain that Dan wouldn't suffer the fate of the others; there was only a slight chance that the mysterious virus would reappear to infect him. He didn't find this very consoling, since there had been only a slight chance of such a thing happening in the first place.

"Do me a favor, Sallie," Dan said. "If I do kick off, don't let the media have tapes of it or anything. I mean, I don't want Marilyn and my kids watching that stuff on CNN or something." He waited. The time for round-trip signals was growing longer.

"You got it, Dano."

The President made his announcement, and Dan went on an hour later to show that he was still able to function. He had no prepared speech, but the most important thing was to look calm and not hysterical. He succeeded in that, mostly because he felt too stunned and empty to crack up in front of the hundreds of millions who would be viewing him from Earth.

Sallie spoke to him after his appearance. Ashana Washington's parents and brother had already retained counsel, and there was talk of massive lawsuits. He might have known that the lawyers would get in on this immediately.

"The most important thing now," Sallie said, "is to bring you home as fast as possible. You'll reach your destination four days from now." She narrowed her eyes. "The *Burroughs* is already programmed to orbit Mars automatically, so all we have to do is let it swing around and head back to Earth. You can get back in—"

"I'm not going to land?" he asked, and waited even longer.

Sallie sat up. "Land?"

"I want to land, Sallie. Don't you understand? I have to now. The others would have expected me to—I've got to do it for them." He searched for another phrase. "It means they won't have died in vain. I can do it—you can program the lander, and I can go down to the surface. Maybe I can't do the experiments and stuff they were going to, but I can set up the cameras and bring back soil samples. It wouldn't be right not to try. And if I'm going to die, I might as well die doing something."

He waited for his words to reach her. "Dan," she said at last, "you surprise me."

It would probably surprise the hell out of the President, too. "I've got to do it, Sallie." He frowned, struggling with the effort of all this thinking. "Look, if I land, it'll inspire the world to bigger and better space triumphs. We'll get that bigger space station built and the more advanced ships, too. But if you just bring me back, all the nuts will start whining again about what a waste all this was and how four people died for nothing." He waited.

"I'll do what I can, Dan." She shook her head. "I don't have much to say about this, but I can speak up for you. In the end, though, it's probably going to be up to the President."

"Then put me through to him now."

He hashed it out with the President in the slow motion of radio delay, listened to the objections, and replied by invoking the memory of his dead comrades. When the President, looking tense and even more hyper than usual, signed off by saying he would have to consult with his advisors, Dan was certain he had won. He felt no surprise when word came twelve hours later that he would be allowed to undertake the landing.

After all, if the President didn't let him go ahead, it was like admitting publicly that he had put an incompetent without adequate training aboard the *Burroughs*. The President, having finally salvaged his place in history, wasn't about to go down in the record books as a doofus.

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David Bowie was singing about Major Tom and Ground Control. Kiichi had been a David Bowie fan, so a lot of Bowie's music, everything from his Ziggy Stardust phase up through Tin Machine, was in the *Burroughs*'s music collection. Dan had never been into David Bowie, who struck him as being kind of fruity, but

now he felt as if he understood this particular song.

Sometimes, during his work with the President's Council on Space, Dan had wondered why some early astronauts had gotten kind of flaky after returning to Earth. These were macho test pilot guys, not the kind of men anyone would expect to get mystical or weirded out. But as he moved around the ship, which was usually silent except for the low throbbing hum of the engine and an occasional beep from the consoles, he was beginning to feel a bit odd himself, as if his mind had somehow moved outside of his body.

He had never thought all that much about God. He had, of course, never doubted that God was out there going about His business; he had simply never thought about the Lord that much, except when he was in church or saying a prayer. When he was a boy, he had imagined a God something like his grandfather Pulliam, an angry old man ready to smite all those liberal Democrats, Communists, and other forces of darkness. Later on, when he was older and more mature, God had seemed more like a sort of basketball coach or golf pro.

Now, when he gazed at the image of Mars on his screen, a rust-red dot surrounded by blackness, he had the strangest feeling that he had never really understood the Lord at all. God had created all this, the planets and the space between them and the stars that were so far away he could not even comprehend the distance. God, in some ways, was a lot like the NASA computers, but there was even more to Him than that. Dan wasn't quite sure how to put it; things like that were hard to explain. He supposed that was what it meant to be mystical—having weird feelings you couldn't quite put into words. And faith was believing what no one in his right mind would believe even though it was true.

NASA kept him busy during his waking hours programming the Mars lander and checking out its systems. After supper, he usually worked on his speech, with some suggestions NASA was passing along from his speechwriters. They had given him another speech earlier, but he couldn't use that one now. With what had happened, this one would have to be really inspiring.

Yet he still had his moments of solitude, the times when he felt, for the first time in his life, what it was like to be utterly alone. He couldn't actually be alone, he supposed, since God had to be somewhere in the vicinity, but there were times when it seemed that the emptiness of space had seeped into him.

###

Mars swelled until it filled the screen, and then his ship was falling around the planet. There was no way to avoid weightlessness now; the *Burroughs* had begun to decelerate after the halfway point of the journey, and its engine had finally shut down. Dan put on his spacesuit and floated through the tunnel that connected the crew's quarters with the module holding the base assembly. He wouldn't be setting up a Mars base, though, since NASA didn't want him fooling around down there for very long. He entered the last module, which held the lander.

He pressed his hand against the lander's door; it slid open. The lander had food,

a small lavatory, and equipment for experiments. There was even a Mars rover on board so that he could ride around on the surface. He wouldn't be doing much, though, except for shooting a bunch of stuff with the cameras and gathering soil samples. The important thing was to land, make his speech, mess around for a little while, catch some shut-eye, and then get back to the *Burroughs*.

He strapped himself into one of the chairs. The four empty seats made him feel as if the ghosts of the others were with him. NASA had allowed each of the astronauts to bring along a small personal possession to take down to the Martian surface, and Dan had his companions' choices with him in the lander. Ahmed had brought a Koran, Kiichi a vintage Louisville Slugger with Joe DiMaggio's signature engraved on it, Sergei a set of nested Russian dolls, and Ashana a pair of Nikes personally autographed by Michael Jordan. A lump rose in his throat.

The doors to the outside were opening; he tensed. The President had spoken to him just a couple of hours ago, telling him that everyone in the world would be waiting for his first transmission from the surface. In spite of the tragedy, Dan's determination to carry out the landing had inspired everybody in the country. Having come so far, humankind would not be discouraged by this setback; the Vice-President had shown the way. Construction of the next ship was moving along; it would probably be spaceworthy by spring, and a follow-up Mars mission would give an even bigger boost to Dan's candidacy. At this point, he would probably carry all the states, and even D.C., in the general election.

"Asteroids," the President had said. "Lotta resources there. Just get one of those things in Earth orbit, where we can go into, uh, a mining mode, and supply-side economics can work." It was nice for Dan to think that, when he finally became President, things might be moving along so well that he'd have plenty of time for golf, the way Eisenhower had.

The lander glided forward toward the new world below.

###

Mars filled his screen. Dan, pressed against his seat, braced himself. He had known what to expect; his training had included maneuvers with a model of the Mars rover in areas much like the Martian surface. Yet actually seeing it this close up still awed him. It looked, he thought, like the biggest sand trap in the universe.

His chair trembled under him as he landed. Dan waited, wanting to make sure everything was all right before he got up. Time to contact Earth, but in the excitement of actually being on Mars, he had forgotten what he was supposed to say.

He cleared his throat. "Guys," he said, "I'm down." That ought to do the job.

Over four minutes passed before he heard what sounded like cheers at the other end. Sallie was saying something, but he couldn't make out the words. By then, he was rummaging through the compartments of his spacesuit looking for the cards that held his speech.

"—all ecstatic," Sallie's voice said. "Congratulations, and God bless you—you

don't know how much—"

He sighed, realizing at last that he had forgotten the cards. He might have known that, during the most important moment of his life, he would have to ad lib.

###

Dan waited in the small airlock until the door slid open. Above him was the pinkish-red sky of an alien world. A rust-colored barren landscape stretched to the horizon, which, he noticed, seemed closer than it should be, then remembered that Mars was smaller than Earth. He felt a lot lighter, too, since Mars, being a smaller place, didn't have as much gravity.

He made his way down the ladder to the surface, then inhaled slowly. "Whoa," he said aloud, overcome with awe at the immensity of this accomplishment and sorrow that his dead comrades could not share the moment with him. "Jeez." He pressed his lips together, suddenly realizing that history would record man's first words on the surface of Mars as "Whoa" and "Jeez."

"Well, here I am," he said, knowing he would have to wing it. "I almost can't believe I'm here. Man, if anybody had told me when I was a kid that I'd go to Mars, I would have thought—" He paused. "Anyway, the thing is, I wish the others were here with me, because they're the ones who really deserved to make this trip. What I mean is, I'm really going to miss them, but I can tell you all I'm not ever going to forget them. It's why I'm here, because of them. In other words, I figured I had to come down and stand here for them." He remembered that he was supposed to plant the United Nations flag about now, and took the pole out from under his arm. "Now we'll go forward." The words he had planned to say at this point were something like that. "And someday, other people will come here and turn into Martians." Dan cleared his throat. "Guess I'll show you around a little now."

###

He scanned the landscape with a camera, then went back to the lander. By then, the President had given him his congratulations, and Marilyn had gotten on to talk to him after that. He was happy to hear his wife's voice, even though, what with having to wait a few minutes until she heard him and could reply, it wasn't actually possible to have what he would call a real conversation. This far from Earth, the signals had to work even harder to reach him.

The rover had been lowered from another side of the lander on a platform. Since about all he could do was take pictures and gather soil samples, NASA wanted him to drive around and take them in different places. They didn't want him to go too far or take any unnecessary risks, and maybe, now that he'd given a speech of sorts, he could let the images of the Martian surface speak for themselves.

He rode around, careful not to drive too fast since there were some nasty-looking rocks and rims of small craters nearby, until the orange sky grew darker. By the time he got back to the lander with his samples, the sky was nearly black and the sun a bright swirl on the horizon.

I actually got here, he thought, then remembered the others with a pang.

###

He slept well, then got up to say his farewells to the Red Planet—although Rusty Planet might be a better name for it. Another ride, some more pictures and samples, and he was ready to go. He hoped the NASA scientists weren't too unhappy with his answers to their questions about what unusual things he might have observed. Hell, *everything* seemed pretty unusual here, when he stopped to think about it.

He went inside, then strapped in. "Ready to go," he said. There were just a couple of buttons to push, and he had practiced a lot during the last days aboard the *Burroughs* to be sure he didn't make a mistake. He pressed one, waited for it to light up, then hit the next. For a few moments, he wondered why he couldn't feel the lander taking off, then realized that it wasn't moving.

"Uh, Mars to Houston," he said, then waited until he heard Sallie's voice respond. "I hate to say this, but I'm not going anywhere. Should I hit those whosits again, or what?"

Nearly ten minutes later, he heard Sallie's reply. Her first word was, "Shit."

###

No matter how many times he activated the controls, nothing happened. Mission Control had various theories about what might be wrong, none of which were doing him any good. Gradually it dawned on him that he might be stranded. Twenty-four hours after he reached that conclusion, Sallie confirmed it. They could not pinpoint the problem at that distance. They did not want to take any risks with the lander. He was reminded of which buttons to push in order to bring down the Mars base assembly.

It could have been worse, he told himself. There were enough provisions in the lander alone to last him more than a month, since his companions weren't there to share them. With the supplies the base assembly had, he could survive until a rescue mission arrived.

There would be such a mission. The President assured him of that, as did Sallie. Another ship would be on its way to him within a few months. The wonderful thing was that his mission, despite the tragedy, was in its own way a success, even if he wasn't in the best position to appreciate that fact. A man had made it to Mars and was now on its surface, and the fate of his fellow astronauts had only temporarily stemmed the rising tide of optimism and hope. Humankind would return to the Moon and reach out to the other planets. Dan, who had insisted on landing instead of turning back, would be remembered by future generations of space explorers.

How his present predicament might affect the elections was not discussed. The President had said something vague about getting him back there in time for the convention. Now that Dan was a true hero, it didn't look as though there would be any opposition in the Republican primaries anyway.

Dan tried to feel comforted by this, but the campaign, and everything else,

seemed awfully far away.

###

A distant object shaped like a shuttlecock dropped toward the cratered plain. Its engines fired; the object landed two kilometers away.

Dan sighed with relief at the sight of the base assembly. He had been worrying that something might go wrong at this point; one disadvantage of being a hero is that sometimes it required you to be dead. Now he would be safe, and could keep busy making observations, watching movies, working out, and in general keeping himself together until the rescue mission arrived. It was sort of depressing to know he'd miss Thanksgiving and Christmas, although fortunately there were some turkey dinners among the provisions, and Mission Control had promised to sing carols for him.

He climbed into the rover and started toward the barrels of the base assembly; he'd check it out first, then come back another time to load up whatever he might need from the lander. His staff had promised to transmit the text for the official announcement of his candidacy in a few days, and he supposed they would want him to make some speeches from Mars later, during the primaries. Maybe being on Mars, whatever the disadvantages, was better than having to trudge through New Hampshire.

###

He had to admit it; life in the somewhat more spacious quarters of the Mars base wasn't too bad in some ways. He was getting used to the desolate orange landscape and the way the sun set so suddenly. There were movies and records enough to keep him occupied, although he was beginning to see that there were limits to how many times he could watch some movies, even ones as great as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

But there were times when the solitude, even with all the messages NASA was relaying from Earth, really got to him. There wasn't a whole lot a guy could do all alone, except for stuff it was better not to think about too much. He had spoken to Marilyn and the kids a couple of times, but having to speak and then wait long minutes for the response made him realize how far he was from everything he knew.

Maybe things would pick up when he really got into his campaign. There was plenty he could do, even out here. His staff was already trying to set him up for a *Nightline* appearance, which would probably have to be taped so that the delay between Ted Koppel's questions and his answers could be deleted. His staff should be transmitting the text for the official announcement of his candidacy any day now.

Dan had finished struggling into his spacesuit and was about to put on his helmet when the com started beeping at him. Maybe his speechwriters had finally gotten their act together. He sat down and turned on the screen.

The President's face stared out at him. "Uh, hello, Mr. President," Dan said. "I was just about to take a drive over to the lander—there's some stuff I want to move

here."

"I don't know how to tell you this, Dan," the President said. "Something's gone, well, a bit awry. Might have known the Democrats would think of some devious—see, we're going to have to postpone your announcement for a while."

"But why?"

He waited a long time for the President's answer. "The Democrats—they're saying you have to be on Earth to make your announcement. Somebody found some loophole or other in the law, and they're arguing that you can't declare and run for President while you're on Mars. Got our guys working on it—think they can beat those bastards in court—but by the time they do, it may be too late to file and get you on primary ballots. Could try to get write-ins, but the rules are, uh, different in every state."

Dan tried to recall if there was something in the law the Democrats could use to pull a stunt like this. He couldn't think of anything, but then he hadn't been exactly the biggest brain in law school. Maybe the Democrats would drag out John Glenn, however old he was, to run this time. They'd probably use Ashana's family in the campaign, too; they had plenty of reason to be pissed off at the Administration.

"You said I could get back by the convention," Dan murmured. "I mean, aren't the delegates free to switch their votes if they want?"

The minutes passed. "Well, you're right on the money there, and no question they'd turn to you, but—see, NASA's got sort of a little problem with the new ship. Nothing for you to worry about, just some bitty technical thing they can definitely iron out, but they're certain they can have you back here next fall."

Dan was beginning to see more problems. The Democrats might use his predicament against the Republicans. They would say he wouldn't be stranded there if the Administration had thought more about real science and space exploration and less about politics and publicity stunts, if they hadn't been rushing to put him on another planet. He wouldn't be on the campaign trail to inspire people and to invoke the names of his comrades; he would be only a distant voice and grainy image from Mars. The whole business might turn into as big a bummer as the end of the Gulf War.

"What are we going to do?" Dan asked.

When the President replied, he said, "Well, there's a lotta sentiment here to make Marilyn our candidate."

That figured. The idea was so perfect that Dan was surprised he hadn't thought of it himself. The Democrats would look mean-spirited slinging mud at a hero's wife, one waiting and praying for her husband to return safely.

"All I can say," Dan said quietly, "is that she has my full support."

###

Dan finished loading the rover, climbed in and drove slowly toward the scattered

Tootsie Rolls of his base. He had not had to talk to Marilyn very long to convince her to run; in fact, he had expected her to object a lot more to the idea. She would make a pretty good president, though—maybe a better one than he would have been.

He had packed up the personal items of his comrades— Ashana's Nikes, Ahmed's Koran, Kiichi's bat, and Sergei's dolls—feeling that he wanted his dead friends' things with him. He had also brought his golf balls and his favorite wood. The club, which had a persimmon head, had cost him a pretty penny, but he liked a driver with a solid hardwood head.

An inspiration came to him. He stopped the rover, climbed down, then took out one of his balls and the wood. Stepping over a small crater, he set down the ball, then gripped his club. Getting in a smooth swing was going to be rough with his spacesuit on, but he thought he could manage it. Alan Shepard might be the first guy to tee off on the Moon, but Dan would be the first to do so on another planet.

He swung his club and knew the head's sweet spot had met the ball. The small white orb arched above the orange cratered landscape and soared toward the distant pink sky.

End