

VOICES FROM THE DUST

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4:30. 4:30 in the morning. 4:30 and fifteen Martian sec-onds...Petra Greenfeld picked up the wood-grained elec-tric clock and shook it. *Hurry up! Hurry up ... or else stop.* She set it down on the desk again, too hard in the low gravity, and rubbed her eyes. *To think I've been up all night, and there isn't even a man in my room. I really must be crazy.* She laughed, weakly. *How can I be crazy and have a sense of the absurd?*

But then why was she sitting here, if she wasn't crazy? Why had she been sitting here all night, like someone con-demned, waiting for the dawn? Why wasn't she asleep in her bed like any normal human being—? She swiveled her chair to look at the rumpled sleeping bag on the cot. Because when she slept the pull was stronger, it pried open her dreams and painted the walls of her mind with the red walls of the Valley, and led her, again and again, to an unknown destination. . . .

“Oh, *stop* it.” She shut her eyes, and turned back to the desk. She wasn't obsessed; she was just upset. Why shouldn't she be upset—that damned Mitradati! Her fist tightened on the graffiti-covered blotter. That egotistical tin god. So he was sending her back to “civilization” today, was he? So her poor, frail little mind needed a rest, did it? Just wait until she got back to Little Earth and made her complaint. They'd let her conduct her investigation without interference, they'd see that her judgments weren't irrational. And that narrow-minded apeman could go suck an egg...Better yet, why couldn't she take one of the buggies, and go to the place first? She'd find her proof, she knew where to look, exactly where—

She got up from her chair, shaking her head, and began to move restlessly around the small room. Think about some-thing else, anything else...*My God, am I really losing my mind? This isn't normal.* Maybe it would be best to get away from here, for a while; from Mitradati, from—the artifact. She hadn't been up to the pole in weeks, hadn't seen a movie, or had a decent dinner, or called Fred. And stuck here with this baker's half-dozen of impossible—No. She couldn't really blame them. Who had been more impossible than she had, these past two weeks?

She looked over at Elke's unused bed, under the curve where the ceiling became the outer wall. Elke had been sleeping with Sergei lately, and she suspected it was as much from uneasiness about her as it was from passion. At least Elke was sympathetic, and supportive...but Elke was a meteorologist, not a geologist, and what did she know? And Sergei, with his damned Russian obsession about

parapsy-chology; making the whole idea sound like something out of a Grade Z science fiction movie. She was glad he had Elke to distract him, before his endless prying curiosity made her do something she would regret.

She saw the cigarettes and lighter Elke had left on the stool by her cot. She picked up the pack mindlessly, took out a cigarette, lit it, inhaled—and, coughing disgustedly, ground it out with her slipper on the cold metal floor. *At least I haven't gone completely insane.* She went back to the desk, looked at the clock again. 4:43. Dawn...soon it would be dawn. But why was dawn so important? The hopper wouldn't be going to the north pole until afternoon, on their bi-weekly supply run; this time taking her along in disgrace at Mitradati's order. That was why she was upset, and angry, why she couldn't stop thinking about the artifact—

The artifact: she had seen it lying like a diamond in the rubbly detritus along a canyon wall, twelve days ago, as she and Mitradati had collected rock specimens. And the moment she had seen it, touched it, she had known, she had *known*—It appeared to be a lump of fused ore, unusual, but not extraordinary. Yet somehow she had sensed an unrightness about it, an unnaturalness. And when she had tested it and found an alloy that had never been known to form outside of a laboratory, she had dared to tell the others about her suspi-cion...about her belief: That this piece of metal could never have been produced by natural geologic processes, that it had been made by an intelligent, alien life-form. And furthermore, that its presence could be a key to an even greater discovery—proof that humanity was not alone.

The reaction had been immediate, and negative. Even she had realized—still realized—that the idea was incredible. Some of the others, Taro, Shailung, hadn't been totally unreason-able; suggesting that it might be a piece of space junk, something from their orbital lab. But Shiraz Mitradati had rejected the idea coldly, in spite of having no better explana-tion—calling it, and by implication her judgment, irrational. She had argued with him, pointing out that her past work with an archeological crew had given her a feel for geological samples that were something more...that even a conserva-tive estimate claimed observers from another star system would visit this one once in every million years; no time at all, in geologic terms.

She had gone on arguing with him, continuously, while her conviction grew that the most valuable discovery they would ever make on Mars must lie somewhere here in the Mariner Valley. And as her conviction grew that out in the thousands of square kilometers of this tremendous canyon system, she alone could find that proof
...

Petra wrapped the collar of her bathrobe tightly under her chin. Even though this small temporary base was buried under two meters of insulating soil, the determined Martian cold crept in, and it was always coldest just before the dawn. *And darkest.* Anger drove the chill out of her again as she remembered Mitradati's contemptuous sarcasm, the hostility lying so clearly below the surface of his

‘rational’ mind: “Simply because it’s 2001, Petra, that doesn’t mean an alien monolith is waiting for us.” The taunt still stung her...No: Haunted her. *Haunted*—She remembered the look on his face, as though he hadn’t expected to say the words himself. And she remembered the almost physical pain as the words burst into stars behind her eyes. In that instant certainty had crystalized out of the vague urges moving her forward, and she had *known* what she had to do. As she knew it now. . . .

Petra swore softly and crossed the room to her dresser, pulled open a drawer. The first time she had seen Shiraz Mitradati, among the scientists awaiting departure from L2 for the journey to Mars, she had been strongly attracted to him. But it had been purely a physical attraction, and abruptly short-circuited. Mitradati was an Iranian: although Iran had used its oil money to catch up with the 20th Century (before clean hydrogen fusion had made oil obsolete), she had discovered that social progress—at least as far as Mitradati was concerned—had not kept up with technological progress. He was a believer in Iran’s old regime, who would have been much happier in her presence, she suspected, if she’d been wearing a veil.

But once they reached Little Earth on Mars they had gone their separate ways, on separate research projects; up until three months ago, when she had joined this particular geological team, a team that Shiraz Mitradati was nominally in charge of. Neither Elke nor Shailung seemed to feel the same irritation with Mitradati that she did, and she had wondered whether it was all her own fault, her own outspokenness, her own opinionation...*Damn it! I’m teaching at Harvard because I happen to have something to say.* It took two to make an argument. Shiraz had refused a perfectly reasonable request to let her investigate her find more fully, and his growing irrational hostility had nothing to do with ‘reason’ or ‘logic’ It was no wonder her own conviction had hardened into an obsession; that even while she was awake the need to go on with her search filled her mind. He had no right to stop her; why should she let him stand in her way, she didn’t have to—

Petra blinked, shivering violently; found herself half-naked, in the act of getting dressed. She stood for a moment staring down at the bulky red sweater clutched between her hands in a death-grip, watched her hands begin to tremble. Then she pulled the sweater roughly on over her head, fastened her pants, and sat down to put on her worn sneakers. She could see the clock on the desk: almost 5:00. A quarter of an hour left until dawn; now was the time, before anyone else was awake. She couldn’t afford to have anyone stop her now—she stood at the mirror, folding her straight black hair into a knot at the back of her head, fastening it with a clip; moving methodically now, her face frozen into placidity. Dark eyes stared back at her from the mirror, her own eyes, screaming at her silently, *What are you doing to me?* She shook her head at the caged image, “*Oy, Gottenyu, Petra—*” She picked up her flashlight and left the room.

She walked silently down the dim hallway, knowing that the room partitions were paper thin. She slipped into the dark stairwell midway along it, switched on her

flashlight and went down the steps into the storage area. She needed a vehicle, her pressure suit, and—the other thing she had to find. She moved cautiously among piled crates and equipment, following a thin streamer of light through the dark room, and through the blackness that clotted her brain. This was the right thing, the only rational thing to do ... *then why am I so afraid?*

The room filled with light, an explosion against her senses. She cried out in surprise and protest, turning—

“Shiraz!” Squinting against the sudden brightness she pulled the figure into focus. She raised her hand with the flashlight to shield her eyes, half threatening. “What are you doing here?” An accusation.

“I might ask the same of you.” She thought there was a trace of sullenness in his accented Oxford English.

“I’m going to prove I’m right. I’m going out to find...to find—it.” She glanced down, confused, as the image slipped away from her. She looked up again, brandishing the heavy flashlight as he moved. “Don’t get in my way, Shiraz! I’ll kill you if I have to,” knowing, desperately, that she meant every word of it.

“I know you will. I’d do the same, to you, to anybody, now.” He moved away from the out-curve of the wall, coming toward her, his hands open and empty. “Petra, listen to me. I’m not here to stop you. I’ve come for the same reason you have.”

“Don’t try to humor me, Shiraz. It won’t work.”

“Humor you! For God’s sake! Do I look like I want to be here?” He was close enough now that she could see his eyes, see the fury and the desperation that mirrored her own. “I don’t want to be here! But I couldn’t help myself ... I couldn’t stop it. Could you—?” with something in his voice that she had never heard before.

“No.” She shook her head, her hand dropped to her side. “I couldn’t stop it, either...But all this time, you denied it! Why?”

“How could I admit to a thing like that? That I heard ‘voices’ whispering in my head—like some bloody lunatic. People would have thought I was mad!” She saw his fists tighten, and waited for the outburst. But he only said at last, wearily, “I’m sorry.”

She looked down, rubbing her hand across her mouth. “Yes, so am I. We should try not to make this any harder than it is.” She realized for the first time that he was already wearing his pressure suit. She turned away, picking a path through the boxes and equipment to the locker, to take out her own suit. She watched her tiny, crumpled image reflecting over and over as she pulled it on. “We’ll have to

hurry if we want to get out of here before anyone wakes up.” She listened to her mind, watching her body obey it unquestioningly—the way a stranger would, the way she watched her reflections move, echoes of her self.

“I know.” Shiraz tested his air tanks.

“We have explosives here, don’t we? Where are they? We’ll need them—”

“It’s taken care of. I’ve already put what we want in the back of the buggy.”

“Good.” She nodded, checking her own suit. “Do you—do you know why?”

“No. Do you?”

“No.” She looked away, down the long half-cylinder of the lower level, toward the air lock. “I don’t like being somebody’s golem.”

She walked slowly along the floor platform, awkward in her insulated suit, to the balloon-tired exploration vehicles parked side by side. “Which one?”

Shiraz followed. “The first one. That’s where I put the bomb.”

She opened the door and climbed in on the driver’s side; he got in on the other, without protest. She wondered whether he was too tense to drive; managed a brief sympathy for the extra strain his inability to accept this nightmarish loss of control must add to the tangle of emotions that already held them both. She leaned past the seat’s headrest, glanced into the back of the pressurized cab; saw the drab, unremarkable metal container waiting, and the red radiation trefoil on its side. “Oh, my God...” They had set off small, clean atomic blasts to create measurable seismic tremors in their analysis of the planet’s core. *But why do we need one now?* She turned back, fastening her safety harness. “Do you know how to detonate one of these? I’ve never—worked with one.” He shrugged, wiping away sweat. “I’ve watched it done.” She nodded. She checked the fuel gauge, not sure how far they were going: Full, as usual, a full one liter of water. She started the fusion power unit.

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They passed through the lock and up onto the flat, wind-scoured surface of the still-dark canyon floor. The canyon was more like a plain, more immense than any she had ever seen on Earth. Here, where the sub-canyons of Capri Chasm and Gangis Chasm intersected, the floor of the Mariner Valley was nearly two hundred kilometers wide; wide enough that the distant two-kilometer wall bounding this trisection of the floor seemed more like a line of distant mountains dancing at a desert’s edge. She turned almost due west, toward the mouth of Gangis Chasm, knowing as she had known for so long, with such aching certainty, that this was where her destiny lay.

“*Kismet*,” Shiraz said absently, not even looking at her.

“Kind of florid; isn’t it?” She managed a smile.

He managed laughter. “Perhaps there is a monolith waiting for us, after all.”

The headlight spilled out like bright fluid, highlighting the stone-studded ground. The dim brown of the undifferentiated surface still in darkness stretched to the far canyon wall, which became a gleaming band of gold as the sun rose behind them. Petra glanced at the side mirror; seeing the unnatural cylindrical hummock of their buried lab silhouetted with the low, conical hills that lay scattered like a case of hives over the flatness. She looked out again at the slowly brightening plain, and at Shiraz’s dark, tense profile at the corner of her sight. She had meditated often enough on the symbolism of his name, finding it more than fitting in her aggravation—Mitradatai, from Mithra, the mace-wielding Persian god of war, the paternalistic Protector of his People...Now suddenly she remembered another of Mithra’s aspects: god of the light that precedes the dawn. She let her mind probe the possibilities, searching for one that might be a symbol, of hope.

The jouncing vibration of their progress increased uncomfortably; she eased her foot on the accelerator. In Mars’ lighter gravity every bounce and swerve was accentuated, but the jarring that followed it was gentler than on Earth. She remembered her first painful ride, years before, in a dune buggy: the grotesque, frivolous Earthside hybrid that had become so indispensable to her work in the desert, and to the exploration of Mars...remembering the stark fantasy of the desert, and the tennis ball-sized bruises the seatbelt had left on her hip-bones. She felt suddenly, unbearably homesick.

Why me?...why us? Why were they doing this; why couldn’t they at least understand...*Because it doesn’t have to let us understand anything.* She tried to focus her resentment against the straitjacket bonds that held her free will prisoner. Even terror, even fear—anything to give her strength. But emotion dissipated the way the paper-thin film of frost sublimed as the ground warmed. It was useless, it was pointless.

The day opened onto the full rust-red brilliance of the endless Martian desert. The dusty sky was salmon pink now around the horizon, deepening rapidly to a black-red zenith. The cloud of fine dust lifting behind them became an auburn haze against the sunlight. She turned southward, slightly, to take them through the gap of flat desert pavement between a tremendous black-sand dunefield to her left, and the kilometers-long slope of slumped earth and talus that fanned from the canyon’s north rim on her right. Above the jumbled slope she could see the pit in the profile of the sheer canyon wall, where the rim of a shallow crater had fallen away with the collapsing cliff-face.

She could picture the canyon and the cratered plains that lay above it as they looked from the air. She had seen them coming here from the polar base, from the southeastward descending arc of the shuttle's trajectory from pole to equator. She pictured the chain of magnificent volcanoes that were the Tharsis Mountains lying beyond the far end of the Valley, four thousand kilometers to the west—those mountains that dwarfed any on Earth, as the great rift valley itself almost defied her attempts to comprehend its scale. She had been deeply moved by the wonders of this alien world, where geology existed on such a grand scale: loved its strangeness and its familiarity, with the breadth of emotion that belonged to all who loved the faces and forces of the natural world, and the depth of emotion that belonged to those who truly understand them. *And never more than now: Where am I going? Will I ever see them again?*

Or ever see Earth again... The limonite-stained cliffs were much closer on their left, now; the red, convoluted walls reminded her of the Near East, her journey to Petra, the City in the Rock—her namesake. She saw in her mind the ancient city, hidden in a cleft of red sandstone, its temples and dwellings built from and into the rock itself: a timeless thing, a part of the earth... And the sun-bleached mudbrick villages that had not changed in a thousand years, or two, or three; that lay drowsing on parched hillsides an hour's drive from some twenty-first century metropolis. An hour's drive, in an air-conditioned time machine... She had spent three years in Israel, as the geologist for a Harvard-sponsored archeological crew, and they had been in Tel Aviv during Israel's Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations, laughing, drinking, dancing, embracing and being embraced by joyful total strangers.

Yesterday and today... and tomorrow: She was here on Mars, now, as a part of this project that celebrated the turning of a new millennium. Enough honor for a lifetime... *But I'm not ready for it to end! Will there really be a tomorrow? And what kind will it be—none that I ever imagined...* She saw suddenly in her mind the smiling, freckled face of Fred Haswell, astronomer; who has been so much a part of this place, become so much more than just a friend to her, before his stay here had ended four months ago. Now, not knowing whether she would ever see him again, or touch him or feel a man... *Oh, Lord; this is no time to get horny!* She bit her lip.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Mitradati said.

She looked away instead of at him; at the menhirs of dark volcanic stone that crouched like confused giants along their path, casting long shadow-fingers across the black sand. There were red anti-shadows stretched in opposition, where the ground was free of sand in the wind's lee. "I ... I was watching my whole life pass before my eyes, I think." She felt herself begin to blush, and kept her face turned away.

"Isn't that what you're supposed to do before you die?" Softly.

"I guess so. But I hope not." Her gloved hands tightened on the wheel.

“There— isn’t much else to think about. Or to say. Is there?” She looked back at him, at last.

“No.” He shook his head, leaned back against the head-rest, his own hands closing over his elbows. “Turn up the heater, will you? I’m feeling rather cold.”

She turned up the heater. Up ahead, beyond the field of black sand, she could see another, smaller avalanche of dirt and rock spilling down from the opposite wall of the canyon. She looked back at him as his gaze left her. *Mind control makes strange bedfellows*. She sighed, studying his profile again, his close-cut, curly hair, the bushy, drooping mous-tache that had so fascinated her the first time she saw him. She smiled unhappily, looking away again, paying attention once more to their progress up the canyon. Her interests and his were similar; their heritage, reaching back over thousands of years, was similar. But their personalities were still poles apart. Or were they too much alike—?

“Have you ever been to see Persepolis?”

“No.” She shook her head, loosened her stiffening neck muscles. “I wish I’d had the chance to ...” She went on, determinedly, “I will see it, the next time I work in the Near East. I want to climb those magnificent stairs.”

“And see those columns standing like sentinels above the past, against a *blue* sky—” He stared out at the glaring red-black dome above them. Petra saw a handful of tiny clouds, very high up, their whiteness tinted faintly pink by the haze of dust. “Did you know that some of the beliefs in the Old Testament were influenced by the teachings of Zoroaster?”

She smiled, nodding. “The name of the Pharisees probably came from the word for ‘Persian.’”

“How far do you think we’re going?”

“I don’t know either.”

“If you get tired of driving, let me know, and I’ll change with you.”

“All right. Thanks.” She realized, with a selfish possessiveness, that she was grateful to have even the driving to help keep her mind occupied.

They reached the end of the gigantic slope of fallen cliff-face at last, and she angled their track across the canyon floor again, closing with the northern wall. She watched the wall come at them, inexorably, rising and rising, a rippling tidal wave of stone; she imagined herself drowning. Hours had passed already, and continued to pass. The sun rose to its zenith behind them and began to drop forward, getting into her eyes, as she followed their unchosen course along the foot of the canyon wall.

They had brought no food with them, but she was not hungry or thirsty, not even tired. Mitradati said little and she said less; her self-awareness ebbed. She felt herself slipping further into a kind of fatalistic boredom, her thoughts almost formless, meaningless.

She could not remember anything she had been thinking, when at last she was able to realize it. They were passing the point of a protruding arm of the red-stained cliff; she began to see another of the endless side canyons that crenelated the heights. But a sudden emotion, utterly unexpected, filled her as the new subcanyon emerged before them: Anticipation? Excitement? Recognition...Inexplicable knowledge that they were reaching the journey's end at last.

Shiraz stirred in his seat, leaning forward, peering out with what looked like eagerness. "We're almost there!"

"Yes—" And the alien emotion, or lack of emotion, within her became recognizable longing again. The shapeless fears that had dulled her desire to reach this goal fell away and were forgotten. This canyon was broader and deeper than most; she studied it for a way up into its network of dry channels and tumbled rock. The canyon became a sheer cleft about a kilometer above them, above an outcropping of resis-tant strata; but below that point the wall had been undercut, when water, and later windblown sand, had eaten away the weaker rock beneath it to form a natural shelter. Her eyes lingered on that hollow in the rock, a memory of the cliff-dwellings of the American Southwest moving across it like a cloud shadow. She could see nothing up there, yet...And yet she was certain now that something was there, something more important than anything a human being had ever discov-ered—

"Can't you get up there any faster?" Shiraz's voice was sharp with frustration.

She got them up there, as fast as she could, over terrain and past obstacles that she would never have dared if she had had any freedom to make a judgment. She stopped the buggy at last, twenty meters below the final ledge that was their destination. "I can't get us any closer than this. We'll have to climb from here."

"All right."

Shiraz picked his helmet up from the floor, and she picked up her own, catching it on the steering wheel in her haste. She settled it on, barely latching it in place in time before they were unsealing the doors and leaping down into the thick, talc-fine, cloying dust. The red-stained dust was darker and duller where it had been disturbed, making her think of midden soil. Making her realize that they were about to unearth a greater mystery, and gaze on the future/past...She saw Shiraz haul the drab, rectangular container that was the bomb out of the back seat, and felt dark doubt gnaw at the edges of her desire. "Do you think anyone will come after us? Maybe they're already searching—they must wonder where we've gone." She

realized for the first time that she had never switched on the radio, never even thought to try. An unfamiliar heaviness clogged her chest.

“Probably. They know something is wrong by now. But we must have a big lead on them, whatever they decide to do. It won’t make any difference.” Doubt clouded his own face again.

They struggled up the final slope, pushing and lifting and dragging the metal box and each other; until they stood finally on the wide ledge below the overhang of ancient basalt. Petra turned slowly, breathing hard, her heart pounding with exertion and excitement.

The compulsion that had drawn them here by an invisible thread intensified stunningly inside her; as though she had passed through a doorway, letting the psychic pull she had known only as a deep, formless vibration burst over her, reverberate through her. She was dimly aware of a human sound, a grunt of astonishment, had no idea whether it had come from Shiraz’s throat or her own. She was frozen in the moment, utterly absorbed in the awareness of what was happening to her, a thing that no human being had ever experienced before: the communication of an alien mind. The presence grew and grew inside her own mind, taking form, focusing. She strained toward it with all her will, straining to understand—

And suddenly she did understand, as the swollen presence clogged her brain and paralyzed her synapses: a cold, unfeeling radiation, without meaning, without—life. Like a machine ... a machine programmed to lie in wait for centuries; but not in order to share with humankind the secrets of an interstellar society. There was no intelligence here, there would be no answer, no revelation, just—

A pile of ruins. Across the plateau, a jumble of red native stone, a warren of broken circles and irregularities filled with rubble, reaching back and back into the russet shadows below the overhang. *A ruin.* A cypher, empty of meaning, long since empty of life. Still she did not *know*—and she realized that she would never know; never feel illumination break the heavy clouds of compulsion... The Unknown held her in bondage, and she meant less than nothing to it. The emotion that swelled in her, straining at her bonds, was not alien any longer—it was not even fear, but anger. Her eyes burned with fierce disappointment, and fiercer determination: She *would* know, she would find out! She moved forward, unexpectedly free to move, taking easy, unresisted bounds across the level surface. Shiraz called after her and she felt him follow. She reached the ruins ahead of him, found that they were even more immense than she had realized. The broken walls were twice her height, wearing deep skirts of dust, and they stretched away for hundreds of meters. She ran her gloved hands over the dust-filmed wall, along the line that age was etching between perfectly-matched precision-cut surfaces of stone. The ruining of this place had taken a long time. She was suddenly, totally certain that it was an ancient thing; that it had been waiting, waiting for millennia. But not for her ...

Shiraz stopped beside her, bent over to set the bomb container down against the wall. When he straightened again she saw the despair on his face. And she knew then, just as certainly, that this was all they would ever know, all that they had ever been meant to understand... They had not been chosen receivers of an alien secret to be shared with all of humanity; they were the chosen destroyers, because humanity had never been intended to know of this. "We're going to blow it up." Not a question. "Nothing will be left." And the mindless presence within her reveled at her understanding—at its own victory, and their defeat—without any comprehension of the significance of the act.

He nodded wordlessly, prying the lid loose on the box. He lifted out a small remote control unit and set it aside; the detonator, she supposed. She watched him begin to flick a switch, twist a knob, inside the box.

"Is the process very complicated?"

He shrugged, flicking another switch. "A bit. Not terribly."

"Is there any chance of making a mistake—?"

He looked up at her, bitterly. "Not intentionally." He looked down again, a stiff, resisted movement. "I have to concentrate. ..."

She turned to gaze out over the rim of the ledge, down the valley, seeing the sun washed canyon floor beyond like the ruddy golden fields of heaven. Searching for movement, fruitlessly.

"All right." He stood up finally, dust coating his knees. The detonator was in his hand. "Let's get out of here."

They began to walk back toward the sunlit rim of the ledge, toward the buggy waiting below, toward safety. And every step became slower, more leaden, more difficult... more impossible. "Shiraz?" Her panic leaped with the terror she heard in her own voice. She stood straining like an animal at the end of a leash.

"Petra ... I can't go any further. I can't—" She saw his empty hand reaching as his body jerked around to face her. Five meters beyond him lay the path down to the buggy, and escape.

But they would not be allowed to use it. "No witnesses?" she said softly, meeting his eyes.

"No..." He looked down at the detonator in his hand. She watched him try to throw it away, and fail.

She swallowed, wetting her dry throat. "Oh, God. I wonder if our medical

plan covers blowing yourself up while mind-controlled?’

“Allah! Can’t you do anything but make jokes—”

She laughed uncertainly. “I’ve either got to laugh or cry, and if I have to die I’d rather die laughing.”

He made a noise that was either amused or disgusted. “What are the rules of this game? I wonder if we’re allowed to lie down flat?”

“Try.” She fought her trembling body with one last, frantic calling-up of outrage and fear; felt her knees give way, dropping her painfully onto the rocks. But her spine was a steel rod and she knelt, paralyzed, watching Shiraz struggle to do the same. “It’s a good position for prayer, at least...”

Help me, God, help me—

She was sure it was a laugh, this time. “Where’s Earth; I’ve lost track of Mecca.”

“You can’t see it from here.” She twisted, trying for one more glimpse down the canyon. “If you had a last wish, what would it be?”

“That I was somewhere else.”

“Scared?” Her own voice broke.

“Shitless.” He raised his hands unsteadily, holding the detonator out like an offering, kneeling in this alien temple where they were about to become a human sacrifice. ... He murmured something in a language she didn’t understand. And he pressed the button.

She kept her eyes open, staring in agonized disbelief: As a blinding ball of orange light blotted out the silver dome, a cloud of smoke and rubble rose to blot out the fire, a fist of smoke and shock and sound swept toward them through a split-second’s eternity—struck her with sickening force, throw-ing her back and over the rim of the ledge like a rag toy.

* * * *

Awake, aware, she found herself lying dazed on the slope. Still alive. She felt her body with her mind: sprawling twisted on its side, head down, faceplate down in the red dust. Stones and pebbles still pelted her. She thought she heard, dimly, the *bang* of a stone on metal; tried to raise her head, gasped as pain like an electric shock stabbed at the base of her neck. But before her head dropped forward again she saw the buggy, barely three meters below her, and the still body wedged against it. ...

“Shiraz?” She lay face down again, putting all her strength into the one word. “Shiraz—?” No answer. Grimly she drew a leg in, pushed off; crawled and slid on her stomach down the slope, whimpering and cursing. She reached his side, saw his face through his helmet glass, saw blood on it. And his eyes shut, no response. She couldn’t tell whether his bulky, insulated suit was still pressurized, whether he was even still alive. But one leg lay crumpled beneath him, like a twisted branch, like nothing that belonged to a human being. She almost shut her eyes; didn’t, as she focused on the faintest whisper of whiteness in the air above it. A tiny, fragile cloud of condensing moisture ... the suit had torn. She fell back, bright fire exploding in her head as she struggled to release the catch on the equipment belt at her waist. She pulled it loose, forced it under his suited leg above the tear, not even aware that she was sobbing now. She drew it tight and jammed the catch, barely able to see her hands through golden fog, the rushing water of noise that drowned her senses. *The radio*. If she could only get to the radio. She tried to push herself up, to reach the door handle. But the one meter to the door handle might as well have been the distance to the sun. She collapsed helplessly across his legs, her strength gone.

But she knew, with ironic grief, before her senses left her too, that she was free to use it if she could. That her mind was free of the compulsion at last, that at least she would be free forever when she died...

* * * *

“Hello, Shiraz.” Petra entered the quiet, dim-lit room where Shiraz Mitradati lay, sat down in the chair at his bedside with exquisite care. “Dr. Leidu told me you felt like talking. I’m glad. So do I.” She drew the collar of her robe closer around the thick, white neck brace. “There’s not really anyone else who understands. ...”

“I know.” He smiled at her from the pillows, his face hollow and tired. “Thanks for coming. It’s good to see you—up and around already.”

“All it took was a little chicken soup. It works miracles. You should try it.” Her mouth twitched, still not quite ready for laughter. Her head hurt, as it had hurt for the past four days, relentlessly. “It will be good to see you up and around again, too.”

“Not for a bit, I’m afraid.”

She glanced down, uncomfortably.

“But I’d never be up again at all if you hadn’t stopped that leak in my suit. I want you to know how grateful I am for that.”

She looked up again, smiling, embarrassed. “I never be-lieved they’d ever find us, anyway; not in time. But they saw the dust cloud from the explosion. The thing

that almost killed us saved us, in the end.”

“But why didn’t it kill us in the first place? We had no right to survive; it was impossible, we should have been incinerated—”

“Didn’t they tell you?” She turned her head too quickly, felt the drug-dulled ache flare up, making her wince.

“Tell me what? ... I haven’t been in the mood for much conversation since I woke up.” His hand moved along the cold metal rail at the edge of the bed, tightened.

“That you made a mistake.” Her smile felt real, and warm, and right to her this time. “You never disengaged the fail-safe on the bomb; only the core explosive went off, there was no atomic blast. That’s the only reason we’re still in— still here to talk about it.”

“Well.” Faint humor brightened his eyes. “No one’s perfect, after all—not even me. What about the ruin?”

“Partly buried. Part of the overhang came down on it. A team is there excavating already.”

“Has anyone else had any—trouble, working with it?”

“No. No more trouble.” She settled back in the plastic chair, trying to find the position that hurt the least.

“Can anyone explain what happened to us? How some-alien *thing* we never even saw could turn us into time bombs?” His voice grew more agitated.

“They found the thing that did it.” She felt him look at her abruptly. “Just a machine.” *Just a thing*. “Nothing more than a twisted-up mess of ceramic and metal. There was still a little ‘life’ in it; enough to pick up on instruments once our people started searching the rubble for it...” She saw him tense. “But the blast broke its back.” Her hands felt her neck brace unconsciously. “I knew that, I felt it, even before we were rescued—that we were finally free.”

“How—how does it work?”

She tried to shrug. “They have no idea...yet.” She wondered suddenly what would happen to humanity if they ever found out. “But I told them everything I remembered. Enright figures the thing must have been left there on purpose, like—like a mousetrap, for any sentient creatures that might pose a threat. He says it must set up a feedback in the mind; in a way, you yourself provide your own mind control. What appeals to you draws you, and helps tune out your willpower.”

“But why? Why would someone leave something like that in a ruin? And—why *us*? Why were we the victims?” He pushed himself up from the pillows, hurling his anger against an unreachable persecutor, an unrightable wrong.

“We found the bait, the piece of cheese—that artifact.” It seemed to her as though it had happened a lifetime ago. She wondered how many other treacherous clues were scattered through the Mariner Valley; harmlessly, now. “Maybe we were the most curious; I don’t know.” Lines tightened between her eyes. “Just lucky, I guess.” Trying to keep it light, she heard her own unhealed fear betray her. “But why the ruin was left boobytrapped. ... Do you remember what it—what it felt like, that *thing*,” her own voice attacked it, “when it got into our minds?”

He nodded, tight-lipped. “Ruthless. Arrogant. Megalomaniacal ... as though the ones who set it up would have enjoyed making us grovel, watching us destroy ourselves.”

She wrapped the tie of her bathrobe around her fingers. “Yes...Ironic, isn’t it, that after all its arrogance we were too dumb to destroy ourselves. But a—feeling like that belongs to an invading army, a military outpost; assuming they were anything like us...”

“*Are* anything like us.”

“Were.” She moved her head cautiously from side to side. “Those ruins have been there for three millennia, at least. Maybe they were boobytrapped because the Martian Foreign Legion was being forced to retreat. The way the place was built of native stone—and it extends underground, too; as if it was designed to stay hidden. Maybe they expected a visit from the Other Side.”

“Or from us. They wouldn’t have bothered to be so subtle with an active aggressor, I’m sure.”

“Maybe not. No one else ever found it, or came back to reclaim it, anyway.”

His head fell back against the pillow, he stared at the ceiling. “I was just thinking. ...”

“What?”

“About ‘flying saucers’...and Ezekiel’s ‘wheels in the air.’ Good Lord. What kept them from tampering with hu-manity, I wonder?”

“Maybe they did.”

He grimaced.

She smiled faintly. “And a lousy mess they made of it, if so.”

“But that’s all meaningless, now, anyway. The only real proof we have of other life in our system—or in the galaxy—is here on Mars: these ruins, left by some ruthless monsters who have been dead for thousands of years. A relic, a curiosity, a problem for the academics.” His hands bunched the blankets. “It isn’t worth it! It isn’t worth dying for. It isn’t even worth...having survived.” He looked down along the bed at his hidden body. “They told you, about my—about my leg?”

She followed his pointing hand unwillingly, saw the terrible lack of symmetry that she had tried not to see beneath the blankets. His broken leg had been injured too badly; without the sophisticated medical care available on Earth, they had not been able to save it. Dizzy, she said evenly, “Yes, they told me. I’m very sorry.” She met his gaze until he looked away. “But it *was* worth it, Shiraz.” A part of her own mind shouted that she lied, that the price he had paid—they both had paid—in suffering and terror was too high. For the sake of his sanity and her own, she let her voice drown it out: “We *won*, even by default. We’re alive, we have their artifacts to study, we’ll learn their secrets!” *What secrets, from an abandoned outpost? Cooking pots and dirty underwear?* “We are going to learn what it was all about, after all. Our monolith, our alien treasure...God, I can’t wait to get at it! Proof that other intelligent beings exist in the universe. It really is a treasure of knowledge—” finding to her surprise that she was genuinely beginning to feel the enthusiasm she forced into her voice. She saw a spark of belief begin to catch in the cold emptiness of Shiraz’s eyes; reached out to him, stretching forward. “Oh!” She sank back, raised her hands to her head, dazzled by pain-stars. “Such a headache I never had in my life; like a dozen hangovers piled on top of each other.” She lowered her hands to the neck brace, swallowing her pain, because his trace of a smile had disappeared. “And how do you like my horse collar? I feel like I should be pulling a plow.”

“At least it’s something you’ll be able to get rid of. I expect you’ll be able to get back to your work quite soon. I wish I could be as lucky. That’s the only real regret I have—that the rest of my stay here will be wasted. I won’t be able to finish my work ...”

“*Dreck*,” she said sharply. “I don’t see why not. It’s not your mind that you’ve lost.” He looked back at her, frown-ing. She put out her hand, carefully this time, and touched his arm. “You’ll get around perfectly well with a cane in one-third gee. And with a prosthesis, back on Earth, you’ll be better than new. Wait and see...you’ll want to get back to work. This is *our* discovery, yours and mine. You won’t be able to stay away—not from the discovery of a lifetime. I know you; and believe me, you’re much too vain for that, Shiraz.”

“Am I?” The frown eased into an uncertain bemusement; he lay back. “I know, thousands of other people have had to live with it. I suppose I shall go on living too; like it or not...Maybe a missing leg will give me a certain exotic mystery,

like an eye patch; and make me more attractive to the ladies—”

She saw suddenly that he had lied when he said that he had only one regret. “Especially when you tell them that story about being kidnapped by aliens. Aliens who haven’t been here for thousands of years.”

“Maybe it might even make me more attractive to you.” He held her eyes, with an expression she couldn’t read.

She blinked, silent with surprise.

“Maybe when we’re both back on Earth, when you come to see Persepolis, you’d go to dinner with me?”

“Why do we need to put it off for years?” She let a smile form slowly, hesitantly; was glad, when she saw his smile answer it at last. “Afterwards, we could go up to my place, sip a little wine, watch our own private Late Show. ... I could even check out 2007 at the tape library—”

For a moment, they stopped smiling.

AFTERWORD- VOICES FROM THE DUST

This is one of only three short stories that I’ve written. Most of my “short” works have been either novelettes or novellas. A lot has been written about the novella, in particular, being a length uniquely suited to science fiction, and one in which science fiction writers work far more often than mainstream writers. The reason seems to be that science fiction writers are dealing with societies and backgrounds that are new and strange to the average reader, and these elements of the story have to be developed along with the basic plot and character—a complication that mainstream writers generally don’t have to deal with. This makes it very difficult to set up every point that needs to be established in under 7500 words, the official length of a short story. Occasionally I’ve been able to do it, when the basic story is straightforward enough; this was one of the results. (I calculate that it is just about exactly 7500 words, in fact.)

The setting of this story is an actual area of Mars, which I have tried to describe as realistically as possible, using information gained from the Mariner missions. There is also an element of the past in its creation, however. I have a background in anthropology, and specifically in archeology, and I found the original title, Voices from the Dust, which inspired this story on an archeology textbook I saw while browsing in a used book store. I’d originally wanted to make the protagonist, Petra Greenfeld, an archeologist, but couldn’t justify sending her to Mars (as opposed to, say, Barsoom), so I had to be content with making her a

geologist with archeological experience.