

# The Three Unknowns

by Severna Park

Act I

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Althea Mendez, the esteemed Chair of the Department of Archaeology at Oxford University, turned over on the acceleration couch, silenced the alarm clock with the back of her hand, and, for the two-hundredth time in so many days, examined the view from her cabin's porthole. Today, finally, there was Mars, which meant the *J. Nessepah* had turned and was starting to decelerate. She wiped away the steam of her breath and leaned even closer to the window. Were they near enough to see the roads? That big intersection of rusty scratchings near the equator was probably the science station at Alba Fossae in the Amazonis Planitia. From there a long scrape headed northwest across ruddy valleys and cream-colored plateaus to Candor Chasma and the archaeological dig. Althea tapped the window with a fingernail. By tomorrow she should be able to see Hoshi Noh's tiny, troubling excavation.

She put on her clothes and walked down the chilly corridor past the cabins where the rest of the passengers were sleeping or keeping to themselves. Space travel, she reflected again, was only slightly better than flying on an airplane. Sure, she had a cabin to herself, but the cabin was, at best, a box, and thirty weeks in a box was still thirty weeks in a box. She'd been lucky to get a box of her own with the forty-odd people crammed on board the *J. Nessepah*. Most of the passengers blended into an uninteresting crowd that shuffled through mealtimes and the ship's cold hallways trailed by the tang of ozone and unwashed socks, and Althea didn't consider herself a social person, but it was impossible not to get to know a few of her neighbors. There were three Fellows in Sociological Studies from Oxford stuffed into the room next to her. The only reason they stood out was because at breakfast on the first day of the trip, one of them found out Althea was going to Candor Chasma and lit up—just for a second.

"I dated Hoshi Noh back at Oxford," he'd said. Given the situation on Mars, this was something that might earn him points, as Hoshi was on the very verge of huge fame.

Althea had smiled and introduced herself, and he'd put his fork down, eyes wide.

"Professor Althea Mendez? You were Hoshi's teacher."

She smiled, showing her teeth. "She mentioned me? Good things, I hope?"

The Fellow slurped his coffee nervously and didn't answer. For Althea, the conversation set the tone for the entire trip. It made her not mind her stay in the box so much, secure in the knowledge that Hoshi hadn't called her to Mars for advice, or to show off her progress. Instead it was a challenge; one final,

decisive round in an academic grudge match that had started years ago. And just because the playing field had changed to some other planet didn't mean that Althea intended to lose the upper hand. Just thinking about it lifted her spirits and warmed her in the chilly, recycled air. Althea turned left at the end of the passenger corridor and headed for the mess.

Captain Rowanoake was there, drinking coffee. His body, which had endured years of weightless travel and then centrifugally induced gravities, had compensated for these abuses by dwindling early into an old man's frame. It still housed a middle-aged mind and lingering hormonal compulsions. Rowanoake threw his shoulders back and sat up straight when Althea walked into the small dining area. She couldn't imagine why he was here. His quarters were vast compared to everyone else's. Surely he had coffee of his own.

"Good morning, Professor Mendez," he said.

"Good morning, Captain." She got herself a teabag from the bin and hot water from the udder-like contraption designed for spacecraft, and sat down, not too close to him, not too far.

"We've come about," said Rowanoake. "You should have a terrific view of Mars from your cabin."

"Terrific," said Althea.

"And we've had a communication from your student, Dr. Hoshi Noh."

Althea didn't look up from her teabag. "My former student."

"I was on the bridge when her message came in," he said. "She seems very excited that you're coming." The captain sipped his coffee and eyed her over the rim of the plastic cup. She waited for him to tell her what a stunning young woman Hoshi was, and how impressive her reputation. Everyone did. Instead he said, "I've heard there's been an interesting new find at the Candor site."

Althea made the corner of her mouth scornful. The alleged finds at the site were supposed to be secret, but there weren't that many people on Mars, and rumors probably made the rounds there like gossip in any small town. "You don't look like a man who believes everything he hears."

He gave her a conspiratorial smile. "What do you know about the human remains?"

Althea picked up the hot cup. The real secret, and more genuine, news was from Neznaiyu, the Earth-like planet orbiting Alpha Centauri. Robot drones sent out half a century ago were sending back pictures of ruins. Buildings. Foundations. She'd seen the footage just before she'd left on this wild-goose chase. Real alien ruins. Not this bullshit Hoshi had come up with. She stood and gave Rowanoake what she hoped was an insider's wink. "Don't be too disappointed when it turns out to be nothing."

Rowanoake hadn't taken his eyes off her. "I hope you'll keep me informed, Professor Mendez."

"Sure," she said and went back to her cabin to see what Hoshi had to say.

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Hoshi looked older on the video clip, and Althea froze the image, just to have a nice long look at what a year in exile on Mars could do to the blindly ambitious. Wind and cold had left Hoshi with wrinkles.

She'd cut her long, silky black hair into a practical bob which only accented her pointy chin, and she'd apparently dispensed with makeup. Trying to look seasoned, Althea thought, or intrepid, or like a person who'd survived in the face of great odds, or something like that. Poor Hoshi, thought Althea without a bit of sympathy. She tapped the *play* button and let the clip run.

*I'm glad you could make it, Althea. I know it's a sacrifice for you to come all the way out here. I appreciate it ... considering.*

Hoshi looked away for a moment, and Althea grinned at the screen. What theater. What a humble role this was compared to those dress-up days at Oxford, back when Hoshi was a pretty little thing in a new blue suit and four-inch heels, defending her dissertation and not-so-secret ambitions in Althea's gloomy, wood-paneled office. Hoshi'd had her hair and nails done that day, mostly to show her sponsoring professor, Elliot Fontaine, how fabulous she'd look as the next Chair of Archaeology. Elliot, full of cancer, had dragged himself out of the hospital and down to Althea's office, nurse and oxygen tank in tow. He was supposed to listen to the dissertation, make a decision about who would succeed him, and fade quietly away, but things were never so straightforward in the battles of academia. His Chair should have been a lock for Althea. She had seniority, experience, and publications in spades. But in four years at Oxford, Hoshi had managed to fortify herself with allies on the faculty, like Elliot, and to Althea's horror, her name began to surface in discussions about who might succeed Elliot when his lymphomas finally killed him. Althea began doing everything she could think of to get Hoshi out of the way. She challenged Hoshi's dissertation—her sources, even the date of her presentation. Outside of Oxford, it wasn't hard to find others who agreed that Hoshi's ideas were too speculative and her sources suspect, but none of that seemed to matter. It only mattered that Elliot thought Hoshi was the most brilliant thing ever to get off a plane in Britain, and he had plans for her.

*I just want to make sure the air is clear between us. I took this project so I could prove myself to you and the rest of the academic community. I won't ask you for your blessing until you've seen the site in person, but I think you'll agree that it's more than anyone could have hoped for.*

Althea laughed out loud. Just as the fight over Elliot's successor was about to become loud and embarrassing, the archaeological site at Candor was discovered by robots excavating for minerals. Reports of alien walls made of alien bricks had barely been confirmed when Althea arranged for a grant to be issued by the Oxford School of Antiquities and volunteered Hoshi to lead the expedition. Elliot couldn't object. Even he had to admit that Hoshi's field experience was limited. It was the chance of a lifetime for any decent archaeologist, and who but Hoshi deserved it more? Who was more promising? Elliot was furious, sicker even in his fury, but in no shape to go to the mat with Althea, and Hoshi could hardly refuse her own exile. She got her Doctorate the day Elliot was buried and got on a ship to Mars as Althea moved her things into Elliot's old office. Althea sipped her tea. Clear the air with "Dr. Noh"? It was a James Bondian name, with about as much academic respectability. Mars was just where Hoshi belonged, especially if the dig turned up the odd ray gun.

*Here's some footage you haven't seen before ... we've made a lot of progress.*

The image on the screen changed to the pinkish landscape around the dig. Actually, Althea had seen it before. Hoshi'd been sending pictures to Oxford—to the Office of the Chair of Archaeology—on a regular basis ever since she'd arrived. First it was just sand, sand, and more red sand spilling in at the edges of a great big hole in the ground, and then finally the edge of a wall, then another and another until the hole in the ground embraced some kind of structure. From what Althea'd seen so far, whoever had built the thing could barely lay one alien brick on top of another, but it was hard not to be surprised, excited, and awed at the evidence of life somewhere other than Earth, and the fact that Hoshi was out there gamely shoveling away to expose it. Well, that thrill had worn off after a while—particularly when that ridiculous rumor surfaced about human remains. Althea sipped. Hoshi'd had too much time to make

plans. Plotting was part of her nature, but this time she wasn't going to take Althea by surprise.

*I look forward to seeing you again, Althea,* said Hoshi. *I'll send someone to meet you at the Western entrance of the ground station.* She smiled with terribly chapped lips and turned the recorder off.

Althea smiled back at the dark screen. Those who had the power to exile also had the power to appropriate whatever the exile managed to find. The hand that gives can also take away.

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## Act II

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The *J. Nessepah* landed without fanfare and without serving dinner. It was midnight on Mars, and except for a pair of disinterested security guards, the ground station was deserted. The lights were dimmed to save power, and the heat had been turned way down. Althea could see her breath as she passed the station's food court, which was closed for the night. Captain Rowanoake fell in beside her, and the two of them followed the rest of the *Nessepah*'s passengers past the famous First McDonald's on Mars, its neighbor, a dingy looking Thai buffet, and then the darkened entrance of The Fourth World, which served protein supplements in twelve flavors.

Althea's stomach growled. She shouldered her backpack, stumbling in the light gravity. The station was built with low ceilings and hard angles. It made her feel claustrophobic, and she was afraid if she pushed too hard against the floor she'd soar up and hit her head on the ceiling. The gravity on the *J. Nessepah* had been reduced over the last few weeks to help the passengers make the adjustment. It gave Althea indigestion while everyone else amused themselves with Galilean experiments with falling objects. She eyed Rowanoake loping along beside her, as graceful as a dancer.

"How're you getting to the dig site?" asked the Captain in a tone that said *I could drive you.*

"They're sending someone to pick me up." Althea stopped at an intersection of low, unlit hallways. There were signs, but they were impossible to see. She knew if she appeared the least bit indecisive, Rowanoake would start giving her directions and the two of them would end up traveling to the Candor dig site together. The prospect of hours of his company inspired her to make a quick left toward what she hoped was the Western Exit of the station, where Hoshi had told her to go. Rowanoake jogged lightly along beside her.

"I had a question about the other site," he said.

There were no other archaeological sites on Mars. She concentrated on her feet as they slipped on dark tiles.

"I don't mean the Martian site," he said. "I'm talking about the one on Neznaiyu."

She tripped. He caught her arm. She pulled away, spun with the weight of her pack, almost fell, and steadied herself against the freezing concrete wall. She scowled at him to hide her surprise, but he could probably see in this stupid darkness the same way he could keep his balance in this stupid gravity.

"There's no site on Neznaiyu," Althea lied.

"No?" said Rowanoake.

How the hell could he know? There were always rumors about what a probe had found here or there, but the ruins on Neznaiyu were a secret. The government had created a special office for security and oversight of the entire planet. The only reason she and her department had been shown the footage was so they could give their august opinions. Then they'd been sworn to secrecy and warned in no uncertain terms against any slips. She shook her head with all the cynical authority she could muster. "Pretty flowers. Big trees. Waterfalls. It's a biologist's paradise, but that's all."

He gave her a look she couldn't quite interpret in the dimness. "I ran the ship that dropped off the robot probes," he said in a low voice. "I took them to Pluto's apogee and kissed them goodbye. They don't send you that far without a full briefing." He raised an eyebrow. "I still have a level-four clearance. I've seen the footage. There's a village in ruins. I think they must have shown you that. Did they show you the obelisk?"

"Obelisk?"

"It's in the middle of everything, like the town square. It's a big white column."

All she'd been allowed to see were the collapsed walls, the pretty flowers, the trees. Obviously her clearance didn't match his. She didn't say anything.

"The column has writing on it," said Rowanoake.

Her heart made a huge and painful thud. "Writing?"

"Next time we see each other, maybe I'll show you my pictures." He gave her an unmistakable smirk, turned and loped back down the corridor. When he was gone, she turned the other way and blundered down the freezing hallway, searching for the Western Exit.

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When she finally found it, a sand tractor was waiting outside in a pressurized vehicle shelter. A side portal opened, and she climbed into the cab. It was warm and smelled of coffee, and there was a young man at the wheel.

"I'm Jeff," said the young man. The skin around his nose and mouth was pocked with acne from wearing a rebreather mask all day long. The cold had chapped his cheeks and forehead. "I'm Hoshi's assistant." He took her pack and swung it onto the floor behind the seats. "I've heard so much about you," he said as though he'd rehearsed the line, "it's very exciting to have you here." He opened a cabinet under the dashboard that was actually a tiny fridge. "We've got coffee and protein supplements."

Althea gave him her nicest smile. He gave her a paper bag sealed with a sticker marked The Fourth World.

The drive to Candor Chasma took ten hours. She tried to stay awake for all of it, but Jeff was politely uncommunicative, and the red dust in the tractor's headlights wasn't the part of Mars she'd come to see. When she stared into the starlit dark outside the window, all she could think about was Neznaiyu. She knew she should be grilling Jeff about the details of Hoshi's dig, but instead Althea found herself replaying what she could remember of the footage from Neznaiyu. She and her colleagues at Oxford had oohed and ahed at the pretty flowers in a night-blooming forest and a sandy brook under a sky the color of turquoise. Althea peered into the Martian night as the tractor shuddered in a sudden wind. The stars vanished behind swirls of black dust. Sand and gravel rattled against the windows. Jeff downshifted with a reassuring smile, lit green under his nose and chin by the glow of the dashboard. She touched the cold window with her fingertips. On Neznaiyu the weather was lovely. On Neznaiyu, the aliens had left behind their written words.

When she was finished with Hoshi, she would find a way to go and read them.

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### Act III

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Althea woke up as the sun rose into the pink sky over Candor Chasma.

The archaeological camp looked like a trailer park in the driest parts of Arizona, but with much weirder scenery. Candor's cliffs were an asymmetric crumble of disintegrating crimson geology looming over ten white plastic housing units, each the size and general shape of a boxcar. They stood in a row on one side of the dirt road, linked to each other by pressurized tunnels that looked like vacuum-cleaner hoses on a giant scale. Unlike the concrete fortress of the ground station, the buildings at Candor seemed like they could blow away at any time.

"There's the dig," said Jeff, pointing to the other side of the road.

Opposite the housing units, yards of nylon string stretched in meter-square grid lines across the geometric ditches that had replaced Hoshi's great big hole in the ground. Underneath clouds of wafting red dust, Althea caught a glimpse of the walls.

Right-angle corners and openings like doorways. Distinct rooms. Hallways? Jeff turned the tractor, and Althea twisted to watch as the site fell behind them, so alien and still so familiar, like any other dig. Shovels and trowels were arranged in a practical kind of still-life. Rust-colored dirt spilled out of dull metal buckets, waiting to be sifted through the screens stacked in the lee of one wall. The whole thing was familiar from Hoshi's videos, but now, framed by the dusty alien scenery, the dig was bigger, more

amazing than she'd let herself imagine. It was a site on *Mars*. Althea felt a jealous pang in her chest. There had been a moment when she could have been the one to come here, but she had put it aside for practical reasons. Now the dig was Hoshi's, and there was nothing left for her to do but perform an act of dirty work.

"How big is the excavation?" she said to Jeff.

"Four hundred square meters."

"Why don't you cover it? Couldn't you pressurize the site?"

"We tried that in the beginning," said Jeff, "but changing the O<sub>2</sub>-CO<sub>2</sub> ratio created too much condensation. The water was destroying the mortar between the stones."

That meant they dug in pressure suits. How much could you actually see in a helmet as you dug with a toothbrush and a dental pick?

Jeff drove the tractor into a corrugated plastic shelter beside the third boxcar. A door slid shut behind them, cutting off the weak daylight and turning the inside of the cab gloomy. The walls of the shelter bulged with the change in air pressure. Jeff tapped a button on the dash and gave Althea a funny smile. "You did bring a heavy coat?"

She nodded. "But it's still packed."

"It's okay," said Jeff. "Here's mine." He reached behind his own seat and hauled out a coat so bulky Althea had mistaken it for a blanket. He handed it to her and waved at the window. Althea turned and looked. It was Hoshi, squinting in at them, her face pinched and thin. Jeff tapped the release for the tractor door, and the rush of freezing air almost sucked the breath right out of Althea's lungs.

Hoshi smiled at Althea without any visible warmth. "Welcome to Mars, Professor Mendez."

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Inside, shelving units stacked with hard-copy site catalogues covered almost every inch of wall. Desks were arranged in a fortress-like island in the middle of the narrow room, and a big vinyl noteboard hung at one end. Light from outside illuminated black marker scrawls showing sectional views of the dig. The whole place was so like any other excavation, it gave Althea a familiar itch behind her back teeth where she could always taste the drifting grit.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" said Hoshi.

Althea shook her head and tried not to look as cold as she felt, despite Jeff's coat. "Do you know what people are saying about this place?"

"Of course I know."

"What you've supposedly found out here makes this project look like a science fiction adventure."

Hoshi went over to one of the desks, unlocked a drawer and took out a small white cardboard box. "Here," she said, and gave it to Althea.

Althea opened it. The box was filled with tissue paper. She picked at it until she saw what was inside. She felt her mouth twitch into a smirk. She looked up at Hoshi, not bothering to hide her disbelief. "A bone?"

Hoshi nodded with incredible gravity.

"This is a human bone. It's part of a hand." Althea felt her jealousy and any spark of sympathy for Hoshi vanish. She let out a bark of a laugh. "Did you bring it in your luggage?"

"I've had it analyzed by three different labs. You can look at the reports. They all confirm it's human, about four thousand years old."

Althea poked at the finger bone. She'd seen plenty of them, catalogued dozens. It certainly wasn't anything else. It was a pitted little finger bone, smudged here and there with floury reddish dust. "Dug it up with your own fair hands, did you? Right here on good old Mars?"

"Actually, Jeff found it."

"But not the rest of the skeleton. I suppose a lot can happen to the only human on Mars in four thousand years."

"Geologically, yes."

She looked *so* serious. She must have practiced in a mirror for *hours*. Althea tried to decide if this moment was worth thirty weeks in a box. "I suppose you had witnesses when you dug it up?"

"It's on video. We tape everything. Like you taught me."

Althea settled herself on the edge of the desk. "If you're so sure about this, you don't need me. You should've announced it. You'd be famous by now."

Hoshi came over to the desk. "I know you think this is a fake. I would never have asked you to travel forty-six million miles for a fake." She looked away, like she had on the video. "I need your support on this, Althea."

"My *support*?" The urge to have a good sarcastic laugh faded into a strange flutter in Althea's chest. "My support?"

"Obviously I can't announce this to the press or the academic journals on my own. They'd come to you, and you'd give them your opinion of me."

"Please," said Althea. "If Elliot was alive, even *he'd* have a hard time swallowing this."

Hoshi crossed her arms, not in an obstinate way, but like she was half-frozen. "I know why you came."

"Do you?"

"You're here to make sure I never set foot in Oxford again."

Althea didn't say anything. Neither of them did. For a while the room was silent except for the low wail of the Martian wind at the corners of the boxcar.

"You must be tired," said Hoshi. "I'll show you where you'll be staying."



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Hoshi put her in the camp's VIP quarters, walking her through freezing plastic tunnels to get to it. They passed three of the other boxcars, each marked, respectively: *Crew Quarters*; *Mess*; *Supplies*. Hoshi pushed the door open to the one marked VIP and ushered her past a rack of dusty white pressure suits into the relative warmth of the room. The VIP boxcar was divided lengthwise by a stiff nylon curtain. Hoshi pulled it to one side to show Althea three men sleeping on cots.

"Who're they?" whispered Althea.

"They're from CNN. They got in just before you did."

Althea bristled, thinking of Captain Rowanoake. "You told *them* about that thing?"

Hoshi shook her head. "They're on a year-long assignment. Haven't you seen the series they're doing? *Roger Dodd Explores the Red Planet*. They come here every three months." She let the curtain fall back into place and motioned Althea to the other side, which was stacked with empty equipment cases at one end. At the other was a single cot, a desk and a chair, and a tiny kitchenette with a mirror over the sink. A thick plastic window looked out over the dig site where red sand rushed to fill in the ditches dug by the sleepers in the other boxcars. Behind the curtain, someone snored deeply.

Hoshi pattered with the coffee pot in the kitchenette. Althea sat on the cot and watched her measure what must have been incredibly precious coffee into the filter basket. From the back, it was obvious what Mars had taken out of her. She'd lost weight. She was stooped in her shoulders, like she didn't quite have what it took to withstand either the physical or emotional environment. The image of her digging for such an unlikely find was laughable, but it occurred to Althea that Hoshi had been punished for her pride and excesses: punished, best of all, by her own hand. And if that was the case, and since she was here anyway, maybe there was an excuse for Althea to humor her.

"I suppose I could look at your videos," said Althea. "And your notes. But it would have to be worth my while."

Hoshi turned and looked her right in the eye. "I think it will be, Professor Mendez."

She left and closed the door softly behind her.

Althea's luggage was by the bed, but she was afraid if she changed into pajamas she would sleep until nightfall. There was too much to do. She crawled under the covers still in her clothes, shut her eyes against the early Martian morning, and found a glimpse of Neznaiyu still floating behind her eyelids.

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Act IV

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When she woke up, it was Martian noon. The snoring had stopped. Someone had turned on the coffee, and now there was a red plastic file case lying on the desk. She pushed off the covers and a motion sensor in the ceiling flashed. Warm air began to blow in from the corners of the room, rustling the separating curtain.

Althea listened. No snoring. "Anybody over there?"

No answer. She peeked around one end of the dense fabric. The cots were made and vacant. She went to the window. Outside, across the road that cut between the boxcars and the dig site, the site crew was hard at work for the CNN cameras and probably had been for hours. Althea looked for Hoshi among the dusty white pressure suits and helmets. The shortest one. That had to be her.

Althea eyed the last of the pressure suits and its helmet, hanging alone on the rack by the door. Let Hoshi have her moment with the cameras. All that would be over soon enough. Althea poured herself a cup of coffee instead and sat down at the desk.

Inside the red plastic file case was a neatly bound book of field notes and a DVD. The little knot of tissue paper with the finger bone was there, too, ivory-colored and audacious. Althea nudged it onto the desk. Hoshi's nerve was simply amazing. She pulled her laptop out of her bag, slid the DVD into it, and blew on her coffee as the site catalogue menu came up on the screen. One of the video entries was marked with an asterisk. Althea picked that one and opened the book of field notes while it loaded.

In the book, the site's overall layout was marked with a plastic tab, and she turned to that first. The ruins consisted of a large rectangular foundation surrounded on three sides by a total of nine smaller square units, each connected by openings in the wall to the larger space. If the openings were doorways, none of them were intact enough to guess how tall the occupants had been. On Earth, this would probably have been living quarters with storage areas. On Earth, the first things Althea would have looked for were the town dump and the cemetery. The wealth of civilizations eventually ended up in one place or the other. But what about the wealth of Mars?

She glanced at the laptop and tapped the icon to start the video. It started silently with an overhead view of the site, overlaid digitally with a grid. The grid corresponded to the real grid outside, meticulously laid out with nylon string, dividing the site into square meter segments. The graphic on her laptop zoomed in onto grid 34L, which was a corner of the largest structure. The image froze, then cut to the jiggling view from a camera on someone's helmet. Whoever they were, they were down on their knees in the floury red dirt, breathing noisily as they dug into 34L with a toothbrush and a dental pick.

Hoshi's voice came from somewhere to the digger's left. Althea turned up the sound.

"Be careful with the mortar in the wall," she said, muffled by her own rebreather. "I want to see if it's the same in the entire structure."

Jeff's voice answered. "Some of it might have been built at different times." He tapped the wall in front of him—a jumble of stone pasted together with orange mortar, shockingly low-tech. "See how crumbly this is? It's more weathered than the other two."

Althea cringed as a rivulet of orange mortar trickled down to mingle with the rest of the Martian dirt, its virgin, testable elements lost forever. She pushed her fingers into her hair. They should have sealed everything with inert polymers. *Hadn't* they taken samples? She checked the date. This was almost a

year ago.

"Hey," said Jeff. "Does this look organic to you?"

Now Hoshi leaned into the camera's view as it focused on the red ground, unevenly scored by the sharp point of the dental pick, powdered by the toothbrush bristles. Something showed just under the surface. It looked like a pinkish-white twig.

Jeff put the toothbrush to one side and picked up a one-inch-wide camel-hair paintbrush. He whisked at the thing until half of it was exposed. His breathing was deafening, like a diver underwater.

"Uh ...," he said.

Hoshi took a sharp breath. Her gloved fingers bumped the camera. "This thing running?" Her voice was suddenly high and nervous.

"Yeah, yeah."

Althea frowned, but it didn't sound rehearsed. He sounded genuinely surprised. She sounded genuinely ... what? Scared? Hoshi leaned closer to the hole and lay down so she could reach in over the edge. She produced her own brush and a small flashlight. The two of them brushed furiously, silently. Althea adjusted the sound and realized they were both holding their breath. The bone came free of the red dirt and lay there in the flashlight beam.

"Dammit. *Dammit!*" whispered Hoshi.

"Jeezus," said Jeff. "That's a *bone*."

Hoshi panted into her microphone. "Get a bag. Get a marker."

Jeff's camera lurched up and away as he bolted across the gridded site. Anything else that Hoshi had to say was lost to the Martian winds.

Althea shut off her laptop and stared out the window. There were only two things to consider.

One: It was a planted fake. Hoshi'd had access to anthropological museum collections throughout her doctoral studies. If a finger bone was missing from a storage drawer, who was going to notice right away? No one checked anything but the rarest mummies on a regular basis, and some museums—the one in Serbia where Althea had been for six months came to mind—had laughable security.

Two: It was real. And no matter what her suspicious gut told her about Hoshi, only a complete idiot would plant something fake and potentially compromise the most exciting archaeological find of the millennium. Hoshi was many things, but she was no idiot.

Althea picked up the bone and rolled it between her fingertips. She took a deep breath and held it for a long moment, to see how it felt to *believe*.

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Act V

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Hours later she looked up from Hoshi's notes to see the CNN crew mingling with the site crew. The camera was gone and the CNN reporter—the only one in a full-facial-view helmet—stood in a conversational pose with Hoshi, making casual gestures at the dig behind them. It looked like any official interactions were over. Althea glanced over her shoulder at the lone pressure suit hanging by the door. She knew how to put one on—she'd been drilled along with the rest of the passengers on the *J. Nessepah*—and she wanted to see 34L before dark, reporters or not. She pulled the pressure suit over her clothes, checked the air in the rebreather reservoir and her hair in the mirror. She put the helmet on, checked the lugs twice, and shuffled out, down the cold corridors, through Hoshi's office, out the airlock, and into the tractor shed.

The tractor was gone and the doors were wide open to the cutting wind. Even the suit couldn't keep it out. The bright, distant disk of the sun glared down, giving the sand a dull, bloody look, but there was no heat in it. Technically it was summer in this hemisphere, and Candor Chasma wasn't far from the equator, but it was still in the minus 60's Fahrenheit. Althea stumbled through the sand, feeling cheated by the gravity that was still heavy enough to rob her of any possible weightless grace. The cold made her fingers numb and her joints ache. The rebreather felt like it was frozen to her face. Its air tasted of someone else's mouth and smelled of their breath. Hoshi waved to her from across the road and Althea found herself wishing for the azure sky on Neznaiyu. She fumbled with the suit's controls, and the heat came on abruptly, a relief at first, then overwhelming. Hoshi's voice came through the speaker in her helmet.

"Roger, that's Professor Althea Mendez. I studied under her at Oxford."

"Althea Mendez?" Roger Dodd spun around as Althea blundered toward them, sweating now, up to her ankles in ruddy dust. He trotted over, grabbed her hand, and shook it energetically—even so, it was a thick, uncommunicative process in a pressure suit—and gave her a sly, full-facial-view grin brimming with hidden knowledge.

*Oh God*, thought Althea. *Hoshi told him about the bone.*

But instead he said, "I'll bet *you've* seen the footage from Neznaiyu."

Althea braced herself to be evasive, but then, everyone on Mars seemed to know more about Neznaiyu than she did. "What about it?"

Roger lowered his voice, as though this would make a difference on an open radio channel. "I have what you might call an exclusive," he said. "They found a *column* sort of thing, like an obelisk in the middle of a *town* sort of thing."

Althea gave Hoshi a sidewise glance. Hoshi just blinked inside her helmet. Did *everyone* know? "Oh. That."

"The International Science Foundation's sending a research team to Neznaiyu in three months," said Roger. "Mostly biologists, but they've put a call out for archaeological applicants." He raised an eyebrow at Althea.

Althea laughed, but she felt her heart speed up. "Wouldn't they have to freeze you for twenty-five years?"

Last I heard they were still putting rats in cryosleep—not people."

"You're way behind!" said Roger. "Didn't you see my report? They've been done with the rats for months. I even let them put me under for a couple of weeks. A little chilly to begin with, but it was fine once I lost consciousness." He winked at Hoshi. "It was supposed to be my vacation time, but I convinced the network execs to call it *research*." Hoshi laughed, but Roger gave Althea another sly grin. "Would you rather be here, or on an exotic planet with pretty scenery? *I'd* go." He winked at her and bounded off to join the rest of his crew.

Althea angled her head at Hoshi. "Does he know anything about . . .?" She tapped one finger with the other to indicate *the bone*.

"No," said Hoshi. "Did you get a chance to look through the notes?"

"Show me 34L."

"It's this way."

Hoshi led her along one side of the excavation. Every trench was sheeted in thin plastic, neatly gridded with nylon cord. On Earth the trenches would have been bridged by wooden planks. Here there were lightweight aluminum catwalks that looked more like ladders, light enough to quiver in the wind. Hoshi stepped onto one, surefooted and confident. Althea hesitated and shuffled after her. The catwalks had no railings and were coated with red dust. They felt slippery and about as stable as a tightrope. Althea could see herself falling into a meter-deep hole. She tottered after Hoshi, fists clenched, jaw tight, trying not to windmill for balance. She was sweating even more by the time she stepped off the other end.

"You haven't found any machinery?" Althea panted.

"We haven't even found a spoon," said Hoshi. "It's like this place was stripped." She pointed down to the bottom of the next trench. "That's 34L."

The plastic drapery in 34L had been removed, revealing more sloppy piles of stone pasted together with mortar. Walls from two other grids joined there to create a corner. To the left, 33L had a door-like opening. To the right, the wall in 35L meandered in crooked clumps until it reached the 40's.

Althea twisted as well as she could to find the reporters. "Can anyone hear us?"

Hoshi checked something on the side of her helmet. "No."

"Then tell me what you think this was."

Hoshi let her breath out through her teeth. "An outpost? A place where they sent exiles? A prison? Maybe the people who built this weren't even native. They certainly weren't expert masons. Maybe they were sent here, or trapped here, or just dropped off as punishment, and this was the best they could do to survive. Like Robinson Crusoe on Mars."

She smiled, or at least her eyes smiled over the apparatus of the rebreather.

"And what about the bone?"

"It was in the corner like a piece of trash."

Althea huddled on the edge of the catwalk. "It's definitely human."

"Definitely."

There was simply nothing in the lab reports that could be faked about the bone's age or composition or DNA. Four different labs agreed. Althea shaded her eyes at the pinkish horizon. Hoshi was nothing if not thorough. "Why isn't there a midden? Didn't these people have trash? And what about the rest of the body? It's not like there're scavengers to drag off the remains." Wind rushed past them, scattering sand. "Have you found *anything* else?"

"Nothing. We've done subsurface scans in a three-hundred-kilometer radius. It's like all this just dropped out of the sky."

Althea straightened up carefully. "How long are the reporters staying?"

"They leave tonight."

"I'll need a place I can have to myself for the next few weeks. Maybe longer."

Inside the helmet, Hoshi's expression was hard to read. To Althea, she seemed relieved.

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That evening, Althea sent a message back to her assistant at Oxford, Murphy Noyes, locked tight with passwords that only she and Murphy knew. She included the DNA information supplied by the Martian labs and instructed him to track the regional origins of the code. She suggested that he look into any robberies from museums in the areas where the DNA might prove to be from. She emphasized that he include small, unguarded collections.

Althea leaned back in her chair, alone in the chilly boxcar. She blew on her hands and watched the screen as her instructions shot homeward. There was no shortage of work while she was waiting for Murphy. She toggled to her to-do list, titled in Latin—*facere*—a habit left over from her undergrad days. She already had a dozen jobs for Hoshi; widen the survey, broaden the parameters for finding a midden. At the bottom she added, *dig deeper*.

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Five weeks later, the trenches were two meters deep, and all Althea could see from the window in her boxcar were the tops of the diggers' heads when they stood up. At one and half meters they'd come to the lowest point of the foundations. At two, they were in virgin Martian soil. Another week and they would be chipping ice cubes out of the meager Martian aquifer. Every bucket of dirt was examined with a fine-toothed comb, but there was nothing new.

Althea stood by the window, watching the afternoon crew. Roger Dodd was back early, in spite of the fact that there was nothing to report. There he was, posing on the eastern side of the dig, silhouetted against the crimson horizon, making grand gestures for the camera.

Althea hugged herself in the chilly room. This was the dullest dig she'd ever been on. Even the reply from Murphy was no help. The DNA was of western European origin, most likely from Normandy. No, there didn't seem to be any evidence of pilfered human remains in any of the museums in the area. No, he'd

heard no reports of missing bones from any major or minor collection.

His message had been brisk and to the point—so perfunctory that Althea knew Murphy had a pretty good idea of what was going on at Candor Chasma. She could imagine Murphy laughing at her. She could imagine the entire department laughing as they watched Roger Dodd reporting live from the Red Planet.

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## Act VI

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It would have been a mistake to try to avoid him, so when Hoshi invited her for a private dinner with Roger that evening, Althea didn't refuse.

Roger served himself two razor-thin slices of steak-colored protein and a few meager spoonfuls of instant potatoes. There were fresh frozen peas and even a cheesecake for desert. This was a gourmet experience for Mars, but Roger only picked at his food.

Hoshi shook a finger at him. "You're insulting our table. Eat, eat." She shoveled peas onto his plate. He smiled, but he didn't look like he was going to touch them.

"We're shipping out tomorrow," he said. "The network swore they'd have hamburgers and fries waiting for me on the ship. I'm saving room." He poked the peas with his fork and cocked his head at Althea. "Well?"

Althea put a piece of protein into her mouth without looking at it. It tasted fine, but on the plate it had the texture of soggy bread. "Well what?" she said, distracted momentarily by the thought of hamburgers.

"Well," said Roger with exaggerated patience. "What about the *bone*?"

Althea just managed to swallow without choking. "The what?"

Roger rolled his eyes. "The finger bone." He jerked a thumb at the dig site. "It's why you came here, right?"

Althea glared at Hoshi.

"Roger found out from one of the labs," said Hoshi. "I told him not to say anything until you'd had time to study it."

Roger spread his hands in a placating gesture. "Everyone knows you found something in the ruins. There's all *kinds* of speculation. Debris from a UFO? An underground city? Live Martians? I've heard all sorts of things, Professor Mendez. It's about time to spill the beans." He gave her a big TV grin.

"No," said Althea flatly.

Hoshi leaned forward and lowered her voice. "The secrecy is hurting us. The longer we wait to release the information, the more trouble I'll have getting an extension on the OSA grant." She meant the Oxford School of Antiquities, which Althea had convinced to pay for Hoshi's banishment.

Althea opened her mouth in amazement. "You haven't told them about this?"

"Althea, I was waiting for you."

The expression in her eyes was distinct this time. It was self-doubt.

Althea looked down and found her hands clenching the arms of her chair. If Hoshi had gone boldly forth and announced the bone as a genuine find—like she might have when Elliot was alive—the archaeological community would have laughed her off the pages of every professional magazine. The academics at Oxford alone would have been merciless. But if Althea was the one to make the announcement, her reputation would protect her. She was rock-solid, conservative, respectable, without any self-indulgent flashes of fame.

Althea looked up at Hoshi again. The only change was the exhaustion in her face. If there was a game going on here, Hoshi was too worn down to play anymore. For a second, Althea felt a profound gratitude toward her former student, her understanding of the academic hierarchy and her willingness to submit to it for the greater advancement of the field. Althea felt her own cheeks flush. She'd won. The bone was real. It was hers.

She put her hands in her lap and turned to Roger. "I'll discuss the bone with you, but I want to see what you plan to broadcast, and I want full editorial purview. Understand?"

"Whatever you say, Professor Mendez." He stood up to leave. "I'll tell my boys we'll be staying a few more days."

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Roger and his crew stayed in someone else's boxcar that night. Althea watched their lights go out as she sat at her own window with a cup of tea, listening to the windblown sand scratch against the side of her boxcar. Every word she said to Roger tomorrow would be historic. It surprised her, how much doing the interview scared her, since history was her profession, but it was a comfort to know that the same little finger bone affected even gutsy souls, like Hoshi. She stirred her tea and wondered if Hoshi'd ever actually felt this kind of trepidation. Althea hadn't, not since her own dissertation twenty years ago.

She'd done her post-graduate work at Princeton, where her sponsoring professor, Canton Ramsey, was younger than Elliot, with more to prove. Rumors about him said that he stole his candidates' research, cultivated favorites, then dumped them. It didn't pay to be *too* original because no matter how supportive he *acted*, Canton was, bottom line, a thief. Althea remembered a defining conversation with a bitter post-doc in the back of a coffee shop six months before her dissertation was due. How did she *think* Ramsey got to be chair of such a prestigious institution? Honest research? Original papers? The post-doc let out a skeptical laugh and hunched over his coffee. That wasn't the way the real academic world worked. Not at all.

And so, by the time Althea was ready to present her dissertation, it was a masterpiece of sand-bagging—not like Hoshi, who went all out, without any fear of plagiarizing profs. If Hoshi treated



her dissertation like opening a bottle of champagne, Althea's was plain tap water. Her moderate conclusions shed only a newish light on research already picked over by many others. Her paper lacked invention, but it was also rock-solid and worthy of the degree. In the end, it would have looked peculiar if her work hadn't produced a PhD. In the end, it was one of the reasons she thought Elliot had hired her.

Now, on Mars, she sat shivering at her desk despite the hot air blowing down from the ceiling, trying to imagine her department and every student she'd ever taught watching CNN as she held up Hoshi's un-conservative, barely documented, utterly inventive finger bone, knowing exactly what she had to lose.

The next afternoon, Roger sat down with Althea, the bone, her laptop, and, against her better judgment, a camera.

He looked at the bone carefully but didn't touch it. "How old is it?"

The camera was about as big as Althea's two fists, silent as it recorded their conversation, but its presence in the room was enormous. "Between three and four thousand years." Her mouth was dry. The ends of her fingers were cold, and her feet were freezing. "Its DNA originates in the British Isles."

Roger took a palm reference out of his pocket—it was stamped with a blue CNN logo—tapped the screen and studied the results. "Neolithic? That would more or less coincide with the construction of Stonehenge."

She put her cold fingers between her knees. "Mr. Dodd, I'm not here to entertain any stupid speculations. I'm here to tell you what this is, where we found it, and what it seems—*seems*—to indicate. But I'm *not* going to talk about Chariots of the Gods or any other idiocy. Am I making myself clear?"

Roger, who had been televised interviewing far bitchier authorities, just nodded. He leaned over the bone. "Can I touch it?"

"Carefully."

He picked it up between his thumb and forefinger and turned so the camera could have a good look at it.

"Do you know if this is from a man or a woman?"

"We don't. There's not enough of a skeleton to tell. You need a hip, or a jaw, or at least part of a leg." In his hands, the finger bone was tiny, and for the first time, she wondered if it could have belonged to a child. Roger turned the bone gently but Althea tensed. Kidnapped Neolithic children on Mars, probably chopped into little pieces and eaten by Martians in lost cities. She could hear it now.

Roger put the bone back on the desk and turned to her with warm, undemanding brown eyes. There was nothing in his face that resembled the predatory questions of her doctoral inquisitors. He was anything but threatening. His expression simply said *Explain this to me*.

She turned to her laptop and brought up the site map. "Let's start here."

He let her talk, never interrupting except to clarify some point. He never led her with the kind of moronic questions she considered typical of the press and never once speculated about abducted Neolithic children. She showed him the minimum—where the bone had been found, when, how, and by whom. She talked about its veracity but the impossibility of using one fragment to date an entire site. "It could be that these foundations are three to four thousand years old," she said, "but without native organic material to use for carbon dating, there's no way to place these ruins in a time line with our own history."

"So they could be much older than the bone itself," said Roger.

"Much older," said Althea. "We just have no way to know."

"And no other ruins have been found on Mars?"

"Not yet. But it's a big planet, and we're constantly expanding our survey."

"So there's reason to believe that civilization existed elsewhere on the planet, not just in this small enclave."

"It's unlikely that this is the only place where there are signs of an organized community. Mars has water, and on Earth at least, where there's water there's life."

He nodded with enthusiasm, and she instantly regretted what she'd just said, even if it was true. Next he'd be asking her about the Martians. Instead he smiled and leaned back in his chair. "That's a good place to end it, Professor Mendez, unless there's something you want to add."

She shook her head. "It's more than enough."

He retrieved the camera, and she held out her hand for the disk. "I want to see that before it goes anywhere."

He glanced at her computer. "The camera runs on an industry standard platform. I'll have to format it so you can run it."

She wasn't sure she believed that. "I don't want it to leave the camp." She didn't want him to have a copy, but to say so sounded even more paranoid.

"It won't." He stood up and stretched. "You were great. You have a good voice for broadcast, and I think you'll come across as knowledgeable but not *scary* knowledgeable, know what I mean?" He yawned. "Ever thought about consulting for a news program? You could make a few bucks."

She shook her head.

He put the disk in his pocket. "I'll send someone back with it. Mark anything you don't want aired and give it to me tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay."

The door thumped shut behind him, and the room was finally quiet. Althea let her breath out and slumped in the chair.

Maybe she would erase everything.

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Roger sent the disk back an hour later with a luckless intern. He handed the disk to Althea without saying a word, but Althea caught him by the arm.

"Did Roger copy this thing?"

"I don't know, ma'am." The intern cringed. "I really don't. But the original can't run on your system, so he probably did."

"Get out of here."

"Yes, ma'am." The young man bolted for the door.

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The interview had seemed to take hours, but the screen counter timed it at just under ten minutes. She ran it twice, making mental notes on what absolutely *had* to be removed—that part about other cities on Mars, for instance, and *that* part—where Roger looked so doubtful as he eyed the finger bone for the first time. It might just be a trick of the light, but if she could see it, so could a hundred million CNN viewers. So could everyone at Oxford.

She worked on it all night, cutting here, inserting there, making notes for Roger on parts of the interview she thought needed to be reshot. She closed her eyes for a minute, and when she opened them, it was daylight and Hoshi was standing over her, shaking her shoulder. She was dressed in a dusty pressure suit, her rebreather hanging by its straps.

"Wake up, Althea," she said. "We've found something."

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## Act VII

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This time the find was in 23A, just southeast of 34L. Jeff was already in the hole, squeezed into the meter-square space, two meters deep and then some. The camera housing on his helmet only obscured whatever he'd discovered. All Althea could see was how the dirt under his boots was slushy with ice.

Jeff uncurled himself with a groan and stood stiffly. "I can't feel my feet."

"Come out," said Hoshi. "Let me. Or ...?" She looked at Althea with a strange expression. "Would you? Like to do the honors?"

Althea could see the corner of something down there. It was white, stained reddish by the mud, straight, like the edge of something. Maybe a jawbone. She helped Jeff out of the hole and climbed down. The dental pick was lying at the corner of the hole, and she started scraping with it, gently. Icy slush oozed under her boots as she picked out the entire edge of the object. It wasn't a bone. It was something

manufactured, ruler-straight with square corners. It was coated in something like a thin plastic, but that hadn't kept it from getting soggy. Liquid water was seeping into it as she released it from the ice, making it soggy, like paper.

"We have to seal it as soon as we get it out." Her heart was pounding. She would have felt like she was dreaming except that her feet were so cold. "Is somebody taping this?"

"I am," said Hoshi.

Althea made an undercut with the pick. She could almost get her fingers around it. The thing was maybe fifteen centimeters long and the thickness of her little finger. She smoothed red mud away from the white edge—there were distinct marks on it. She thought of the distant obelisk on Neznaiyu and almost laughed. Who needed to spend twenty-five years sleeping on a spaceship? She jiggled the edge of the object. It was loose enough to pull.

"I'm going to remove it now," said Althea. "Hoshi, are you sure the camera's on?"

"Absolutely."

Althea pulled. Her gloves slipped. She got a better grip on it and eased it from the mud. Even as she did, she realized she was holding something familiar, out of place and out of context. Even as she pulled it out of the Martian mud she understood that there should have been more people to witness this event. Her mind made the connections with slow precision as she pulled the book out of the mud.

It was a hardcover, a children's book, and the title was just legible through a half-frozen slick of red mud. *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*.

Althea stood up in the hole, laid the book on the top edge, and climbed out. Both Jeff and Hoshi squatted silently on the other side, faces half hidden inside their helmets.

Althea looked around the dig site. The three of them were the only ones outside. The tractor, which was usually parked by Hoshi's boxcar, was nowhere in sight.

"Where is everyone?" demanded Althea.

"They went to Alba Fossae," said Hoshi. "I told them they could have the weekend off."

"Alba?" Hours away. No witnesses. This was a private hoax. "Where's Roger?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"They all left together," said Jeff.

"With the disk with the interview on it, right?" panted Althea. "How many more fakes did you plant around here?" She waved her arms at the rest of the site. "Is *any* of this real?"

"The site's real." Hoshi picked up the book and wiped the cover. "Obviously this isn't."

Althea wondered for the first time if the two of them were lovers. That would explain Jeff's complicity in Hoshi's single-minded revenges, but not Roger's. Was she sleeping with all of them? Had she convinced them that Althea was so evil that she needed to be lied to by *everyone*? Althea looked down into the hole again, trying to see the consequences of this tape, of Roger's facetious interview, without allowing herself to feel anything.

"What do you want, Hoshi?" Althea said finally.

"I want you out of my way."

"How far out of your way?"

Hoshi aimed a thumb at the Martian sky. "I'd say about twenty-five light-years."

"Neznaiyu?" The wind came and kicked dust over her suit. Grit rushed past her faceplate. "I'll go back to Oxford. You'll never hear from me again."

Hoshi shook her head. "We can't be in the same time zone, so to speak. The minute you get home, the School of Antiquities'll start asking for details. I know you too well."

"You're afraid I'll tell everyone the truth about all this bullshit."

Hoshi shook her head. "You'll embarrass yourself trying. You'll have wild accusations and no proof. On the other hand . . ." She tapped the camera. Even in the framing shadow of the helmet and rebreather, her eyes were sharp, vindictive. "You look like you'd do anything to advance your career."

"I don't need to do *anything* to advance *my* career!"

"I know," said Hoshi blandly. "You did it all for me."

Althea lunged to her feet, but Jeff stepped between them.

"Apply for the Neznaiyu team," said Jeff. "It'd be something real."

"Then you should go," she snapped, and bit back the rest of what she wanted to say.

"Go inside," said Hoshi.

"And do what?" said Althea. "Pack my things?"

"That," said Hoshi, "and call Oxford. Tell them you're going to Neznaiyu with the Academy of Sciences team and you're recommending me as Chair in your absence."

Althea snorted. "What if the Academy isn't interested in me?"

"Oh, they are," said Hoshi. "I've already told them to expect your call."

How long had she been *planning* this? Althea turned, too quickly in the damned low gravity, and nearly twisted her ankle. She limped back to her boxcar quarters and stripped off her suit. The mirror over the sink showed her so tight across the mouth that her lips were barely visible. She walked around the room twice and then sat down at the desk. She felt like getting into bed and pulling the covers over her head until this nightmare was over.

Instead she turned on her laptop and accessed the communications node at Alba Fossae. She pulled up a blank email and slowly, angrily, addressed it to the Department of Antiquities at Oxford.

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Someone was shaking her, saying *wake up, wake up*. Twenty-five years in cold sleep made her feel twice as old. She opened her eyes to see Doctor Don Salvia, the mission medic, wide awake, aiming a medical scanner at her. "Can you move?"

She bent her elbows and her knees. Everything hurt, and her feet felt just exactly like they'd been asleep for a quarter of a century. She groaned and made herself sit up.

"Are you feeling dizzy or nauseous?" said Salvia. "Are you in any pain?"

She shook her head and looked around. The rest of the sleep units were open and empty. Everyone else was probably already awake and hard at work. She'd met the rest of the crew briefly before they'd all lapsed into unconsciousness—fifty-seven bright young things who were just too, too happy to be sent into oblivion. She'd felt their irritating enthusiasm even in her coldest, deepest sleep.

Salvia gave her a water bottle with a pink drinking tube. She took it with blunt, clumsy hands. He was her age, anyway, and that was a relief. "Have we landed?"

"Not for another six weeks." Salvia turned off the scanner, got up, and offered her a hand. "Everybody's got gravity rehab, and then there's final logistics and landing prep."

She stood unsteadily. Gravity rehab didn't sound so hard, but Althea couldn't imagine how she was supposed to participate in final logistics and landing prep. She could go over the footage the robots had taken of the archaeological site again—there were only thirty hours of it, after all—but there wasn't much else to do. Despite digital enhancements and extreme close-ups, it was impossible to make out the lettering on the obelisk. The site was still a mystery, too, so overgrown that all she could see were the tops of irregular stone walls. The robots had been instructed to observe, not to dig, so the place would be exactly the same when she got there. She tottered a little, and Salvia caught her arm.

"Come on," he said. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee." He gave her a surprisingly boyish grin, obviously putting all the charm he had into it. "Or if you prefer, I could prescribe a wake-up shot."

It took her a minute to realize he was talking about booze. "Listen, Dr. Salvia ..."

"Don," he said. "Everyone calls me Dr. Don."

"Then listen, Dr. Don," she said. "I'm not in the habit of—of—" She waved vaguely at the empty cold-sleep units and abruptly knew she didn't have the energy to fight this engineered fate. Not yet anyway. She rubbed her eyes. "What the hell."

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Over the next six weeks, Althea discovered a number of things.

First, gravity rehab was hard. Not for anyone else. Just her. The bright young things were disgustingly fit

and stretched and bent and jumped and twisted, smiling, uncomplaining, and were never, as far as Althea could tell, sore the next day.

Second, it turned out that the Academy of Sciences had designed the Neznaiyan base without any input from a field archaeologist. Instead of her own lab, Althea was assigned a corner of the tectonics unit, which didn't make anyone happy.

Third, the head of the team, Dr. Waylon Nelson, finally told her that although she would have assistants for her excavations, they weren't going to be human assistants. They were the robots which had been sent to Nez for the initial survey, now seventy-five years ago. "I'm sure they still work," said Waylon.

Her only really positive discovery was that Dr. Don had enough "medicinal" hooch to last for years, even if he shared.

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Six interminable weeks after Althea woke up from her long cold sleep, she was on a shuttle about to launch itself for Neznaiyu. Outside and far below the planet was lit by the warm Centauri sun, shining in shades of emerald and lapis. One of the oceanographers behind Althea bounced in her seat and squealed in excitement. "I can't believe we're about to be *here!*" The oceanography team consisted of three women, none over the age of twenty-seven. They crowded over each other at the window and let out a chorus of "Oooooooh!" like freshmen on a field trip.

Althea tightened her seatbelt. It was cold on the shuttle, although that didn't seem to bother anyone else. Don was beside her in the window seat, his nose pressed against the glass, fogging it. "God, it's gorgeous!" he said for the fifth time.

The pilot, who was in plain sight and easy earshot, stood up and bellowed over the excited racket. "*I want everyone tied down, goddamn it!*"

That dampened the enthusiasm, but not much. The oceanographers settled into their seats, still chirping as the lights went off in the cabin. The shuttle detached itself from the ship with a lurch and began to fall.

First it seemed slow and strangely leisurely. Then high clouds iced the windows. Thin air roared against the shuttle's skin as it plunged into the upper layers of atmosphere. A sudden mist obscured everything and turned the cabin even darker. Althea heard one of the zoologists across the aisle suck a breath in through his teeth. The shuttle fell through the clouds like a cannonball and then broke out into gentle sunlight. The untouched continents revealed themselves below. Lush greens and gleaming lakes. Iridescent snow on high mountains. White beaches beside transparent oceans. It looked like the beginning of the world.

Dr. Don turned to Althea with tears in his eyes. At a different time in her life, she might have laughed at him. Instead, she gave him a clumsy pat on the arm. Despite Hoshi's revenges and her own greedy mistakes, despite the fact that she was surrounded by overly enthused young people, maybe this lovely planet was where she was supposed to be.

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## Act IX

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Months before Althea and the science crews left Earth, robots designed for manufacturing and construction had been sent ahead in a separate ship to clear part of the Neznaiyan wilderness, put up half a dozen research pre-fabs and one large group residence. The residence was three stories tall and had been placed at the edge of the night-blooming forest. It was no luxury hotel, but it had plumbing and electricity, and it was no more than a kilometer from the archaeological site.

The residence building had also become a point of interest for the local wildlife, and it was a mistake to leave the doors open even for a few minutes. Her first day on Nez, Althea found a scaly, mouse-sized creature regarding her gravely from the windowsill as she threw trowels, brushes, dental picks, and a camera into her daypack. The zoological template for vertebrates seemed to be six-legged and vaguely reptilian. She opened the window and shoed it out. The thing scurried away, clinging to the outside wall like a gecko. Althea shut the window and checked the rest of the room. So far, the largest lizard anyone had seen was about the size of a house cat. Most of the ground creatures were able to rear up and use their front limbs in an arm-like manner. Some even had a sort of opposable thumb. None of them seemed to be dangerous. The bright young biologists referred to them broadly as "Rugby-Shirt Lizards," which Althea thought was inane.

Don knocked on the door and poked his head in. "I thought you were already down at the site."

"I'm on my way." He was going to ask to come along. She wasn't sure she wanted that. She needed time to study the obelisk. She needed to see exactly how to grid it, how to approach it, and how to make it into her redemption.

"Want company?" Don cocked his head. Sun from the window caught in his hair, showing blond and silvery gray.

She fumbled with the zipper on the pack. "Don't you have a hospital to put together?"

"Should I take that as a no?"

Successful redemption might require a witness. She zipped the pack and swung it over her shoulder. "Okay," she said. "Okay. But you can't touch anything."

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Robots had cut paths through the thorny forest undergrowth, and so she was robbed of even the challenge of bushwhacking. It was almost like going on a picnic in some exotic, perfume-scented place. The treelike plants were extraordinarily tall, almost familiar in their leafy shades of green. Surveys of the



local flora showed that the saline poisons the vegetation used to compete with each other for light and space were harmless to humans. The only noticeable effect was a kind of stimulating, briny quality to the air.

They walked single file, Althea leading in silence until the forest thinned and Don pointed ahead into the brightening shade. "Aren't those your little metal helpers?"

They were. Her robotic assistants had parked themselves in a dapple of sunlight at the edge of the site they'd cleared. They were knee-high things with an antique armored look, like prehistoric insects with treads. They were coated with bits of freshly cut brush.

"Looks like they just mowed," said Don.

Althea didn't say anything. She stepped past him and the robots into the breezy, sun-washed clearing and shaded her eyes. The foundations were off to the right, emerging from a stubble of leaves and vines. The ruined walls were about waist-high, uneven but unmistakably *built*. Althea took another step. "Where the hell's the obelisk?"

Don came up beside her, crunching in the shorn brush. He pointed to the left. "Is that it?"

The obelisk's pointed white top stuck up out of a shaggy, obscuring mass of olive-colored brush that looked like long-needled pine. The robots had shredded everything around it, leaving swaths of dead vegetation, but they hadn't cleared the object itself since they'd first found it seventy-five years ago. Althea picked her way toward it, sweating under her breasts. The obelisk had a tilt to it, she noticed. That hadn't been obvious in the videos. It wasn't in the middle of the site either, like Captain Rowanoake had said. It was off to the side of the foundations. And there was something wrong with its size.

"Why is it so short?" She realized she was clenching her teeth.

"The robots are short," said Don. He was right behind her. "They were looking up at it."

So much for its monumentality. It was no taller than she was. Shorter, actually. It was no taller than Hoshi. But that didn't matter. It was the writing that was important. She shoved through the dry, prickly vines, dragging stickers and brambles in the cuffs of her pants. She pushed her hands into her gloves and picked at the weedy growth at the base of the obelisk. Tiny white flowers—they looked like flowers anyway—festooned the three-sided column. It was so disappointingly small, she could have put her arms all the way around it. And that *tilt*. The vines were obviously dragging it loose from its foundation. She grabbed a fistful of woody stems and gently pulled them away.

"It looks like its ready to fall over," said Don. He put his hands out, just in case.

"Don't touch *anything!*"

He put his hands in his pockets and stood there, silent, as she peeled away the olive-colored needles and miniscule blossoms that didn't have a smell. Where was the writing? She dropped her pack and pulled out a scraper. Carefully, with her tongue between her teeth, she cut away the needled vines and flowers from a good square foot of surface. The obelisk was coated with something like white plaster. It had a texture. It had marks. But they were random, like the stuff had been put on with a putty knife. Althea wiped sweat out of her eyes and crouched down to robot-level under the bright noon sky, down to the robot-level point-of-view of the tapes she'd watched so many, many times. Closer to the ground, the random marks seemed closer together and more regular, but only because whoever had coated the obelisk had worked methodically, smoothing and slapping, smoothing and slapping. The shadows and root trails from the plants added a little more texture, more mystery. But the bottom line was, there was no writing.

Althea stood up, hot and unsteady. Don peered at her with real concern. She turned away, afraid she'd start to cry right in front of him.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"I," she said and had to take a breath. "I want to look at the rest of the site." Another breath. "By myself."

He didn't say anything. When she had enough control to look back, he was gone.

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By evening, she'd discovered the two most significant things about the Neznaiyan site. First; the column showed no sign of writing whatsoever. She'd stripped the entire thing, and she was certain of that. Second, the buildings were laid out and constructed in exactly the same way as the ones on Mars. The only difference was that this site had filled in with weeds, not sand. The stones and mortar seemed to be made from native materials, but the scale was the same and so was the workmanship. The walls were sloppy and thrown together with no sign of technical skill.

Althea stood at the edge of a tumbledown stone wall, her hands pricked with thorns and her clothes soaked with sweat. What did all this add up to? A race of aliens capable of interplanetary travel who couldn't build themselves a decent house? Intelligent creatures who left tantalizing signs of civilization—but no artifacts? She'd stared into the darkening forest for any revelation and asked herself the next question. How much had Hoshi known about this? Roger Dodd had certainly shown her the tapes from Nez. Had she recognized the building styles through the weeds? Had she seen through the distorting angles of the robot view of the obelisk? Had she known there was nothing new here? Had she planned not so much an exile, but a one-way trip to a perfect kind of hell?

Althea took her gloves off, put her sweaty face in her sweaty hands, and let herself sob until nightfall.

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## Act X

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To keep up appearances of success and, therefore, redemption, Althea made sure to eat breakfast with the rest of the science crews every day. They were enthusiastic. She tried hard to act like she was too. When they asked about how her work was coming, she would smile and say, "Great!" but she refused to let anyone come down to the site. The science teams started calling it "the Forbidden Zone" but stopped

when she never, ever laughed.

Althea avoided Don as well as she could, retreating to the ruins each morning with her antique, retooled robots. While they cleared brush in a hundred-meter radius of the Obelisk, she gridded and numbered the site. It didn't take long to discover that the site was exactly the same as the one on Mars, right down to the corner in grid 34L. Althea dug a small test-trench there, stomach churning, but there was no finger bone. She sent a sample of the coating over the obelisk to the chemical-analysis crew for testing and found that it was just plain plaster. It could have been made from local calcium carbonate. Then again, it could have been made in a factory in Delaware. She sent a request to the orbiting transport to run subterranean scans of the site and the surrounding three hundred kilometers, but she felt like she already knew the answers and she was right. There was no sign of midden, and no graveyard. She gave the orbiting transport the long-term job of scanning the entire planet for geologic anomalies that might indicate other building sites, but she knew there was nothing else out there.

When she stood at the edge of the woods with her camera in hand, she found she couldn't make herself take the pictures she was required to send back to the Office of the Chair of Archaeology at Oxford. For one short second, she understood exactly how Hoshi must have felt in her freezing exile on Mars, dutifully digging and recording. For one short second, Althea felt a pang of sympathy. It vanished almost immediately. Hoshi had been close enough to home to make plans and set them in motion. There was no such option here. Althea put the camera into her pack without even taking the lens cap off. It would be a quarter century before anyone knew what she'd found—or not found—here. There was no rush to send proof of her failures. There was no need to think about Hoshi at all, if she could help it, but the truth was, she thought about Hoshi almost all the time.

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Six weeks into the mission, she found a lawn chair and a beach umbrella stacked together in her corner of the tectonics lab. It wasn't a subtle hint. She took them down to the site and set them up, telling herself she would organize her field notes and get a tan while the robots scraped away the vines and bushes and frightened off the six-legged lizards. Instead she wandered in and out of the roofless, rundown rooms. She cursed Hoshi. She shook her fists at the sky. She screamed at the robots until she realized she would look like a crazy woman to anyone watching. Althea stood in the middle of the site and finally, finally, felt herself give up.

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Late one afternoon, Don came down from the residence, calling her name from the woods.

"Althee-a ..."

She sat up straight in the lawn chair, jerked out of her half-nap. The cool evening breeze was just starting to rise. Soon the downy lizards would climb to the tops of the trees and begin to sing, claiming their section of night-blooming forest and the nectar that dripped from the flowers after dark.

She shot to her feet and looked around in a sudden panic. The robots had finished clearing the brush weeks ago, and the site was trimmed and mowed. Today all they were doing was burnishing the bare dirt

into attractive pathways. It would be obvious to anyone that she was fully stuck, faking any progress. Don appeared at the edge of the woods and smiled and waved. Althea stood where she was, feeling criminal, breathless and false.

He meandered over and squinted at the robots rolling back and forth. "What're they doing?"

She wanted to lie. He wouldn't know the difference. Her mouth was too dry to say anything. She shrugged instead and sat on the lawn chair.

He plopped down beside her and watched the robots for a while longer. "Correct me if I'm wrong," said Don, "but isn't this the most exciting find of the millennium?"

"Oh," she said, "definitely."

He rubbed his hands on his knees. He was wearing shorts these days, and his legs and arms were tanned to golden brown. "When're you going to tell me what's going on out here, Althea?"

"Nothing's going on."

"That's what I mean," he said. "It's the most exciting find of the millennium. You've got the whole thing to yourself. You're the luckiest woman in the galaxy, but you're not happy."

Her lower lip started to shiver, and she covered her mouth with both hands. She felt the whole stupid story that went from Oxford to Mars welling up in her throat. The shame of it made her eyes feel scratchy. He put an arm around her, and she let the truth spill out—Mars, Hoshi, her chair at Oxford—and the finger bone. When she was finished, it was dark, and the flowers were wide open. The night wind carried the briny scent of the forest, and lizards sang and creaked, chirped and whistled their desires. Don ruffled her hair and kissed her under the indigo, alien sky.

When he told her none of it mattered, she almost believed him.

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## Act XI

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After that she tried to be more professional. She started a paper on the similarities of her site to Hoshi's and the cultural ramifications thereof. She didn't get more than halfway through the outline because there wasn't any cultural evidence to discuss. Then she tried one about the coincidence of finding the same kind of site on the only two planets that humans had visited. She speculated that there might be sites like these on any Earthlike world, and as these were the only verifiable alien contact so far, survey teams and satellites should be on the lookout for them. She was well on her way to making a mountain out of her molehill when the first communications arrived from Earth.

Don met her in the mess hall and handed her a disk with the downloads. The disk was in a thin case, and the cover had a handwritten list of its contents. "I wouldn't call it hot off the press. They transmitted it six months after we left."

The first thing on the list was a boldface **Congrats!** "Congrats for what?" said Althea.

"For getting here," said Don. "Although, I guess they don't know for sure that we *did* get here. They're a sort of theoretical congrats."

The rest of the list showed titles of her regular subscriptions—electronic versions of *The London Times* and her professional magazines, *Archaeology Today* and *The Archaeology Journal*. The *Journal* had interviewed her just before the ship left for Neznaiyu. It'd been a good interview, full of heroic speculations and as much enthusiasm as she could manage.

"What did you get?" said Althea.

Don patted the disk in his pocket. "Medical journals. The most entertaining reading on the planet."

He went to his room, and Althea went to hers with a cup of coffee and a muffin. She slid the disk into her computer and settled down for a good, long read. Especially in the *Journal* there was always an undercurrent of gossip that made the articles far more interesting than they appeared to be. If you knew how to read between the lines, you could almost always find out who was stabbing who in the back academically speaking, who'd developed an "Indiana Jones" complex about their particular dig, and who had finally discovered their inner Heinrich Schliemann. She was sure Hoshi would be in there somewhere. Althea opened the file for the *Journal* and saw the headline for the first article;

### **ALIEN TEMPLE DISCOVERED ON JUPITER'S MOON**

Althea stared as the twenty-five-year-old cover illustration filled the screen. A vaguely humanoid figure apparently cast in gold, gleamed on its pedestal in a high-ceilinged room. Writing—there was no mistake about it—swirled over the walls in copious, flowing, gold-edged script. And they had found it six months after she'd left for Neznaiyu. Had Hoshi known about this *too*?

Althea hurled her muffin across the room and went to find Don.

"*Look* at this." She dropped down beside him on the bed and pushed the laptop into his hands.

"God damn," said Don. "Damn. You just missed this, didn't you." He gave her a quick, apologetic look.

"Read it," she said, on the breathless verge of tears. "Just tell me when Hoshi found it."

She sat up straight, tense, as he scanned the first few paragraphs.

Don frowned. "I don't see Hoshi anywhere in here."

"Oh, she's there all right," said Althea. "She's got her fingers in the entire pie."

"Oxford's not even involved in this, Althea. The archaeologists are from Harvard."

"*Harvard*?" She grabbed the laptop back and read through the first page. "Hoshi never got near this. Oxford should have been organizing the expedition. Harvard barely has a foot off their own campus, much less on *Jupiter*."

"Then I guess Hoshi screwed up," said Don. "A good thing, right? Maybe they'll kick her out of the

department."

Althea closed the laptop and clenched her fists on top of it. Nothing was a safe bet when it came to Hoshi. "Do you realize that nobody's ever, ever, *ever* going to see what I've found? Even if there *was* something here, it'd take years for the *Journal* to find out about it, and another quarter-century for anyone to come out and see it. Hell, I'll be *dead* by then." She glared at the floor. "They're all heading straight for Io. No one gives a damn about Neznaiyu anymore. And even if they do come, what do I say? Look! I found something that's exactly like what Hoshi found on Mars!"

"Except for the obelisk."

"Except for the damn obelisk," said Althea, "and as far as I can tell, it never had a purpose. It was never carved, or painted, or inscribed. Nothing was ever put on top of it, nothing was ever buried underneath it, nothing was ever arranged around it. It's not even in the middle of the site—it's sort of off to one side, like they couldn't figure out where else to put it. And," she said, "it wasn't even important enough to put in a solid foundation. The thing's ready to fall down."

"But look," said Don. "Doesn't the fact that this site is here mean that these aliens perfected interplanetary travel and took their culture with them all over the galaxy?"

"But there *is* no culture! All we've found is similar sites on two completely different planets built by people who could hardly stack two rocks on top of each other. There's *just* the site. There's *just* the column. All you can do is take it at face value. You can't make a pile of rocks into something just because you *want* it to be something. Unless you're Hoshi Noh. She just buries the things she wants to find and has someone else dig them up. Well, *anyone* can do *that*."

Don rubbed his knees, and she could see the things he was struggling not to say to her. Things about seeing the reality of her situation and how outrage was only going to make her old before her time. Instead he took her sweaty hand in his and didn't say anything.

Althea took a shaky breath. "My career is trashed. You know that? It was trashed from the minute she walked into my office."

He squeezed her fingers gently.

"I mean, I could make things up, too. But she has a *reputation* now. She has my *Chair*."

"I know."

She swallowed hard. "There's not much for me to do around here, Don. Not unless I want to go down to the river and strain water samples with the biologists."

He leaned against her and put his head on her shoulder. "So what do you want to do, Althea? You're in a beautiful place, and you have all the time in the world. What do you do *want* to do?"

She wiped her eyes, with no idea how to answer.

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## Act XII

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The actual purpose of the Neznaiyan site came to Althea a week later at the party the biology team threw to celebrate the cataloging of their hundredth species.

"They're putting on a play," said Don, as the two of them walked down the path to the sandy brook where the bio team spent their days.

"A play?" Althea echoed doubtfully.

"Evolution on Neznaiyu," said Don. "'A Musical in Three Acts.' *And* they're having refreshments. It's the first decanting of the Nez-Nectar wines."

It was a typical summery day on Nez. The sky was a flawless azure, the breeze blew just enough to keep everyone comfortable, and the lizards trilled sleepily, musically. The bio team had built a lean-to beside the brook to keep their electronics out of the sun. Today they'd slung a red curtain over the front and arranged folding chairs from the mess in rows for their audience. Someone Althea recognized from the tectonics team was setting up a video camera to record whatever pearls of wisdom might be revealed.

The refreshments were arranged on a long table decorated with colorful stones from the river and hanks of piney branches. Striped lizards darted between bowls of blue-yolked, lizard-egg-salad and Ehrlmeyer flasks filled with fermented night-nectar. Half a dozen lizards had congregated around the potato chips and were lifting them out of the bowl one at time, licking them with cat-like tongues.

"I'm told they like the salt," said Don, filling a plate with cut celery and slices of baked eggplant from the hydroponics unit.

Althea noticed that only a few people had sampled the egg salad and everyone was avoiding the potato chips.

Don poured two cups of fermented nectar and gave one to her. He tapped his cup against hers. "When's your grand opening of the Forbidden Zone?"

Althea sipped. The drink was a bit savory to pass for wine, but it had a distinctly alcoholic kick. "Why should I show them a dud?"

Don sighed and took a deeper swig. The biology team bustled behind the red curtain. Someone came out and pranced back and forth turning a flashlight on and off. People in the front row laughed. The tectonics guy behind the camera shooed people out of the way. The folding chairs were filling up.

"Let's find seats," said Don.

"In the back."

"In the back."

Althea lost interest as soon as the curtain lifted and the kazoo chorus began. She finished her drink and picked at her food, not paying attention to the festival of post-doctoral idiocy the biologists had somehow

had time to come up with. The only thing she really noticed was the paper-mache copy of her obelisk. Grown men in rugby shirts carried it out to center stage and skipped around it like little girls. It was a good copy. Someone had obviously snuck down there and taken pictures. And that sour old woman with the pine-needle crown was probably supposed to be her. She got to her feet in disgust.

Don looked up, trying not to grin. "Don't leave. It's funny."

"It's stupid," she said and put her plate on the seat of her chair.

It was when she straightened up again that the realization hit her. Maybe it was the fermented nectar. Maybe she'd given up at such a deep level that her mind was finally open. She stared at the stage and the stacks of painted boxes that made up the set. She looked back at the camera, the distance between the stage and the audience. Someone dragged the copy of the obelisk off to stage left and bounded into the next dance number.

"Oh my god," she said.

Don burst into laughter as the head of the biology team waltzed out with a lizard clinging to his head. He sang a catchy little number about Darwin. Althea steadied herself on the back of her chair.

Don looked up, wiping tears from his eyes. "What's the matter?"

"It's a stage," she said. "That whole thing is a stage."

She turned and bolted away from the party, up the hill and past the research station. She ran the kilometer to the dig site at full speed, weightless with comprehension.

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Althea stood in the cleared area in front of the big rectangular foundation. If it was a stage, she was now standing where the audience would have been. So where were the seats? She made her way into the brush at the edge of the site and shuffled through bushes and deadfall, looking for stonework. Orbital scans hadn't found anything, and neither did she. Maybe the aliens were expected to supply their own seats, or maybe they preferred to stand. She tramped back into the clearing and frowned at the jumbled stone walls.

The fronts were no more or less finished than the backs, so making the visible side of the set pretty or presentable didn't seem to be important. Permanence didn't seem important. The only thing that was important was the fact that it was exactly the same as what Hoshi had found on Mars. Did that indicate a ceremonial use? But why build something so flimsy if it had any importance at all? It was almost as if the builders had come here just to have a different background for the same scene. Like in a movie.

Althea sank onto the warm, needle-strewn ground. Like a movie. Or TV. Or the alien equivalent of streaming video. Those kinds of sets didn't need to be permanent or well built. Aliens who could flit from Mars to Neznaiyu could build these exact structures anywhere they chose. And if they were moving props and actors and needed to duplicate their scenes in each new location, why would they leave anything behind? Althea pushed her fingers through her hair. For all she knew, she and Hoshi had discovered the backdrops for an interplanetary soap opera. Instead of bones and potsherds, they should be looking for lost lens caps.



It got dark, and Don came looking for her. He was drunk and dropped down beside her with an old man's *oof*.

"The songs weren't bad," he said, "as long as you didn't listen to the singing."

"I figured this place out," she said.

"Really?" He sounded impressed. She told him, and he sat there nodding, pretending to be sober. She couldn't tell how much of it he was buying until he got up and went to the middle of the "stage."

Don struck a theatrical pose. "*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.*"

Althea laughed in spite of herself. From where she was sitting it looked exactly right. The night flowers in the background, the stars overhead, the lizards chanting in the tops of the trees, all suffused by the salty perfume from the forest. At that moment, Don's question seemed to answer itself. She knew exactly what she wanted to do, here on this beautiful planet, with all the time in the world.

Even from twenty-five light years away, Althea now knew how to destroy Hoshi Noh.

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### Act XIII

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The next morning, Althea moved the obelisk. It was easy.

She just put her arms around it and dragged it to center stage, where Don had quoted Shakespeare the night before. The stone wasn't heavy, and it had never been secured to a foundation. When it was steady enough to stand on its own, she stood back and was surprised to find that her heart was pounding: not from the exertion, but nerves. It wasn't as if she'd never moved an artifact before, but those had been small things—potsherds, tools. It wasn't as if the obelisk's original position hadn't been thoroughly mapped. It was what she was about to do, now that its position made more sense.

She pulled her lawn chair and umbrella around into the audience part of the site and sat down with her laptop. Normally she kept her notes in English, but now she was afraid that the nosy biologists might come snooping, and she wrote them in Latin. Of course they knew enough Latin to get through a species and genus list. Some of them probably knew more. She switched fonts on her computer and wrote in her other undergraduate fluency; ancient Greek.

*Ὁὐρανὸς ἰσχυρὸς ...*

She worked until late in the afternoon, absorbed and oblivious. Don found her in the lawn chair at the foot of the obelisk. He squatted next to her, and when she saw him, she flinched in surprise.

"Good grief," she said. "Don't you have a hospital to run?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing." He gave her a funny look. "What *are* you doing?"

She turned the computer to show him her photo of the obelisk and the digital chicken-scratch she was pasting onto the image. "I wrote a paragraph in Greek, Latin, and English and then cut up the words." She touched a key on the laptop and showed him the preliminary versions. The graphics program she used for site-mapping could be applied, clumsily, to text as well. She'd mirrored the letters, turned them upside down, sliced them in half and skewed them. Each of the three paragraphs was about the same length, but each "alphabet" was distinctly different.

He stared for a minute. She'd been so careful with the shadows and textures that the chicken-scratch looked carved, even missing in places where the plaster had fallen away. "What're you going to do with it?"

She chuckled. "I'm supposed to send Hoshi pictures. So I am."

Don sighed. "And what does your paragraph say?"

She grinned. "It starts, '*All the world's a stage ...*'"

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Even though she knew Hoshi wouldn't see the faked picture for another quarter century, something felt bad in Althea's gut after she sent it, as though she'd left on a long trip without checking to make sure that the stove and the coffeepot were off. It felt like an impending, though distant, disaster, and she did what she could to take her mind off of it.

While the robots sat idly, she took pictures of the stunted walls and labored over them on her laptop, adding layers of graphics. But even after two weeks of steady work, the facades she tried to create looked unconvincing. It had taken all of her artistic skill to embed a little text onto the obelisk. With her limited software, nothing she could cobble together had the same tactile authenticity, and at the end of the day that upset her as much as being stuck in the middle of nowhere at the end of her career.

Three weeks after she'd moved the obelisk and sent the doctored photo to Hoshi, it rained hard enough to make the burnished paths around the dig site into muddy wallows. Althea slogged down to the site the next morning and found the lawn chair too wet to sit in, so she perched on the edge of one of the walls instead, where the morning sun had dried the stones. The force of the downpour had washed a considerable amount of plaster off the obelisk, and she wondered if she should repair it. She went over to inspect the column and turned back to the wall for a moment. Mud had splattered the sides of the foundations and dried to a light brown like adobe. She went back to the wall and crouched beside it, examining the pocks and spatters. She sat on her heels for a long moment and then took a handful of fresh mud and wiped it across the surface of the wall. It stuck there, thick as paste. She added more, filling in the spaces between tumble-stacked stones until she had a smooth surface. Then she plucked a ferny weed, pressed it into the mud and pulled it out, leaving a precise image.

Althea stood up, squinting at the site in the bright morning. The vision of what she would do for the rest of her days on Neznaiyu came over her with such shining clarity that she had to close her eyes. She stood there, steadying herself against the crudely built wall, finally seeing the site as she herself would make it,

and how Hoshi Noh would seethe over it when she saw it in the *Archaeology Journal*.

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#### Act XIV

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Five years after landing on Neznaiyu, Althea and Don got married. Their wedding wasn't the first—it was the third, in fact—but it had the best setting. Don and Althea were joined in wedlock at the dig site, on the alien stage in the shadow of the obelisk. The afternoon sun gleamed on Althea's painstakingly inscribed combination of Hamlet and Rosetta Stone and on the site's painted stucco scenery. The foundations Althea had put in to show where the surrounding village should have been were framed by the gardens she'd planted. The midden and the graveyard were downwind, just out of site behind the small museum she'd constructed for the artifacts she'd designed and built herself. None of her inventions were secret. No one ever asked any questions about them. After she'd opened up the site to the rest of the team they treated it like a park or, at worst, a sculpture garden.

The head of the biology team raised a cup of fermented nectar. "You've done an amazing job with this place, Althea. Just amazing."

"And to think you started out with nothing," added one of the oceanographers. At this point it was an old joke, but everyone still laughed. Even Althea.

She scooped a handful of potato chips onto her plate and shook off the salt-craving lizards. She ducked under the decorated lizard egg mobiles she'd strung across the doorways of her reconstructed stage houses and waited for Don in the noisy wedding crowd. He and the zoologists had gone off to get another case of bottled nectar from the research station. The biologists had put together a new musical as a wedding gift, and no one wanted to be sober for that.

Althea wandered out into the open part of the theater where the alien camera crew might once have been and turned to admire her work as her fellow researchers chatted amid the much-improved ruins. Instead of stumpy, uneven foundations, she'd made the structures on the stage slightly-higher-than-human-sized and given the doorways arches. She'd built everything from native stone, stuccoed them smooth with mud and washed them white with local limestone. The painted designs were her own creation as well, based on abstracted versions of six-legged lizards, each matched with its favorite flowers. It looked primitive—brightly colored, energetic, totemic—and maybe just a little alien.

She was pleased even when people called it an "art project," which, as far as she was concerned wasn't really a negative comment. She didn't care what opinions they kept to themselves. She didn't even care what Hoshi thought, or would think, one of these days. Every time Althea had finished a section, she'd sent a picture of it to Hoshi at Oxford. She'd sent a hundred at least by now, and Althea could imagine her photos traveling through the ether of space in a long electronic string, slowly heading home. Early on

she'd daydreamed about Hoshi's reactions, but now Hoshi and her old life in general didn't seem so important anymore.

The fact that some things simply *didn't* matter had been a revelation for her. She'd quit reading the *Archaeology Journal* when Don pointed out that keeping up on finds she would never see or even have a chance to comment on only made her unhappy. Now four years of back issues lay in a drawer underneath her socks, and instead of trying to mine the magazine for gossip, her biggest pleasure was an afternoon of cloud-watching with Don.

Althea grinned and tipped back her cup. The nectar was sweet and fragrant, filling her throat like warm honey. From where she was standing right now, turning away from her old life seemed like her greatest accomplishment. She wiped her mouth and waved at Don, who was meandering toward her with Waylon, the head of the expedition.

"Congratulations," said Waylon, tapping Althea's cup with his. "Another few weddings and we'll have a bunch of little scientists running around the place."

"It won't be long," said Don. "Two out of three oceanographers look pretty ripe to me."

"I don't know about having kids way out here," said Althea. "How would you tell them they'll never get to see their own planet?"

Waylon cleared his throat and glanced over his shoulder at the rest of the crowd. "Actually," he said in a low voice, "we had a very interesting event this morning. I didn't want to spoil your wedding, so I didn't say anything." He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. "This came in from the ship about four hours ago."

Don unfolded the paper and held it so Althea could see.

## **FIRST FASTER-THAN-LIGHT SHIPS LEAVE EARTH**

### **FTL TRAVEL AND COMMUNICATIONS BASED ON ALIEN TECH FROM IO**

"What the *hell* is this?" said Althea.

"It's the front page of the *New York Times*," said Waylon, practically in a whisper. "Look at the *date*."

Althea heard Don swallow hard. "This is Sunday of last week."

Waylon angled a thumb at the sky, indicating the orbiting ship that had brought them here. "The crew up there detected a signal. They sent out a shuttle and found a probe—they were all excited because they thought we'd finally come into contact with aliens—but it was from *Earth*. It was a *faster-than-light* probe from *Earth*." He shook the printout. "Back home they've figured out how to use that alien technology they found on Io, and now they've got faster-than-light ships and instantaneous communications." He took a breath and blinked, like he might burst into tears. "We're not an outpost anymore. Anyone who wants to go home can do it, just as soon as they get here."

"They're coming *here*?" said Althea.

"Read it for yourself" Waylon handed her the printout. "I'll announce it at the general meeting tonight. Keep it under your hat until then, won't you?"

Don nodded a little numbly, and Waylon walked off.

Althea read through the first few paragraphs, hands shaking. "It says here that they can acquire information in transit, even if it's been sent with old technology. It says they've already got every report we've sent in the past five years." She took a breath. "It says they're coming to bring us a transceiver so we can communicate with Earth in 'real time.'" Althea looked up at Don, wide-eyed. "They're coming the fourteenth." It was less than a week away. "Guess who'll be on the first ship?"

Of course it was Hoshi.

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Althea's first impulse was to destroy everything she'd built, and that evening, while everyone else was at the meeting, Don had to physically restrain her from setting fire to her own museum.

"What else am I supposed to do?" she screamed after he'd wrestled the welding torch away from her. "Don't you know I sent her *pictures*?"

"Of what?" He pointed at the site, neatly built and perfectly groomed. "Of *that*?"

"Of *everything*." Althea tried to take a breath, but her throat felt tight and small. "She must have gotten all of them at once. That's why she's coming. It probably looked like I just pulled off the vines and there it was." She sank to the ground in the briny perfume of the night. She'd been able to accept the end of her career while Nez was a prison. Now she could only imagine the depths of her humiliation. "She's coming to finish me off, Don."

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## Finale

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The shuttle from Hoshi's ship arrived on the morning of the fourteenth and settled with an eerie, engineless silence in the clear space behind the research station. The Neznaiyu teams cheered and threw homemade confetti. Althea stood next to Don, lightheaded from lack of sleep. She glanced over her shoulder towards the site, beyond the woods, incriminatingly intact. The mature and professional thing to do was step up and confess. She gripped Don's sweaty hand. She should have dynamited the site and let Hoshi admire the rubble.

"Ship sure is quiet," muttered Don. "Must be that Io drive."

"Must be," she said, dry-mouthed.

The shuttle's hatch opened and the crew marched out, waving. Hoshi was easy to spot, even thirty years older. She stopped at the end of the gangway, neatly dressed, just a bit of gray in her hair, and put on a pair of glasses, peering around for a familiar face.

Don gave Althea's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Do the right thing. Please?"

She squeezed back and made her way through the crowd to the foot of the shuttle's gangway.

Hoshi saw her and stepped down, as crisp and smart as an army general. She took Althea's damp hand and gave it a firm shake. "You're looking well, professor."

"You too," said Althea, and swallowed the bitterness in her mouth, "professor. Would you like something to drink before we get started? It's a long walk to the site."

"No, thank you," said Hoshi. "I'd like to get right down to business." She turned and beckoned to someone behind her, and, to Althea's dismay, Roger Dodd and his news crew trotted out of the shuttle.

"Hi, Doc!" Roger waved, boyish and unchanged, thirty intervening years canceled by plastic surgery and hormone treatments.

Althea's stomach wound itself into one more knot. "This way," she said and started up the hill toward the site.

Roger bounded along beside her. "It sure is pretty here," he remarked. "Is it true what they say about the romantic effect of the midnight blooms?"

"Uh," said Althea. "You'll have to ask the biologists."

Roger nodded energetically. "Say, did you hear about the site Hoshi found on Mars?"

Althea let herself glare at him. "I was *there*, Roger. Don't you remember?"

"No, I mean the *second* site," said Roger. "It was just like the first one, but it was intact. I mean, it was *amazing*. Didn't you see the reports about the excavations? We did a special. We called them the 'Three Unknowns.'"

"Three?" Althea turned to Hoshi. "There were *three* sites on Mars?"

"Yours is the third," said Hoshi tightly. "The special included pictures of yours. And mine."

"My pictures?" echoed Althea, but they'd come to the edge of the site and now no one was listening.

From here the stage and its painted buildings, the new foundations, the gardens and fields, spread out like a colorful page from a storybook. The obelisk reared up in the middle of everything, casting a needle shadow like a sundial. Althea wiped sweat off the back of her neck. She should have thought of *that* earlier. She could've made the whole place into an alien Stonehenge.

"Wow!" said Roger. "Wow!"

He sprang ahead, trailed by his camera crew, but Hoshi stopped and turned to Althea.

"I didn't expect to hear from you," said Hoshi quietly. "Not after what happened on Mars."

Was she apologizing? How unlikely. Althea shrugged.

Hoshi reached into her pocket and took out a handful of snapshot-sized color printouts. "You'll see these eventually. This is the second Martian site."

Althea gritted her teeth and looked at the first photo. The structures seemed almost completely intact—slightly taller than human scale, with arched doorways. She flipped through the rest, quickly at first, then again. The buildings were covered with a rust-colored stucco and painted with geometric abstractions. They looked, in short, remarkably like the alien village Althea had built from her imagination.

She stared at the pictures and then at Hoshi. "You—you *made* this!"

Hoshi put her hands on her hips, then crossed her arms and looked away. "You know," she said, "first the thing happened with Jupiter's moon. They found that site and Harvard grabbed it before I knew what was happening. I took a huge amount of flak. The grand high muckety-mucks at Oxford threatened to send me to Mars permanently if I didn't come up with something. I was scared to death. I was running out of ideas. I never found a single artifact anywhere. Then this faster-than-light thing happened. I got your pictures, and in another year there were f1l ships. By that time ..." Hoshi raised an eyebrow at the photos.

"You'd copied *mine*."

"I'm surprised you didn't see any of this in the *Journal*," said Hoshi.

"I quit reading it."

Hoshi chewed her lips. "I figured I wouldn't see you until I was well into retirement. Or dead."

Althea eyed Roger, in front of the camera, elucidating with wide, dramatic gestures. "Does he know your second site is a fake?"

"If he does, he's never said anything," said Hoshi. "It was a good news piece, and I gave it to him before I even called the *Journal*."

"Payback," said Althea. "For screwing me over."

Hoshi spread her hands.

Roger wrapped up his editorial comments with a flourish and started toward them. Althea took a breath. Of course everyone on Neznaiyu knew Althea's site was a complete fraud, and it wouldn't take long for Roger to find out. Someone would probably let him in on the joke at lunch, and then, even for Roger, it would only be a matter of moments before he made the connection to Hoshi's counterfeit site on Mars.

Roger charged over and grabbed each of them by the elbow. "I see a great place to do the interview," he said, pointing at a sunny spot in the middle of the stage where alien soap-opera stars might have had played to galactic audiences. "Hoshi, you can introduce Althea, and Althea, you can explain the site. Can you keep it short?"

Five years of jealousy, fakery, fury, and despair. Could she keep it short? Althea looked over at Hoshi, dressed to the nines, desperately contrite, with everything to lose. Althea's path became precise in her mind. She looked into Hoshi's eyes to see the evaporating wisps of both of their careers. Althea smiled at her with genuine feeling.

"Hoshi, dear," said Althea, "when you introduce me, be sure to mention that I'm the one who made you exactly what you are today."

Curtain