

We shall not cease from our explorations.

And the end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot

Chapter 1

2035

"Sweet Mother of God! The sons of bitches have been lying to us for almost sixty years! Ever since Viking!

Eric, record this! All of it! When we get back - if they let us get back - I'm personally going to take this disc to Washington and shove it down their God-damned throats! Eric? Eric! You hear me? Snap out of it!" And the Commander pushed the Lieutenant roughly against his shoulder, to break him out of his reverie.

"Sorry, Captain. It's - it's just too much to take in. I see it - but I don't believe it!"

"You'd rather believe those hypocrites at NASA, who knew the truth all along, but lied to the American people - lied to us; that it was just a trick of light & shadow - an optical illusion? Don't pay any attention to that man behind the curtain! And *their* handlers in Washington probably kept paying them off to keep their mouths shut, and keep us in the dark. Weak, scared little rats, who were afraid the truth would make their own little house of cards - so carefully constructed over the years - come crashing down around their heads; that they weren't numero uno any more. And we kept re-electing their shithead handlers in Washington, so they could keep paying off these "experts."

Growing up in West Virginia, my Daddy always told me, 'Don't spit in my eye and tell me it's dew!' And Eric - I don't like to be spit on! Do you?"

His second in command, still in awe, uttered a quiet, "No, Bill," without averting his gaze.

Chapter 2

The crimson sands of the Martian desert wailed across the cold forbidding plains in a ghostly pirouette at ninety below. Even though mankind had staked its claim to the fourth planet from the sun, quaint but disquieting legends had begun to evolve, concerning "Martian myths" - mystical tales 150 million miles from Earth - to frighten little children at night, and unsettle the dreams of seasoned old men.

But no ancient wonder so fired the imagination, than the titanic edifice first revealed by the Viking I spacecraft, fifty-nine years earlier. And it stood now - silent, immutable, incomprehensible. And in this shattering revelation, our cosmic innocence was lost. And all the secrecy, betrayals, and deception, had failed to conceal the fact - that we were not alone. But *why* the deception? One could only conjecture.

The Face on Mars. It was a visceral feeling, here in the brutal, wind-swept desolation of Cydonia, in the Northern hemisphere of Mars.

Did the creatures of the night look up, mystified in primal wonder, at Stonehenge on Earth? Did the desert viper gaze up in

reptilian bewilderment at the pyramids? Such humbling analogies must have gone through the minds of the first astronauts to stare in disbelief at a structure they had been assured was nothing more than an optical illusion, a trick of the eye. But at least Stonehenge and the pyramids were Earthly constructs - fashioned by *human* hands. What faced the first Martian expedition in 2035, made these puny humans feel as insignificant as an insect contemplating a fusion reactor. And maybe the comparison was not totally undeserved, by what faced them: a monumental stone structure, 1.6 miles long, 1.2 miles wide - and half a mile high! It rested on the plains of the shoreline of an ancient sea, the Cydonian Sea. The Face. Staring up into the starry night with cold, eternal stone eyes. Waiting, waiting for at least half a million years, for the evolving creatures on the third planet from the sun to gain first sentience, then eons later, spaceflight capability.

This is who we were. All that we were. Our hopes. Our dreams. How we lived. How we died.

And the centuries rolled on.

Until July 25th, 1976, when Viking I finally revealed that we were indeed, not alone in the pantheon of cosmic existence. For on its thirty-fifth orbit of Mars, the seventy-second

photograph taken, number 35A72, proved it conclusively - despite the frightened betrayers who led the world to believe otherwise.

But it would take almost sixty more years before man could plant his feet in the Hematite rich sands of Mars, and stand face to face - with the stuff of legends.

Yet five more years would have to pass, until 2040, when the 2600 foot Martian leviathan allowed humans to cross its threshold, and learn the secrets of a race that flourished when dinosaurs ruled the Earth.

Chapter 3 - 2040 - Mars Research Station I - Cydonia region

It took time, effort, and not a few deadly incidents, but Mars Research Station I was officially completed - five years after man first set foot on the fabled fourth planet. Hauling supplies and building materials 150 million miles was a gargantuan undertaking, unparalleled in human history. Mars itself provided many of the raw materials and chemicals that the

base required, and eventually MRS-I was christened. It took the form of a large spoked wheel. The central hub was a rigid geodesic dome. The spokes contained living quarters for the station's forty scientists, ships crews, and technicians; research labs & computers; hydroponics and food production; materials & supplies; recreation facilities & mess hall; infirmary; vehicle charging & repair shop; and the regenerative cycle plant. The central hub, both above and below ground, contained a cold fusion power plant. A mile from the "wheel" were launch facilities, where two VASIMIR-powered ships now stood - chemical first stages, plasma second stages. Their fuel, Argon for the plasma engines, and Hydrogen for the nuclear first stages, were mined and processed on Mars, and stored in massive underground tanks. Six giant tanks containing potable water, also processed on Mars from rock, underground aquifers, and the atmosphere itself, were shielded from the harsh Martian environment, as well.

But the entire complex of MRS-I was dwarfed by the looming shadow of the Face nearby. Almost a quarter of a mile taller than the Empire State Building in New York City, it sat like a vengeful god, gazing down, dispassionate, omniscient, at the puny human intruders foolish enough to try and unlock the

secrets of an ancient race more advanced than the Earthlings could comprehend.

"I swear, Ed, if they serve that synthetic turkey "whatever it is" again in the mess tonight, I'm going to vomit!"

"Then you should have stayed at M.I.T. I hear they've got great cuisine."

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't have the once-in-a-lifetime chance of unlocking the secrets of - this!" he said, pointing up. And he and his physicist colleague craned their necks, staring at the Face, its ancient eyes peering into the Martian sky a half mile up from where they now stood.

"I feel like an Indian Shaman trying to explain a plasma spacecraft."

"Well, we're just one cog in this puzzle. We've got chemistry, optics, and molecular engineering working on this thing. I've just about run out of options myself, Kyle. What do we report back to Central Command? We have state of the art equipment up the yin-yang in front of this damn thing, and nobody yet has a clue on how to get inside it. Makes the Rosetta Stone and the Dead Sea Scrolls seem like figuring out a damn gumball machine!"

"Well, we've got an hour left on our shift, and..." he glanced at his O₂ indicator on his arm, "...our oxygen reserve. The greatest minds on Earth, using the most sophisticated technology 2040 can provide, haven't made a dent in figuring this monster out."

Look on the bright side: they rotate us back to Earth, you can have your prime rib and Scotch at the faculty club back in Cambridge."

His friend let out a sigh, then turned and gave his fellow scientist a dirty look.

The massive, mile long wall at the base of the Martian monument was built of a material that, at first inspection, seemed to resemble some type of marble, highly polished. Foot high symbols carved deep into its surface had so far defied analysis. Although, like the gods taunting Man with tantalizing clues, the Martian inscriptions had up until now generated more questions than answers. Five years of analysis had so far yielded inconclusive data. The monument's base exhibited no seams, bolts, separations, or any obvious means of entry. X-ray, neutron beams, molecular analysis, even down to the atomic level, revealed no machined components. It's as if the entire

Face was carved from a single mountain-sized rock! And no man-made tool or weapon could even make a dent in it.

"I swear I've seen something just like this symbol once."

"Where?"

"About ten years ago, Grace and I took a vacation, and we visited the Valley of the Kings, outside Cairo. I know I saw this symbol there, in the pyramid at Ghiza!" It looked like a winged serpent, with lightning bolts flashing from its eyes. And thus, more questions were generated, and precious few answers. And at this solemn revelation, they both silently turned, and gazed at the incredible Martian pyramids far off in the distance, many times larger than their Earthly counterparts, and containing a thousand times the internal volume. They had *their* own army of scientists and engineers, poring over their fantastic secrets. But special radars and X-ray devices had determined that the *real* prize, the truth of the ages, lay inside the Face itself - the Martian Holy Grail.

Suddenly, Kyle turned to his friend. "Uh, what was the temperature when we first set up here an hour ago?"

"Let me check the sensor log." He tapped a tiny screen on his suit's arm, until the information appeared. "Minus 89.5 degrees F. Why?"

"That's what I thought. I just looked at the outside temperature. Its dropped ten degrees, to minus 99.5. What could account for that?"

"Not sure. Let me check something." And he briskly walked about fifty yards away, stopped, checked his temperature sensor again, then walked back. "That's weird. It's localized. The drop is confined to the area here, where we are. Beyond it, it's the same as it was when we got here - minus 89.5."

"That *is* odd. Well, welcome to Cydonia."

It was at this moment that their EMF scanners set up near the base of the monument, to measure magnetic field densities, began to go wild.

"What's going on with the field scanner & magnetometer? Kyle, look at this thing!" he shouted, as they both ran over to it. "It's off the scale! Either something just snapped on inside this thing, or there's some kind of weird storm brewing."

Suddenly, they both began to hear an odd buzzing in their helmets.

"Ed, you hear that sound in your comm. Unit?"

"Yeah, and it's getting louder. What the hell is that?"

"Beats the crap out of me. Janescki to base. You guys receiving an odd buzzing sound on your sensors? We hear it in our helmets, but can't localize the source."

"Stand by. Negative, Kyle. But we are reading a build-up in the magnetic field density in your area. Suggest you and Ed return to base, just to play it safe. Your shift, and your O₂, are almost up soon, anyway."

"Acknowledged, base. Preparing to wrap up and return."

And that's when it happened.

And for years to come there would be heated debates, speculation, and much soul-searching by those directly involved, as to the sequence of events - which changed everything.

Little dust clouds of electricity began to mysteriously appear around the area, for several square miles. They didn't harm anyone. They just - didn't make any sense.

And then slowly, like a sleeping deity awakening after a million year slumber, the half mile high Face on Mars - began to awaken! The thousands of ancient symbols deeply etched into its still highly polished surface somehow, miraculously, took on solid form and began to rise slowly from their deep grooves. One by one. First ten. Then fifty. Then one hundred. Then a thousand. The golden symbols of a race, dead for thousands of

centuries, rose, like Lazarus, and impossibly hung in mid-air a moment, defying the laws of gravity.

The scientists took shelter behind a nearby boulder. This was unprecedented. Perhaps it was a weapon come to life?

All the security sensors, cameras, and fail-safe mechanisms on the entire base began to come to life automatically.

Technicians could only stare at their monitors, speechless.

Those outside, engaged in geological and biological analysis, hurriedly ran for cover, uncertain as to what was transpiring.

Had humans unwittingly stirred an incomprehensibly destructive power within the monument that they had no right to awaken, and which now would exact vengeance on the impudent and puny creatures from the third planet?

The ground began to shake. And now everyone heard the strange buzzing.

Suddenly, all the thousands of gleaming symbols, impossibly suspended in midair, began to slowly rotate 360 degrees, until they were all re-aligned with their slots again. And that's when they slowly began to retract back into their respective cavities.

"Christ, what have we done now?" Dr. Kyle Janescki whispered from the shelter of the boulder.

What happened next was clearly beyond human technology. And it began to dawn on those observing the spectacle, as to just what god-like power was coming to life, here on the desolate plains of Cydonia. An area of the monument's base, perhaps one thousand feet long and one hundred feet in height, didn't merely slide open, lower itself into the ground, or creak open, like a leviathan bank vault, ready to swallow the ape-like humans, like Jonah's whale. No. This fifth of a mile long section of polished monument simply, and inexplicably - dissolved! And what replaced it, in an instant, was an impenetrable green "fog." And when it had determined that it had terrified the very marrow out of the Homo Sapiens bones, it began to dissipate, like haze on a sunny day. And when it had, Doctors Kyle Janescki and Ed Hoffer slowly stood up from behind the boulder, and cautiously walked back up to the base of the monument. Others around MRS-I could see what they were seeing, as well. And the silence was deafening.

A blinding white light was pouring out of the titanic opening where the green fog had been. And in his fear, the first thought that came into Janescki's mind was the brilliant white tunnel of light encountered in cases of the Near Death Experience; but he quickly dismissed such morbid and dangerous ideas. As they approached closer to it, the light pouring out began to fade, too, yet they still could not discern what

ancient wonders lay within. When they were approximately fifty feet from the opening, they definitely *did* see something. Dr. Hoffer saw it first, only for a moment. Did something just fly out of the monument's vast new entrance?

"Kyle, tell me I haven't lost my mind," he said slowly.

"I'd be a hell of a lot happier if I was just running too low on O₂, than if I really saw what I think I just saw!"

"It - it had to be a trick of the light," Kyle stammered.

"Then you *did* see something, too!"

"I don't know what I saw." Two words flashed through his mind - 'golden wings.' He could not bring himself to utter them.

The closer they got to the Face, the faster their hearts began to beat. The fleeting spectral thing that flew out of the Martian edifice only heightened the strange spiritual epiphany that slowly began to creep into their subconscious. When they were thirty feet from it, the blinding light had faded enough for them to see clearly what now lay before them.

Maybe it was the spiritual energy inside, finally released after perhaps a million years; maybe it was the shocking realization that we were never alone, in spite of determined efforts to "prove" otherwise. Or could it be the shattering

paradox of Dr. Kyle Janescki's strict Protestant upbringing back on Earth versus what he now saw? Whatever was the determining factor, all the inexplicable things he had felt in his soul, seen with astonished eyes, and heard with heightened senses while on Mars - all of it came together in a searing spiritual climax, as he fell to his knees. "In my Father's house are many mansions," he murmured, hoping the verse from the Book of John would salve his swift and shattering 'Dark Night of the Soul.'

Ed Hoffer tried to speak, but could not. He felt weak, and leaned up against a large rock to steady himself. Finally, he said quietly, "I think you're going to have to postpone that prime rib in Cambridge." He knew it sounded silly, but it didn't matter - Janescki wasn't listening, anyway.

No sound. Deathly silence, save for the eerie whistling of the wind across the bitter cold and barren Martian sands.

"My God, Ed! Look at it!"

"The whole paradigm of human existence just changed - and I don't know what to say." He just stood, dumbfounded.

Everyone back at MRS-I base had been monitoring what Janescki and Hoffer were staring at, and by now, a crowd had gathered.

"This just isn't possible," someone said quietly. And indeed it wasn't. Yet here it was, just the same, in defiance of the laws of logic and nature. Comparisons to Shangri-La or the fabled Elysium Fields would have been an acceptable analogy. For what stretched before them, against all reason, was a vast expanse of sylvan countryside; multi-colored flowers on fairway-like endless fields of grass! There were verdant hills and valleys nestled around peaceful lakes and majestic waterfalls, cascading into mystical pools. Someone remarked that it was like looking at the Garden of Eden. And it went on seemingly forever. They could see winding paths, caves with perfectly square entrances, and lush forests as far as the eye could see. One might almost think it Earth-like, were it not for one incredible peculiarity. And as Robert Frost said so eloquently, 'That has made all the difference.' The difference being hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of glowing two-foot tall tetrahedron-shaped crystals. They rose from the ground on silvery rods, and straight as railroad tracks, they dotted this entire "Martian countryside" - up one hill and down another; around and through mountains, and circling lakes. And each one had ancient Martian symbols etched into them. And each of them was glowing red.

It looked like a small country had been ringed with Christmas lights. It was all very surrealistic.

Suddenly, a scientist noticed something that should have been immediately obvious to all - but oddly enough, wasn't:

"Hey, how can there be blue sky and sunlight *inside* this thing?"

"Dr. Janescki," someone shouted through his spacesuit's comm. System, "I'm reading 20.95% O₂ concentration, 1013 millibars of air pressure and - I don't get this - 75 degrees Fahrenheit. This isn't possible! We're open to the Martian elements outside!"

At that moment, one of the technicians monitoring conditions in the area shouted through the comm. Units: "Gentlemen, I think you'd better step outside the monument for a minute. Something anomalous seems to be developing in the upper atmosphere."

As two of the lead scientists at MRS-I, Janescki and Hoffer ran outside. Then they looked up.

"I thought I'd had enough excitement for one day," Janescki said.

"What else will this day bring?" Dr. Hoffer added. "Any second I expect Santa Claus to come down out of the sky!"

For when they gazed into the Martian sky, they observed something that could not possibly be.

"It's a rainbow! There can't be rainbows on Mars!" Janescki said. "They require water vapor. But it hasn't rained on Mars in a hundred millennia! And why can't I see the end of it? It seems to go on and on. Base, are we analyzing this atmospheric phenomenon?"

"Analyzing it?" base shot back. "Every orbiting probe sees it! Even the Extra Solar Planetary Array orbiting Earth is photographing it. Dr. Janescki, this thing is circling Mars like a ring."

Dr. Hoffer looked at Dr. Janescki, and each could only utter, "What?"

"Ed - they knew."

"Who knew? And knew - what?"

"The Martians! The Face. The symbols on the base. That idyllic countryside in there. It all fits. Which planet has water rain?"

"Earth."

"And which planet has rainbows after those rains?"

"Again, Earth." And it all began to sink in, to make sense.

"Oh, man! I see what you mean. The Martians *knew*. Seems like we triggered an automated welcoming committee."

Within a half-hour the planet-wide rainbow ring had dissipated. The long dead ancient race had said 'Hello'.

As Ed and Kyle walked back into the Face monument, Ed brought up an intriguing question. "Kyle, why now? I mean, we've had a presence on Mars for five years now. All of a sudden, we rubbed the magic lamp just the right way, so to speak? Is it the date? Is it us? Genetics? Some unknown form of spiritual field energy?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Make a good Doctoral thesis for some M.I.T. grad student. It could take us years to figure this out. If ever. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. We did it. We got in."

By now they had re-entered the Face. One brave scientist decided to take a calculated risk, seeing as how it had just been determined that conditions in here were completely Earth-like. He cautiously removed his helmet. And it felt good! It felt like - home. The others followed suit. Some closed their

eyes. And for a moment - they were home. Small town America, Thanksgiving dinners, picnics, and the sound of crickets on a warm summer's evening. That sweet, precious moment. But what was in front of them was like home. Or at least a damn good copy of it. But why? And how could this Earth-like environment be sustained, when the titanic monument was now open to the harsh Martian elements outside? They could only surmise it must have been some invisible force field at the newly opened entrance, that was beyond human technology.

While most scientists were engaged in taking readings and analyzing this strange new landscape, they all stopped dead in their tracks when a technician happened to touch a symbol on one of the glowing red crystals. Instantly a holographic image began floating in front of him. "It's a Martian Rosetta Stone! This whole immense monument is a titanic repository of their civilization!" he shouted, as others quickly gathered around this new revelation. The image clearly showed strange Martian symbols, and what appeared to be a massive spacecraft orbiting a planet; until someone looked at the image more closely.

"It's Earth! The Martians visited Earth."

When? No one knew. It might take a century or more to unlock the secrets of these uncountable crystals. But the initial conjecture was that - at least the crystals that they could see in this area - seemed to form the foundation of their language and basic concepts. It would no doubt be a long and laborious project, utilizing fourth generation quantum computers, and an army of linguistic experts, symbologists, mathematicians, and exo-biologists.

With an impossible sun shining down on an impossible alien forest, one geologist asked a fellow scientist, "What secrets about the Martians do you think we'll unlock in a hundred years?"

"I'll do you one better," he answered. "What if some of them - are still here?"