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THE SLAYING OF SPRING (excerpt)

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It had been thirty years since we had landed on Mars. Thirty years since we had set foot on the fertile, rich planet that we all had thought would only be good for mining iron and high grade titanium. When the first ship landed everyone expected the swelling of pride that came with the lunar landing. Parades, footprints on the moon, Cadillacs, Mankind, and jerky footage.

The thin atmosphere clawed at the hull of the Abassi. Stabilizer rockets fired and fired again trying to balance the ungainly ship on the head of a vaporous pin. The crew clenched their teeth, weathering the vibration and uncomfortable creaking noises that came from the frame of the ship, the stress searching for chinks in the fragile armor.

The twenty-six month journey had been a harrowing exercise in relentless boredom but entry into Mars's orbit had relieved the tension of being trapped with five other high-strung individuals. Pre-entry flight checks were done, contraband was stashed, and gear was tied down for the final approach lest an errant coffee cup brain some crew member like a ceramic pinball. Once everything was secure the crew strapped in and with an unconscious prayer tipped the ship down.

The crew was fixed on the altimeter and hull temperature gauges. They all knew that the craft had been designed to withstand 60 to 65 percent more stress than was needed to endure entry into Mars proper but screaming towards the red Martian surface at three hundred kilometers per hour was disconcerting to even the most rational mind. No sooner had Murray loosened his grip on the arm of his cradle, shaking his numb hand, than they heard a loud crack from the port side. The ship lurched to starboard. “Keep her steady.” Murray tried to hold a course but the ship listed hard and rolled. The captain rapidly checked all of his tank pressures looking for drops that would indicate ruptures in fuel lines or vessels and habitually crossed himself, “There’s a pressure drop in tank six but everything looks fine; I said keep her steady Murray, pay attention!” Murray cut the engine and waited until the ship began to right itself. “Sit tight.” He tripped the pilot light and they were under power again. The rear dropped a little and brought the chin of the ship to bear. The ship groaned as it settled onto the air. Murray grinned. Gill shook his head, “That was stupid, Murray.” “It worked.”

The whistling of the atmosphere grew louder and louder as the air became thicker. The captain checked the altimeter again and blew the charges that held in their security blankets. The drogue and main chutes deployed and filled with the thin, cold carbon dioxide, blooming open like a perfect white flower.

The creaking ship slowed, the rush of sound deadened and the crew was silent. They fired the last landing blasts and touched down one two three points, its steel and alloy feet pressing deep into the dusty surface. The hulk of the ship stood, its surface stained by oxidation, its shell creaking under contraction. Bloody and scared mankind had made it to Mars.

Shortly after landing and stretching their legs the people on board began their duties. They were a crack team of scientific prodigies, all hand picked for their particular talents, many peerless. Captain Gill Stride led them; his military background, two doctorates and a laundry list of special projects made him the man for the job. Victor Comm was only arguably less qualified. The remainder of the crew was comprised of Murray the engineer, chemists Leah Strutt and Jake Fidge, and a man named Hans Verner in charge of communications. The group had been isolated from each other by their respective training before the launch but the voyage to Mars had made up for any holes in their acquaintance.

The ship was built in three parts: propulsion in the rear, cabin in the front, and what equated to a huge toolbox separating the two. After landing the crew began unloading the huge crate. The tractor came first. It was an engineering marvel. Four-wheel drive, massive lifting and towing capacity, structurally stressed integrated polymer batteries, solar recharging array, life support backups and a wicked hydraulic lift arm, all at a scant 350 kilos. It was the paramount object of engineering lust. After the tractor came the shelters. There were three domes of increasing size: Number 1, the largest, was the lab and airlock...
They all sent short messages home to loved ones. Leah sent her mother and father a message. “It all went just as planned,” she stammered. “We dropped in and stuck the landing, just stuck it. We’re all fine really, we’re all fine.” She repeated various combinations of these sentences in different tones and at different volumes until she thought she sounded convincing.

Hans sent a message to his wife in Pittsburgh: “I had to mess with the alignment of the antenna but I built in enough adjustment that it all worked out...” he trailed off for a moment shuttering his eyes with his hands. “And its so beautiful here, I’ll bring you something special. Probably a rock from the look of things,” he said, smiling. “I love you.” He tried not to tell her any more of the technical details of how he had to set up the equipment. He said “I love you” two more times and was finished.

Victor sent his commercial mainly to his parents and his girlfriend but didn’t leave out anyone else that may have been listening. “I have my schedule all set out for the next week, we have a lot of work to do but, that’s what we’re here for, right?” He hugged the microphone close and said, “This place is going to be great, we just need to get cracking.”

Gill managed to rattled off all the requisite flight and landing data. “We had a little mishap on the way in, piece of debris caught the port nacelle and tore up some parts but other than that it went pretty smooth.” Like Leah, he reassured everyone at home that they were safe and sound. “The crew did a great job, real troopers.” He shot a half snide glance at Murray. “Real troopers.”

“Dropped in and stuck the landing. It was perfect. We’re all set up now and it looks like we’ll be fine for quite a while, we’ve got food and water for months and a clean place to live. Had a run-in with some debris but the ship doesn’t seem to be worse for the wear. This is going to be sweet, as long as I remember my helmet.” Murray tapped the red button and made an inviting motion towards Hans, “Fire it up Hans. Let’s see if

They had been sent following a set of Martian landers dispatched at the turn of the century. The first few landers did little more than look around and take a few pictures, then promptly ran out of batteries, or froze, or broke, or didn’t work at all. Over fifty years the robot landers improved but never seemed to do the planet justice. The government administration was driven to succeed by the need to leave a legacy, to follow up the lunar bases started twenty years earlier.

In 2065 the Abassi mission was sent out. Earth-orbit assembly of the vessel, rocket and ion propulsion, experimental burst communications technology. The scope and scale of the technologies involved culling all but the best engineers and technicians. To offset the massive cost of the mission the government sold off portions of the cost to private entities. Massive advertising campaigns promised that the great wealth and prospects on Mars were unimaginable. Cheaper, higher strength materials and a snazzy logo sold thousands of companies on the idea of investing in Mars. The company was looking for, in addition to minerals which the landers had found, any strata of soil or rock that offered promising evidence of water or at least held out a rumor of water. Water on Mars would mean a much higher, but still slim, chance of extraterrestrial life as well as a more diverse set of chemical compounds and processes. The company had provided a great deal of the funding and was interested because water, life or not, meant easier installation of vital industrial infrastructure that could increase the value of further exploration on the planet.

Gill and his team were to survey, above ground and below,
the area surrounding the landing zone. Running through drills practiced a thousand times, Gill and Victor mapped every ridge, gully and rock within a square kilometer. After the surface had been scoured for significant data and was found wanting, they began the laborious mapping of the various strata underground. Done in the old days with a pipe and elbow grease, mapping was now done with ground-penetrating radar that was able, with the help of a stiff impact, to read the density and composition of a volume of about a dozen cubic meters by listening for the echoes.

While pounding their way across the base they were getting static or interference from something. Victor checked and double checked all the monitors and relays, then finally in desperation called Gill. He ran all the same diagnostics that Victor had, was fine, everything was running like a finely tuned watch. "Hey Murray. Get over here," the captain barked. "What is it? I'm really busy repairing the capacitor array. It got banged up on entry," Murray paused. "We felt that little crack against the port nacelle. It tore up the insulating wrap and we cooked some caps." The captain returned a look of disgust and exasperation. "What do you make of this Murray?" said the captain, thumping over his shoulder at the round radar display. There were what appeared to be lines weaving across the screen, interconnecting, intertwining like a ghostly green net. "It looks like the GPR is messed up, maybe the hit damaged this too—it was a pretty good hit." "No Murray, they're tubes, underground tubes; we've checked six ways from Sunday and they're tubes under the surface," Murray scratched his head at the possibilities. Water, gas, radioactivity, lava, air, life, god only knew what could be running through those tunnels or where they came from. Murray smiled, his hands itching, and asked the question the others wanted to hear: "So when do we start digging?"

There was one tractor they had brought and converting it into a drilling rig really made the geologists and Murray unpopular at mess that evening. The little six-million-dollar tractor was tipped on its side, propped up against a shipping crate and outfitted with a jackshaft and a cobbled drilling rig. It was far from ideal, one drive axle used to drive a tube with a bit on the end: spin, shovel, spin, shovel.

Jake was on shovel duty, grunting, cussing and clearing the hole of debris. He stopped and asked Murray, hard at work on keeping the rig working, "You think there's critters underground? Little green men?" "Not a chance man. Whatever it is we'll be lucky if it isn't corrosive and won't eat through our suits." He chuckled and kicked the tractor, his initial enthusiasm for the project having waned in the week it had taken to carve out the few meters they had managed in their spare time. "Where's Gill?" asked Jake curtly. "Damn captain. Doesn't like sweating in his suit. He thinks smelling better will give him a better chance with Leah." Murray grinned. The intercom crackled as Hans piped up from Pod 1, "Enough shit talking guys, it's quitting time. Shut it down and come in for dinner." Murray hit the switch and when Jake tossed his shovel in the air, it flew up out of the divot in the Martian surface in a long smooth arc. It landed lightly in the low gravity, leaving another small print in the surface. Jake followed the shovel in a slightly less graceful arc and landed on his back. Murray gave him a kick as he stepped over him on the way to the airlock. It would be good to rinse off and get a hot meal.

At dinner the hall was noisy. Despite the side project of digging, everyone was still busy running their own projects. Gill and Victor were arguing about the best way get to the top of a nearby mountain for "surveying." The rest of the crew knew that Gill was an avid mountaineer and the peak to the south of the camp had been calling to him since they landed. He decided early on, being the captain and all, that the satellite map was not accurate enough and that he could set up a laser mapping system on the peak to get a perfect digital model of the larger surrounding area. Gill claimed it would ease his work load as well as provide invaluable insight into the formation of the geological forms in the area.

"There's no reason to climb that mountain and you know it," blurted Victor. "We have plenty of work to do in the lab, and with one of us always taken up in Murray's harebrained shoveling we don't have enough time as it is." He took one more bite of his less-than-appetizing meal and with mouth full pointed his fork at Gill. "It's a waste of resources and time. We
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have work to do and theories to disprove; the board
would believe, Vol. 14 [2006], Iss. 1, Art. 38
our hide if they find out that we came all the way to Mars to
dig holes and climb rock piles. They are going to want some
sort of return on their investment or we'll be in serious shit.”
Victor's fork rattled in his glass as he stood. “I'm getting back
to work for a few hours.” The rest of the table looked at him
and then at Gill, waiting for a response. A spat between the two
was not uncommon; Gill was always right and in command and
Victor was always right and subject to somebody else’s orders.
The hatch closed behind Victor and then at Gill, and then at their plates.
“Either way, Victor and I will be
heading out first thing tomorrow to climb up there and take a
look around. Jake, round up the gear we’ll need for the
surveying. Leah, are there any samples that you need from the
top of the hill?” Gill asked politely. “No, I’m fine. I just need to
keep up on the soil samples I already have,” Leah replied, intently
lancing an overcooked carrot like a small boar. “I’ve been behind
since day one.”

Murray picked at his reconstituted meal and his stomach
suddenly turned. He set his fork down and stood up collecting
his napkin and plate. “I’m going to turn in, long day tomorrow.”
He got a nod or two from the group all looking at their food
with the same contempt. He knew that each meal was carefully
balanced in calories and nutrients to provide exactly what he
needed to work. He felt ill when he saw the meals and wished
that he could get a real vegetable. A single stalk of celery, crisp,
green and wet, or maybe a tiny radish, anything alive. That was
the part that got to Murray that he wasn’t prepared for. He was
a fish out of water, enclosed in a silver bubble he could live in
successfully for months in space. But he was dead sure that,
while progress and technology could keep him breathing and
fed, it would have a hard time keeping him sane. He scraped
his perfect meal into the disposal, shut off the light, and tried
to think of something other than the hum of the ventilator or
the near vacuum outside waiting to empty his lungs.

The next morning Gill and Victor ventured out. It was a
good two miles to the foot of the mountain and another good
two mile hike to the top of the rocky crag. They took their time and
made it to the foot in less than two hours. While both men wore
over sixty pounds of gear the lower gravity compensated by
lightening their load. “It’s not so heavy, its just kind of awkward,”
Victor said. “This was easier in the pool back home,” Gill
laughed. “Well, there’s no quitting now; unless you plan on walking
off the job and off into the sunset?” “I figure we’ll both be
back in a few hours.” The going was easy, the sand and loose
rock giving way to larger crouching features of red and ochre.
Stepping here and there on larger rocks the two men clambered
up at a steady pace. “I still think this is a bad idea, Gill,” huffed
Victor breathing hard into his microphone. “Waste of time and
money if you ask me.” “Good thing I’m the Captain,” Gill
chided. They were halfway to the summit and both men had
settled into a rhythm with the slope dropping away behind them.
“Just think, we’re the first men on Mars. Not many people get
to be at the outer edge; it’s a privilege to see progress first
hand. So quit bitching.” Smiling, Gill turned, missed a step and
topped. Distracted by his reaming of Victor he had by chance
selected a rock that sheared off under his weight. The bulky
boot rode over the smooth fault in the rock and Gill palmed at
the thin air trying to regain his balance. Victor watched in
disbelief as the captain of the Abassi fell slowly down a steep
bit of slope peeking over the edge of progress.