THE CANALS OF DEATH

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**Year 1877**

Giovanni Schiaparelli gaped at the image he saw through his telescope, nearly injuring his eye. It was impossible. The sublime picture of the planet thousands of kilometres away, which he was observing, could revolutionize astronomy.

His legs were weak from hours of standing at the same spot, peering into the telescope as he waited for the air to clear up and grant him a few seconds of clear observation. He stumbled around his cluttered laboratory, grabbing a piece of paper and an old pen from the mess around him before returning to the telescope.

Peering up its narrow tube, he found the Red Planet gone from its viewing glass. The kilometres of air separating his telescope from Mars had gone into one of their capricious routines of thermal expansion and contraction again, preventing him from clearly viewing the object of his studies.

Quickly setting pen on paper, he began drawing what he had seen from memory. He made sure it was as accurate as possible, lest he become the subject of ridicule among his fellow scientists. The announcement he was planning to make could either be the pinnacle of his career or the end of it. Any mistake now and he could be ostracized from his beloved scientific community and ridiculed for the rest of his life.

He hadn’t managed to get a clear view of Mars again, but he had decided to go ahead and publish what he had seen. He couldn’t afford to let another astronomer beat him to this.

Days later, his tidily drawn and neatly labelled diagram of the surface of Mars was in every reputed scientific journal in Europe. Some newspapers even went so far as to hail his discovery as proof of life on Mars. For, Schiaparelli had seen ‘channels’ on Mars.

Labelled ‘canali’ in his native Italian, the word had been mis-transliterated into canals in English. Soon, most astronomers believed that he was claiming to have seen water-carrying canals on the surface of Mars.

Which really hadn’t been his intention. He had seen ‘channels’ on the surface. He had very clearly stated that these channels might or might not be natural. But thanks to the transliteration of channels into canals, a good deal of overexcited and inaccurate articles by newspapers, and a few astronomers like Percival Lowell, his discovery was being made out to be a claim that life on Mars existed. His reputation was at stake.

Decades later, the ‘Canals on Mars’ theory was finally disproved by a group of astronomers, who put it down to an optical illusion. Life did not, or could not, exist on Mars. Or so everybody thought.

**Year 2036**

Robert Tranter looked at the massive screen in front of him, which displayed detailed information about the mission he was about to head. Surrounding him, seated, staring into their computer monitors, their faces pictures of concentration, were NASA’s finest. Right here, at the Houston mission control centre, he was about to coordinate the most far-reaching manned space mission of all time.

There had been plans to colonise Mars all the way back from 2017. However, to accomplish this goal, much more data needed to be collected. From the year 2017 onwards, NASA had partnered with leading space agencies from around the world to achieve the colonization of the Red Planet.

The first goal, of course, was to establish a viable colony on the closest astronomical body to the earth – the Moon. This having been accomplished in 2021, NASA put the experience gained from this mission to work, beginning the collection of data from Mars in order to establish a permanent colony.

Three probes had been sent to the Red Planet’s surface, and five more put in orbit. A multi-station supply chain had been established between Earth and Mars. All that remained was a manned exploratory mission to confirm what probe missions had seen. NASA would then be all set for the actual colonization mission. That manned exploratory mission was being carried out now.

Mars having been named after the Roman God of War, it was thought only apt to name this mission after another God of War, albeit the Greek one. Ares One would be carrying the first humans to explore Mars’ surface.

A five-member astronaut team had been selected to carry out the mission. On a year long journey to Mars, they were to stop at the resupply stations to gather some of the equipment they would need to perform a complete geotechnical investigation, spectrum analysis, climate analysis, and more of the area in which the Martian colony was to be established. They were to confirm whether the site chosen based on data supplied by the many probes used to scan Mars was suitable.

If, for some reason, the site proved to be unsafe or unviable, they were to investigate the other three sites chosen by the scanning missions.
The Ares crew was also to live on Mars for a five-year period before returning, as NASA monitored their living conditions and decided whether life on Mars would have negative effects on human health.

The five-member team chosen for the mission had already been trained, and was going through their final checklists before the launch, which was to take place in a couple of hours.

Robert Tranter had nothing to do with their training. His job was to make sure the Ares spacecraft was fully functional, and that its many onboard systems were in optimal condition.

What he had also been assigned to do was discreetly investigate the somewhat disturbing readings the satellite in sector 54667, Mars orbit, had picked up. It had, in one of the ten pictures it took of Mars every hour, sent back what seemed to be an impossible image of the surface.

The highly detailed imagery included channels on the surface of Mars. They were everywhere, crisscrossing and weaving through the Martian surface in droves. They seemed to originate at the ice caps.

Ordinarily, NASA would have dismissed the image as a temporary camera malfunction. What had really turned heads in the analysis department was the picture’s disturbing similarity to a drawing made centuries earlier by an Italian astronomer – Giovanni Schiaparelli.

Tranter could not find an explanation for this phenomenon. Schiaparelli’s drawing had long since been proven to be the result of an optical illusion. Maybe the probe’s malfunction was a coincidence.

Having found nothing to the contrary, he only had this to say when he submitted his report to the NASA high command, which then decided to carry out the mission anyway. If the Ares mission discovered these anomalies as it approached the Martian surface, it could always temporarily abort the mission to land until further information could be gathered.

Tranter had advised a more cautious approach, involving more probing missions before Ares One took off, but an impatient and budget constrained high command had brushed the suggestions off.

Now all he could do was make sure Ares One was functioning properly. When Ares finally launched, he was sure he had done everything right. Now, he could only sit back in his chair at NASA and hope for the best.

Near Mars Orbit
Ares One was reaching the end of its year long journey. Its commander, Mark Warner, sat in the bridge with his team of four astronauts, analyzing the readings the sensors gathered. In a final concession to Tranter, NASA had told the Ares One crew to be alert and exercise extreme caution as they landed on Mars.

Warner and his crew, however, found no abnormal readings. After reporting to NASA and receiving clearance to land, they proceeded through the standard landing procedures, as stipulated by NASA after the establishment of the moon colony.

It took them less than ten minutes to use their thrusters to slowly move down through Mars’ very thin atmosphere, before activating their landing gear as they approached the planet’s surface.

As they cleared the lower atmosphere, they received a nasty shock. Below them was not the Mars they knew and had studied. Mars was still a Red Planet with craters, but between those craters were channels and tunnels. Faintly visible, they looked a lot like the tunnels used on earth by supersonic trains and for the transportation of water.

The channels they could see were faint and small, no bigger than a metre or so in breadth. However, sensor scans seemed to indicate that these were simply smaller distributaries which apparently emptied into larger tunnels many meters in diameter.

What was even more astounding was the fact that none of the probes on Mars, nor any of the scans or pictures taken by astronomers had depicted these channels. Ares One’s sensors had not picked them up until the ship passed some invisible barrier in the atmosphere. Now, even as the crew attempted to signal home to report their discovery, the barrier seemed to have sealed – a massive, transparent blockade somewhere in the Martian sky, jamming their signals and their sensors.

Warner decided to carry out the basic instrumental analysis he had been ordered to do and then track down the source of the barrier before taking off. His crew agreed with him, each of them too curious to take off without figuring out what was blocking their communications.

The biggest mystery of all, of course, was that of the channels.

Centuries Ago
The Martian civil war was reaching its end after years of bitter fighting between the Martian Government and the organization trying to overthrow it. The Government’s peacekeeping forces had finally defeated the rebels in pitched battles all over Mars and...
boxed them into one final stronghold – the region of Kitmoka, the first staging post of the insurgence and the site of one of the two repositories of the planet’s banned and ageing nuclear arsenal, marked for destruction.

A crazy religious cult had claimed that the Martian environmental problems of water scarcity caused by decreasing reserves in the polar ice caps, incessant floods and dust storms were God’s way of punishing society for its evils. It urged Martians to perform penance by joining the cult, and cleanse society of its ills by taking over the administration, overthrowing the government and massacring all non-believers. This mass slaughter was proclaimed as being a way to remove the ‘impurity’ from society.

The advanced, scientifically centred and educated Martian majority would normally have ignored this cult, even assisting government efforts to destroy it. However, the Martians had recently had to deal with multiple problems including famine, death and destruction caused by storms, and a corrupt administration and upper class which siphoned off all the planet’s resources and wealth, leaving the Martian majority in poverty.

This corrupt administration was, ironically, the result of scientific advancement. Newer discoveries had given a boost to industry, resulting in a rapid gain of wealth for entrepreneurs and industrialists. This wealth was soon used by these powerful men to bribe Government officers and control the administration of Mars to further their own ends. Gullible and greedy Government officers used the opportunity to escape the strict and socialist Martian code of law. Soon, the wealthy had a vast number of sources of yet more wealth, while the middle and lower classes languished in poverty, deepening the economic divide.

The cult’s extremism appealed to the poorer Martians as the only way they had to fight for themselves.

The civil war had begun as millions of middle-class Martians joined the rebel movement. While these Martians did not approve of the cult’s extremist policies at first, consistent brainwashing after they joined it had resulted in their incorporation into its army of hoodlums.

Chaos resulted as the cult began disrupting Government efforts to administer Mars. A horror-struck government at once took measures to wipe out corruption and extend relief to disaster ravaged Mars. It was too late.

In a battle that took hundreds of years, however, the Government carried out economic and socialist reforms, and continually drew to its side the thousands of disgruntled Martians who had previously joined the rebels because of its unjust policies.

A huge offensive led to the capturing of Kitmoka. However, the cult’s members were not to be defeated. If they were going down, they would take the rest of Mars with them, cleansing Martian society as they were supposed to be. In a desperado mission, they gained control of Kitmoka’s nuclear stockpile and annihilated all life on the planet in a nuclear crucible.

Over time, all that was left of Martian society was covered with dust – a product of the dust storms that ravaged Mars’ surface. The ashes of a civilization long dead remained covered and forgotten.

All that was left of Martian civilization was the canal system, used to draw water from the poles to the cities, and as a mode of transport.

Besides this, however, a much more potent remnant survived below the surface, waiting to be discovered.

The Government’s main computer system, which hacked all of Earth’s probe signals was intact. It created a shield to prevent Terran observation of Mars, in order to allow Earth to develop without Martian influence. Buried deep underground with its own energy sources, it survived the nuclear holocaust.

Also intact was the second repository of thousands of nuclear warheads, corroded by centuries of neglect and ready to explode at the slightest disturbance. These warheads were, unfortunately, positioned directly below Ares’ landing site.

**Year 2037 – Mars**

Warner was quite happy with the rate at which his ship’s laser drill was proceeding. All other tests having been performed, only the drilling for surface samples was left. He had found nothing out of the ordinary, except for a slightly elevated radiation count.

NASA had instructed his crew to drill 200 meters below the surface, and take samples along the drill route for a geotechnical investigation. As the drill proceeded downward, he found a rapid increase in radiation levels. He decided to check for the source once the drilling was complete. NASA could not place a colony right on top of radioactive material.

His sensors revealed only hard rock below the drilling site, with a few large abnormalities. He had maneuvered the drill to get a closer look. As he approached the irregularity in his readings, he frowned. This was not natural. The irregularity was a one kilometre by one kilometre by one kilometre cubical chamber, made of a material he couldn’t identify, with several smaller chambers attached. Moving the drill closer, he engaged onboard sensors.

The heat from the drill melted the outer walls of the ancient chamber housing the remaining nuclear weapons, triggering a massive explosion. In less than a second, he and his team were gone, and a crater the size of an ocean had formed on Mars’ surface.

**Year 2037 – Earth**

The scientific director of NASA spoke without revealing the emotions clawing at his insides.

“Our scans reveal that the team is gone, and the main landing site on Mars’ surface has been destroyed. A number of our probes and satellites in orbit are gone as well, because of chunks of Mars’ surface blown outward by some kind of explosion. We can’t get accurate scans of the surface. We will try to maneuver the remaining probes to get a better look, and see if the team has somehow survived.”

Above him, thousands of Kilometres away, Mars waited for the next human expedition to land on its surface. It was not out of surprises yet.

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