

**ONCE THEY SEE YOU
NOWHERE IS SAFE.**

**ERIC
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ECHOES OF OLYMPUS MONS

Olympus One colony students Hal Leon and Akio Sato have made history. Their invention, a camera that images dark matter, has had its first successful test; but what it reveals may put human life on Mars in jeopardy.

Hal believes that the strange animalistic silhouettes hidden in the dark matter web prove his theories. The wiry, inhuman forms appear to look to the sky at some invisible threat before they're wiped away by a wave of nothingness that resets the dark matter web to normal, until it all repeats again—a never-ending cycle.

That is, until something else appears in the dark matter web, and students and colonists alike start dying under mysterious circumstances. Can Hal and Akio figure out what's causing these grisly murders, and does the dark matter camera somehow hold the key to the mystery?

**ECHOES OF
OLYMPUS MONS**

**A NOVEL BY
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II

I jerked awake as Akio dumped a bucket of water over my unconscious body.

"Wake up, damn it!" Akio said.

I sat up. "What the hell was that for?"

She sat the bucket down next to the couch and pointed to the clock on her tablet's screen.

"It's almost noon, Hal," Akio said. "You slept through your morning class."

I wiped my face with my palms and watched the water drip off the plastic couch. It pooled onto the hard-plastic floor and slipped down a drain close by. Can't have anything wasted on Mars. Everything must be recycled.

I looked back into Akio's dull brown eyes.

"I'm sure they'll live without me for a day," I said. "You could have just nudged me awake, you know?"

"No," she said. "I tried that. You kept tossing and turning, muttering in your sleep about something. I was almost worried."

I rubbed my eyes. "I must have been more exhausted than I thought..."

"Yeah, maybe. I grabbed your assignments for you, and you can have a copy of my notes to study from. You can thank me later."

That wasn't it. My head felt heavy, as if I hadn't rested at all. I felt the pang of a memory just out of reach. Perhaps from some kind of nightmare?

I got up, strolled over to the kitchen; grabbed the coffee pot, dumped it, refilled it, snatched a coffee packet, turned the brewer on.

"You should get in touch with your professors," Akio said.

"Can't." The coffee pot started to drip, pooling precious black gold into the bottom of the pot.

"Why not?"

"Because we're going on walkabout today."

Her eyes blinked several times while she processed the idea. "Wolfrik will lose his mind if we do that again. If they knew what we did last night—"

"Apparently Wolfrik doesn't care what I do anymore."

"I guess that makes me guilty by association?"

"You're welcome."

"Why do we even need to go outside? The hydrogen cell is stable. Why not just test it in here?"

"I want to see how dark matter interacts with the planet. That's not something we're going to see if we limit our focus to inside the cramped corridors here. Panoramic shots don't work too well inside."

"We should still do some tests inside."

"And we'll do that, but the big picture is out there."

The coffee-pot was almost a quarter of the way full; I pulled it out prematurely and poured myself a cup, then sat at the counter, watching the steam swirl into the air. Akio walked around and grabbed a cup from the sink, rinsed and washed it with her hands. She waited for there to be enough coffee for another cup, poured herself a generous amount, then took the seat opposite me.

"You need to see the panorama in high definition," I said.

"From last night?"

I took a long sip. "Yes. There's a curious aspect of it I want your opinion about before we go out."

"Now you're assuming I'll go." She leaned back, a slight grin wrinkling the skin of her left cheek.

"You will once you see what we got from the test."

"That good?"

"See for yourself." I fetched my tablet from across the living room, brought up the panorama and handed it off to her.

She took it in her dainty hands. Her eyes went wide as she manipulated the image, twisting it and moving it in any direction she could. I moved behind her to see what she was looking at.

"What is the glow around us?" she said.

"Getting to that," I said, parrying her finger away and focusing on the part of the image I'd seen last night. "Look at this sector here. See that shape there?"

She nodded. "What is that?"

"Not sure."

"Could be an artifact...or maybe it's just repeating the glow around us farther in the image?"

"If that was the case, why are its limbs in completely different positions than ours? In any case, we won't know for sure until we get up to the summit of Olympus Mons and run another test."

She set the tablet down and rubbed her eyes. "Forget it. You know how long it would take us to walk up to the summit?"

"That's why we're not going to walk."

She pushed me back and walked off to the coffee-pot to pour herself another cup. "You better not be suggesting we steal a rover."

She looked me in the eye; I grinned.

"That's exactly what you're thinking!" she said.

"It'll be easy," I said. "You know the security codes for the hangar anyway, they'll never know that one's even missing."

"And what if something goes wrong? What if the hydrogen cells give out halfway up?"

"Then we use the solar cells."

"What if we crash and the air tanks rupture?"

"Then we die."

She glared at me. "Yeah, I'm out, sorry."

"All great discoveries come with a certain amount of risk. Mars is a dangerous world, yes, but so is living here. Do you realize that any number of things going wrong here could spell doom for us all?"

"What's your point?"

"What's the difference if it happens out there or in here? Death is death."

She tried to avoid my gaze.

"I'll tell you what the difference is, Akio, out there you'll be helping to break ground on something no one's ever seen. A new technology that could open the door to the universe for us."

"A new technology?" She shook her head. "Aren't you making it sound a bit too grandiose? We invented a camera that images dark matter, not a machine that manipulates it."

"And yet, this may grant us the data we need to prove our hypothesis. Look at the glow around us and the silhouette again, there's something you're missing."

She stared at it for a time, squinting and shifting the perspective. "I don't get it."

"The glowing dark matter concentrations around us could be positive evidence for non-local consciousness."

She rolled her eyes. "Not this crap again. I thought you gave up that outdated theory?"

"Just because a theory is unpopular does not mean it isn't true."

"One might suggest the same thing of God, and you're adamantly against the notion that one exists."

"There's a big difference between some bearded idiot sitting in a chair, governing all life in the known universe with a set of arbitrary rules, and the existence of non-local consciousness."

"Not from where I'm sitting. I think it's been widely proven that human consciousness is a product of the brain and nothing more."

"It might be more accepted, but the evidence doesn't necessarily suggest that. There are a lot of things that your theory doesn't explain, like out-of-body-near-death-experiences where the subject is able to perceive their own body and surroundings and even travel to other places before being revived—"

"Clearly just a fabrication of events created by the brain to explain the lack of activity—there's nothing to suggest that the subject's consciousness magically got up and walked off."

"Then how do you explain instances where the subject is able to perceive events and areas that they never could have known of prior to having the experience?"

"Lucky guesses, or maybe the subject overheard bits of conversation that led their subconscious mind to piece together the information later."

"That's a bit of a stretch."

"Not as big as yours."

"Okay, then what about the observer effect?"

"What's that got to do with non-local consciousness?"

"Everything. How do you think the state and spin of an entangled particle is instantly described, if not through a transference of information that transcends the physical relationship of matter? We see this in other forms of matter, where they behave as a wave when observed, and as a particle when they're not being observed by a conscious subject. It's as though the sentient, conscious observer acts as a probability generator when it comes to how it interacts with reality."

"Probability generator—where do you get this stuff?" She made a face at me. "I don't see how the observer effect is affected one way or another by where consciousness comes from. For all you know, dark matter might act as a conduit for the transference of information that serves to facilitate evolution, perhaps as some kind of means of an exchange of information from different parts of the universe. It doesn't mean our mind exists somewhere else."

"And yet, we have the same hypothesis. We arrive at it from different points of view, but what is more plausible for the generation, evolution and organization of complex life in our universe? Your way of thinking—*boring*—" I paused for dramatic effect. Akio rolled her eyes, but I could tell she was holding her breath, so she wouldn't burst out in laughter at my

theatrics. “—or, that there are many levels of consciousness, that dark matter *is* consciousness, or is a means of connecting it to biological forms, and that thereby drives and *wills* life into existence.”

“I still like my version better.” She smiled, then threw a wadded-up piece of paper at my head. “I think you trivialize the role of the brain. The brain is awesome! Who’s to say that panspermia isn’t a direct result of information being downloaded into the dark matter web and transported across the known universe, thereby causing life to happen on worlds where it’s possible?”

“Dark matter web?” I leaned back.

“You like it?”

I smiled. “Has a nice ring to it.”

We sat silent for a few minutes drinking our coffee.

I leaned forward. “Fine, then prove me wrong. We can even make a wager on the outcome.”

“Provided I help you hijack a rover and violate about thirty different safety regulations?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your wager?”

“I’ll clean the dorm room for the rest of our academic career here on Olympus Mons if you prove me wrong.”

“No thanks, I’ll pass, your idea of cleaning still leaves me with a metric ton of work to do.”

“Fine, then I’ll clean it to your specifications for that period of time.”

“With no complaints or bellowing?”

“Sure.”

She sighed. “Fine, damn it, I’ll do it.”

I smiled. “I knew you’d come to your senses.”

“However.” She raised a finger into the air.

“Damn it.” I sighed, planting my head on the counter. “What is it? And don’t say that you want me to clean naked, that’s not happening.”

“You have to try requisitioning the rover first...though that would be a nice touch.”

“No, it wouldn’t, and they’ll deny us. Connor Wilson fucked that up for us.”

“And if they do, we’ll try it your way.” She grinned. She had me. “The look on your face tells me everything I need to know.”

"Which is?"

"That you'll do it, even if you despise the idea."

I finished my coffee and used my tablet to set up an appointment to talk with requisitions.

2

Akio went ahead to her next class while I strolled over to requisitions. The student rep there was eating one of those new Salad in a Box things that Milkyway Unlimited sent up with the last shipment of supplies. He chewed the green and yellow food bar with all of the slow, deliberate motion of a cow that's just realized how relaxing it is to chew grass and stare into oblivion.

I knocked on the desk. His thin, tired eyes met mine, and he instantly knew me. "Whatever it is, I'm sure you should be in class, Geraldo."

"Hal," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "What do you want?"

"I'm on a mission," I said. "Class project."

"Which class?" His left eyebrow rose. Where did I know this guy from?

"Planetary Physics? I need to do some surface tests on Olympus Mons for the upcoming mid-term."

"Oh, the class you got kicked out of yesterday?" He chuckled. "Trying to salvage what's left of your grade after insulting Professor Brown?"

"Yes, that, exactly that." I smiled, leaned in. "Look, I know I screwed up, and I've got to do something big to make an impression on her."

"I'd be more than glad to help, as long as it falls within safety regulations. What would you like to requisition?"

"A rover."

His dreadlocks almost slapped me in the face as he reeled back in laughter, holding his stomach and everything.

"Are you finished?" I asked.

"Wolfrik would never allow someone with your reputation for insubordination to take a rover out onto the surface!" He shook his head. "You can put in for the request, but I can't promise anything."

I nodded, and begrudgingly put in my request for the rover on the terminal next to captain jackass. I left, headed for engineering to pick up another bottle of "gin."

Dane avoided my gaze when he saw me coming down the corridor. He was looking left and right at his station, dark circles floated beneath his sunken eyes. This time of day, the rest of the Engineering department was usually at lunch, and Dane liked to eat his right in this corridor, where his customers could find him.

"Man, I just took care of you a couple days ago," Dane said. "You wanna burn my whole supply or something?"

"You make it sound like you're dealing in meth or something."

"Quiet down, will you?" His voice transformed into a hushed whisper as he looked behind me. Paranoia was painted on his sweaty face.

"Relax, I just want a bottle."

"Which flavor? I'm working on some new flavors, might even be able to mimic the taste of whiskey soon."

I shrugged. "Surprise me."

Dane grinned. He spun around on his butt, setting his ration bar on the plastic food tray next to him. He hopped to his feet with all the grace of an emaciated stray dog and walked around the corner. I followed him to the door to a supply room, which hissed open after he put in an access code on the side panel. Once we were inside, the door shut, and Dane dug his fingers into a hidden access panel in the wall. He reached his arm into darkness, the sound of bottles clanking together caressed my ears—music to my soul—and he produced a large bottle of clear liquid the size of my forearm, then shut the compartment and sealed it with a love tap from his elbow.

The bottle was cool to the touch when he placed it in my hands. There was a label: CHERRY. "What do I owe you?"

"A favor when I ask for it," he said.

"What'll it be this time? Hacking the feeds again so you can sneak into the showers, a prank against one of your fellow workers in Engineering, or, perhaps, supplies?"

He smacked my arm. "Shush!" Then he came in closer, whispering. "Supplies. Soon. This batch won't last forever, especially with you around, and I can't be seen sneaking into the greenhouse."

"So, that's where you get your corn?"

He nodded. "They're wise to me, though. Put up cameras and shit from what I hear."

"I have ways around cameras."

"Good, let me know when you can get me this list." He palmed a small piece of paper into my bag. "Don't look back when you leave, Anderson is getting suspicious."

"You still have the security cameras looped?"

He nodded. "Thanks to you."

"And don't forget it."

We both left the supply room, and I turned away from Dane and left him to his rations and solitude.

When I stepped back into the main corridor, a message ping rang off my tablet. I grabbed at my bag and eyed the message.

I gritted my teeth, squeezed my free hand into a tight fist until my fingers ached.

REQUISITION ORDER: DENIED

Good, I didn't want their fucking help anyway.

3

After depositing my cherry gin at home, I made my way over to the greenhouse. Eyes were on me. Botany majors filled the corridor and I stood out like a dead fly in my mom's menudo. I needed to blend in, and I'd need an alibi for later.

I found my way into one of the research labs. It was empty, thankfully. The lab smelled of fertilizer, and various species of plants were arranged on each desk. A few ferns, a common weed, and a dead watermelon plant that stank like Akio's feet after using the gym. I saw the answer to my problem on the back of a chair: a hooded lab coat and a pair of goggles.

I donned the garb of the botany expert and hoped to a nonexistent God that no one asked me anything about plants.

There were fewer stares now that my gear was in fashion. I made my way to the greenhouse. The door was open, so I walked right in like I belonged. The blood drained from my face.

The greenhouse was a glass dome. It always scared the shit out of me, even though everyone claimed it was made of a reinforced polymer. It was like standing on the surface of the planet without any protection at all.

Standing on the surface of the red planet can be a calming and surreal experience, and I've often wished that I could experience the sunrise without the need for an EVA suit, but this

was almost nightmarish. The old fears of vacuum exposure came creeping out as I attempted to get ahold of myself.

I took a deep breath and focused on the plants. That helped.

I slapped the power switch on the wall, turning on the heat lamp that dangled from a magnetic track following the curve of the dome—hoping it might be a distraction from the Martian horizon. I reached inside my bag and withdrew several large plastic bags. I made my way through the greenhouse, picking corn and sugar cane. The other two items on my list—water and yeast—could be found later.

Once the bags were full, I walked right out into the corridor—keeping my head down. There were only a handful of people in the corridor. I got halfway down it, thinking I'd gotten away with it, when I saw her Armada tattoo.

Gila was talking to a friend of hers in the hall. I tried to scoot past her, but her eyes caught mine. My gut sank.

"Hal?" she said, sounding both excited and accusatory.

Her friend crossed her arms and glared at me.

"Gila!" I grabbed both bags with my left hand and waved at her, approaching them. If I was lucky, they wouldn't notice the bags.

"What are you doing all the way over here?" Her eyes drifted down to the bags, eyebrows scrunching together. "And, why are you wearing one of our lab coats..."

"Are you stealing plants?" Her friend's voice had a slight African accent to it. "That is a major violation."

"Chill, Dalla," Gila said, raising her hand. "I'm sure Hal has a logical explanation for this."

"Right," I said, wracking my brain to come up with some kind of explanation that wouldn't end with Wolfrik coming after me for stealing from the botany domes, and Dane from killing me in my sleep if it all led back to him. "It's...for an experiment?"

"Experiment?" Gila's African friend did not look the least bit convinced. I was officially in panic mode.

Gila nodded slowly. There was a tense silence between the three of us. I was sure that I was dead.

"Right!" Gila said. "I did say that I'd help you with that project!"

I nodded. "Gila gave me access to one of the botany domes so I could get a head start."

"Uh-huh." Her friend did not look convinced. She shrugged and turned, patting Gila on the shoulder. "Whatever, plants are dumb anyway. I'll see you later, Gila."

"Later," Gila said.

Once her friend was out of earshot, Gila pinched my arm.

"Ouch, what the hell?"

"Stealing! Really, Hal?"

I grinned, tossing the bag over my shoulder. "If you're so mad, why'd you cover for me?"

Gila shrugged. "I figure you're getting it for Dane. I've been known to partake."

"Really now?" I laughed. "Now that *is* a surprise."

"Anyway, I need to get to my next class, and you need to get those out of here before someone starts asking questions."

"Right."

Gila turned and headed down the hall. I proceeded to get the hell out of that sector before someone else recognized me. I'd send Dane a message later about picking his stuff up. For now, it was time to figure out how to steal a rover without getting expelled.

Returning to the dorm, I set the bags of ill-gotten corn and sugarcane in my room, then opened up my tablet and sent Akio a message.

Hal: *Guess what?*

I sat on the couch and stared at the dark matter camera. If we were going to do this, it had to be done right. There had to be no chance of us getting caught.

Akio: *You've finally realized your life long goal is to open up a taco truck on Mars.*

Hal: *Racist. I don't even like tacos.*

Hal: *No, our request got denied.*

Akio: *Shit.*

Hal: *Yeah...*

Akio: *So...that means...*

Hal: *Yeah, we'll talk about it when you get home. I wanted to get the data today, but I don't think we can do it till the weekend anyway, the trip would probably take two Sols, and someone would notice.*

Akio: *Right. Weekend it is then.*

Akio: *Oh, shit, Prof. Morison is looking right at me. TTYL.*

I set the tablet down.

"Can I do this?" If we got caught, it could mean expulsion. For a moment, I thought about what might happen if I was forced to return to Earth... I was certain my father would just

love it if I came home a failure, my head hung in shame and my name forever tarnished within academia. I wrung my hands together until they became numb.

The dark matter camera meant more than even Olympus One did to me. In a sense, it was the entire reason I'd come here to begin with. But, if we could prove our hypothesis...maybe it wouldn't matter how many rules we broke to do it?

I shook my head, stood up, and made myself a cup of coffee.

"No," I said to no one but the walls and the mess of wires in our lab.

I told myself there was no way in hell we could get caught. Sipping a hot cup of coffee seemed to reinforce this idea. We could hack one of the rovers to look as if it'd been put on the maintenance schedule. No one would know it was missing.

If Akio and I were considered one being, we'd probably be the best hacker on Mars. There weren't many people on Mars to begin with, but still.

I sighed.

It was going to be a long wait till the weekend.

Thanks for Reading Chapter 2!

