

**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?

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**A NOVEL BY  
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## **III**

Lightning struck the surface sporadically; the dust rolled itself together like a thousand gargantuan fingers squeezing into a mighty fist. The rover's cage rattled over crimson rocks and spat sand that hadn't been disturbed in millions of years, splashing it backward like a boat cutting through the ocean—if the ocean had gravity of 0.4 Gs. I kept my hands tight around the controls. Akio had kept her helmet and gloves on the whole time since we'd left Olympus One.

I looked at her and grinned sheepishly.

"Fuck you," she said. "I don't wanna take any chances."

"Hey, I didn't say anything."

"Yeah, your stupid face said it all."

I chuckled, and she flipped me off.

Olympus Mons was about the size of France, but Olympus One was situated just a few kilometers up the gradual incline of the volcano, so the journey would take a little over one Sol at thirty-five kph, not taking into account the fact that the rover's speed typically varied due to terrain and incline severity.

I kept the comms down, and the jamming frequency up so the Admins couldn't call the rover back. We could always turn those back on if we got ourselves into any trouble.

"Is the storm going to hit us?" Akio asked.

"The HUD's telling me it's going to miss us by a few kilometers," I said.

"Oh, comforting. Why did I let you talk me into this again?"

"Because you're a real scientist, and not one of those neck-bearded pansies who never leave Olympus One. Also, fame. Also, money."

She rolled her eyes. "Right. How could I forget?"

I watched the dust storm rake its claws across the horizon to my left, red-orange dust licking up from the surface in waves, lightning dancing in the darkness. I tried to imagine what it might be like to be consumed by the storm. Martian winds typically never get any more intense than sixty miles per hour, but that wasn't the chief concern being inside one. Microscopic rocks and debris have a slight electric charge to them, and those lightning bolts could be a big problem if one hit the rover. The biggest challenge would be navigation. Sure, there'd be GPS, but that only told you where you were and where you were going, not what was in front of you and if you were heading for anything that might kill you.

Hours passed, light faded into night, and the controls became stiff in my hands. It was a safety measure baked into the rover to ensure that the stupid human driving it didn't run a four-billion-dollar piece of equipment straight into a giant rock or a crater. I relaxed my grip and let the AI do its thing, allowing me a break to look at the stars.

The constellation Draco drifted across the horizon. The stars glistened like tiny white fires in the night. It reminded me of the surreal feeling of driving through the countryside with nothing but a tank full of gas and a pollution-free sky for company years ago.

Akio had fallen asleep, using some leftover HAB canvas from some old class experiment as a makeshift pillow.

She had the right idea, at least. I set the computer housed in the gauntlet of my EVA suit to wake me before sunrise. I set my seat to recline and laid my head back against the chair's headrest.

I watched the stars for a while as sleep crept up on me.

## 2

This time, when I dreamed, I remembered it vividly.

I stood on the surface of the red planet. The constellation Draco was bright above me. Each star was a concentration of dark matter within the violet web. Striations stretched from the stars, scattered across the dark matter web, through my own body. Raised me up off of my feet, dangling me like a puppet.

There was something on the horizon, a jagged spire of a silhouette blacker than even the night sky.

A sense of panic tore through me when I saw it. I couldn't move anymore.

"Hal," Akio's voice called to me. Her voice seemed strangely detached.

I felt something move my head to the right.

Akio was still in her EVA suit, but the screen on her gauntlet was dead. She was dangling from threads composed of dark matter, just like me. Her eyes were white, her lips cold.

I woke up wondering where her voice had come from. My heart was racing. I almost reached out and shook Akio awake, but seeing her shallow breathing from inside her suit stopped me.

I looked at my gauntlet. It was still three hours till my alarm would sound.

I couldn't sleep.

## 3

Before I knew it, the sun was rising through that familiar blue haze against the highest reaches of Olympus Mons's caldera. The coming light gave me back control of the rover, and I guided it down a hill, inside the caldera, and kept driving until I found a large flat area that would suffice for our experiment. By the time I came to a stop, the sky had already transitioned from blue to butterscotch.

I nudged Akio's shoulder. "Wake up. We're here."

She fumbled in her seat. "We're alive?"

"Yes. The storm missed us, like I said." I grinned. "You ready to go outside?"

"You're going to be the death of me, aren't you?"

"Probably. Do you want to stay inside the rover where it's safe while I do all the work?"

"Fuck no!" She flipped me off while I slipped my helmet on, fastening the clamps in place. I pressurized my suit when she was ready and gripped the latch.

"Ready?" I asked.

Akio nodded with stiff, wild eyes and tight lips.

I popped the seal and stepped onto the hard, dusty surface of the caldera. The Martian dirt had the consistency of powdered sugar beneath my boots. Dragging a mounting pole and our invention with me, I checked my HUD. The temperature was minus 45 degrees Celsius, with no other weather anomalies this morning. Picnic weather.

"Are you sure it'll keep working through the night?" Akio asked as I walked the pole out toward a spot that looked soft enough to spike through.

"It should be fine as long as it doesn't dip below minus 70. Even then, the cold won't stop the machine from turning back on when it warms back up."

"You're not typically so optimistic. It's possible extreme cold could do significant damage to the wiring."

"I doubt it." I let out a grunt, arched my arm back, and spiked the pole into the dirt; crimson dust clung to my boots.

I opened up the claw at the end of the pole and fastened the dark matter camera into it, closed it back up and tightened the fasteners until I was sure it wouldn't drop.

"Okay, what about sandstorms?" Akio paced around me, her hands twitching together.

"Winds don't get any stronger than sixty miles per hour, not strong enough to knock over the pole."

"And dust?"

"The dust'll get on the casing, sure, but I doubt it'll be out here long enough for any real damage to be done."

"You're going to come back for it?"

"We."

"Sure, just as soon as pigs roam the surface of this gloriously bleak world in massive packs, creating ozone from the massive piles of crap they leave behind in their wake. That is to say, *no!*"

"So you say." I booted up the machine, let it run through its diagnostic phase and checked to make sure everything was working fine with the screen on my gauntlet. "The systems check out."

"Can we go now?"

"How about breakfast first?"

"Fine, but as soon as we're done, you drive us the hell out of here."

"Deal."

We marched back to the rover, climbed inside the cab, and waited for the pressure to re-equalize. I removed my helmet and set it on the floor to my right, Akio following my lead as soon as she saw that I was not in fact suffocating in a vacuum. I opened a plastic package containing a dried beefsteak and placed another package containing a shortbread cookie on my knee. I stared at the beefsteak for a moment too long, catching a whiff of the smell.

"Well, are you going to stare at it, or eat it?" Akio asked.

I nodded and shoved the beefsteak into my mouth. When eating rations on Mars, the only way to avoid gagging from the taste is to consume what passes for food as quickly as possible.

I made a show of how much I hated that beefsteak by making every grossed-out sound I could manage as it slithered down my throat and splashed safely into the confines of my stomach. This seemed to amuse Akio.

She giggled. "That's why there's no obesity on Mars."

"Makes sense." I rolled my eyes, gagging and looking for something to erase that horrible aftertaste. "Or, they don't choose anyone who isn't in perfect health because they're afraid they'll die from a heart attack or implode."

"That too, but I imagine if you gave a reasonably healthy—and fat-man this shit to live off of for four years, they'd probably end up lean as fuck by the end of their stay."

"Or they'd walk off into the Martian sunset without a spacesuit, because you just took away the man's only hypothetical reason to live."

"Cruel, aren't I?"

"Extremely, but at least now you're not wearing the helmet like a coward."

She smacked my arm, knocking my cookie to the floor.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"You have to ask? Why'd you have to remind me, jerk?"

I shrugged. She wasn't scared anymore, at the very least.

Akio and I scarfed the rest of our meal down as quickly as possible and consumed enough water to keep us hydrated for the drive back.

She put the helmet back on and I tried not to chuckle.

The return trip went faster than expected. I guess due to the fact that we'd already made the trip once. The Sun kept pace with us for most of the journey and was only beginning to edge behind Olympus One by the time we returned.

Once we entered the range of the campus network, our controls immediately seized, and the rover began to drive off toward the eastern wing of the colony.

Something had gotten through my jamming frequency.

"Well, that's not good," I said.

"What?" Akio's eyes went wide, and her breath was hoarse. Her hand ready and waiting to pressurize her suit.

"Looks like the Admins got through my jamming frequency. There's an auto-recall on the rover, as soon as we passed into network range our controls were seized."

"Shit!"

"Relax." I kicked my feet back and tossed her a mischievous smile. "What's the worst they can do to us?"

"Expel us! Send us back to Earth!"

"Bah! They don't have the balls to spend the millions it would cost to send both of us back to Earth."

"You don't know that, Hal!"

"Relax, I'll just tell them the whole thing was my idea and I coerced you into it—which is mostly true. Most you'll get is a slap on the wrist."

"And you?" Her lip started to quiver.

"I'll be fine. Watch."

The rover twisted and turned around one of the domes, circled the greenhouse, and passed under a bridge, until we entered a large pressurized hangar. The Martian sky vanished behind us, and we were greeted by the angry faces of Wolfrik and the rest of the Admins.

I waved at them, gave them my best smile.

"You put me in a strange position here, Geraldo." Wolfrik leaned forward, clasping his clammy hands together beneath the all-encompassing white light of what we affectionately

referred to as *The Box*. "What you did was reckless, and even if you care nothing of yourself, you could have killed Akio."

The Box was like solitary confinement. A formless white room that played tricks on the eyes and made one feel as though they were going mad if left there alone for too long.

Despite my reputation, this was my first time in The Box. It had originally been intended to help deal with cases of cabin fever and claustrophobia. There were built-in holographic projectors that could allow you to see any kind of environment: the sprawling, clean flowing waters of the Grand Canyon, the great heights of the Himalayas, the greatest cities in the world...

Wolfrik, however, liked to use it to teach problem students what a big fish he was. I'm not even sure the holographic projectors had ever been used.

"Do you have nothing to say for yourself?" Wolfrik asked.

I leaned back, propped my feet up on the table. "Let's be honest if this is an expulsion hearing, Wolfrik. You don't give a damn about either of us, you're only concerned about what could have happened to the rover."

"This is not true." His accent was coming through, I was getting to him.

"But I think it is." I leaned forward, the humor melting from my face. "You want to label this as a joyride and a woeful disregard for authority. The second part is definitely true, in part, but the first is not. It was not a joyride. It was an experiment."

"An experiment?"

"I can't get into specifics yet, the patents for the device haven't been made. You understand, right?"

His thick eyebrow rose. "I'll believe it when I see it. Even so, if that were the case, I am not understanding why you didn't put in an official request to borrow the equipment, we could have worked with you and ensured that the proper safety—"

"I did put in an official request, and it was denied, you shyster."

He paused for a moment, looking at his tablet to confirm that I was telling the truth.

"Still, you did not have to resort to stealing—"

"Oh, please, spare me with that shit. We both know that you wouldn't have let me take the rover, and why the hell would you? You made that clear yesterday when you brought up my mother."

"Your upbringing has little to do with what you did here."

"Doesn't it, though? I've heard the way you all talk about me. Don't think that I haven't. I've found ways of reversing the mechanism you use in our desks when you want to hear and see everything we're doing, and the things you say are quite revealing. *'That degenerate will never graduate, I'll make sure of that!'* and *'He doesn't belong here, he's not one of us!'* And, my favorite: *'He belongs in the asylum with his mother.'* was what you said. Why, Wolfrik?"

"I never—"

"You did, you son-of-a-bitch!"

His eyes narrowed; he removed his glasses and rubbed them. "Yes. I said that, because you are a problem, Geraldo. You do not follow the rules, you argue with your professors and drive good students to mischief."

"I want a lawyer."

"A lawyer?" He looked genuinely confused. "You don't get a lawyer."

"Then, I want a trial by combat. If I kill you in battle, you have to set me free."

Wolfrik rubbed his eyes. "Is that how you want this to go, Geraldo? Keep playing these games, I can't tell you how well it will go for you at your disciplinary hearing."

"No, Wolfrik, I really want a trial by combat."

"Stop that."

"Stop what, Wolfrik?"

"Calling me that."

"That's your name."

"I have a doctorate, you should address me—"

"It's irritating, isn't it? To be called something other than your desired name."

"It is. So, stop it."

We both grew quiet. I glanced around The Box. I couldn't even tell where the door had been. But I was sure that the other Admins were watching this.

I looked back into Wolfrik's angry eyes. "Do you want to spend four billion dollars to put me on a ship back to Earth?"

"If it comes to that."

"Guess you've all made up your minds."

"That's up to you."

"Is it?"

"I want to hear about this experiment."

"No."

"No?"

I nodded. "No."

"That's unfortunate, Mr. Leon. I had hoped that you would be cooperative, but, as usual, you choose to be difficult. Your expulsion hearing will be held in five days. Until then you are suspended from all academic privileges and are confined to your quarters."

"Oh, joy."

"I trust you're fine with the consequences of your actions?"

"Always."

"You'll be escorted by campus police, now get out of my sight."

"It's been delightful, as usual."

Wolfrik gave me one last piercing glare as a hulking mass of a man seized my arm and shoved me into the hallway outside The Box. The officer wasn't much for conversation, and that was fine by me.

On the way back to my dorm, passerby students gave me downcast looks; whether those were pity or revulsion, I couldn't tell for sure. News travels fast.

The campus officer pushed me through the door to my room.

The door clanked and clacked behind me; the light turned from green to red. Effectively, I was a prisoner in my own home.

My place was just the way I'd left it earlier, so there was that, though I wouldn't have any network access with my privileges suspended. There were ways around that, though, and I'd need access to check on the progress of the experiment.

That was my one saving grace, even if they did ship me back to Earth. I'd have the discovery that Akio and I made.

I paused. Here I was, about to be expelled for breaking the rules, and all I could think about was my work, my obsession. I sank into the couch, staring at the wall. I imagined myself returning home, my head hung low, my father smiling ear to ear.

"¿Ves lo que te lleva tu ciencia preciosa?" *Do you see now where your precious science gets you?* he'd probably say.

"Fuck you, Father."

How had we gotten caught? I'd been certain that my plan was fool-proof. I wanted to feel angry at Wolfrik, at the Admins, for catching us, for locking me up and throwing the keys to my future away. Instead, I only felt empty inside. I told myself that I didn't care. That I'd make it as a scientist one way or another. I almost believed it.

My eyes drifted to the bottle of moonshine on the counter. I poured myself a glass, felt it burn the emptiness away.

I set the glass down. Left in isolation for mere moments and I'd already resorted to drinking. I needed to do something, occupy myself so I didn't polish the whole bottle off...

It had already been an entire Sol since we left Olympus Mons's caldera. The dark matter camera would have plenty of data to review. I grabbed for my tablet and, as expected, saw that there was no access to the school's network. The trick now would be to copy the permissions of another user and trick the system into thinking my machine was still granted access. I only knew of a few off the top of my head, Akio being one, and she was most likely being punished as well. Though, her punishment would no doubt be less severe, she would still be blocked from network access. They only deactivated a user's profile for three reasons: one, if the user is expelled and sent back to Earth; two, if the user graduates and leaves the facility, and three; if the user dies.

Who did I know that I could switch profiles with easily? If I hacked Wolfrik or any of my professors, they'd probably be on to me faster than a Catholic priest on an altar boy. I could probably find Gila's profile pretty easily. She probably wouldn't know it was me, either. The thing about being blocked from the network was that, although you couldn't access anything directly, you were still technically connected to it, and could see other users who were connected to it at the same time as long as you had the appropriate software.

As expected, Akio's profile was blocked, but Gila's profile was open. I made the necessary switch with the permissions and found myself able to navigate the school's web and academic forums, but I wouldn't need it for anything quite so boring. I quickly launched my machine's operation program, the HUD that would allow me to see what it saw out there from the great crater of Olympus Mons.

There was over a Sol's worth of data recorded on the hard drive, and I could see that there had been no hardware or software failures in that time. I copied the files I needed, which took the better part of an hour due to the size, volume, and resolution of the images. Once the data was secure on my hard drive, I restored Gila's permissions and resumed my "punishment."

Now for the real work. I opened the image folder, setting the preferences to display each one in chronological order. The first image was expected, the violet web of dark matter overlaid atop a butterscotch Martian sky; the second image a slight variation of that, and so on and so forth. That was until I got to the fiftieth image, when a shape appeared in the bottom left-hand corner of the vibrant violet web.

I zoomed in on the shape. It was strange, almost animal-like, with round and bulbous shapes, like a squash, or an ant's thorax, where the torso would probably be. It had two thick legs, and four thin, wiry appendages. In the images that followed, the strange violet silhouette was joined by other identical forms. They appeared to be standing on an incline in the distance, despite the backdrop of the massive flat line of the caldera that stretched on for miles and miles.

Then, for some reason, the silhouettes turned around, and began to move, or run, or climb, the incline. This running, or stampede, if you will, continued for almost a hundred images, until they all seemed to be swept away into the normal shape of the dark matter web, like the tide rolling in on a dry beach to wash waiting crabs to sea.

After that, the images seemed to repeat from the beginning, that same shape standing on the incline, perhaps watching the sky for something? Cowering? Then others appeared around it, something happened, and they all stampeded up the incline again. This time, I noticed several forms left behind in the wake of the stampede, crouched, huddled with smaller silhouettes.

I looked at the image number and gasped. The files hadn't looped; they were all in sequence. The sky had gotten darker in the images too, changing to that familiar pink, and then a brief cobalt-blue before final darkness. The sequence just repeated over and over again, always the same, like a video stuck on replay for all eternity.

By the third repetition, I noticed that when the dark matter web returned to normal, it almost looked like a shock wave from an asteroid impact. Like the millions of documentary re-creations that depicted the extinction of the dinosaurs. When I examined each individual "body," or "form," they all seemed to move with an individual purpose, and that purpose was repeated exactly in the next repetition.

I rubbed my eyes. It had been a very long day, and I was starting to get tired. As fascinating as the questions this raised were, some of them could wait for the morning. I'd have plenty of time to write and speculate, considering my confinement.

I cleared a spot on my plastic couch—which would soon not be mine anymore—and quickly let sleep take me.

*The New Mexico sun beats down on my back. My skin isn't used to Earth's sun anymore. I swing my duffel bag over my shoulder. My father's house is as I left it three years ago; the lawn of rich grass where I once played as a child is now nothing more than dirt and weeds; the windows are dirtier, and the once-vibrant white paint has flaked and become decrepit.*

*My father is waiting in his favorite chair.*

*I say nothing to him.*

*He turns his head; his smile is ruthless.*

*"Do you see now where your precious science gets you?"*

6

I woke to rustling sounds in the kitchen.

Wrappers crinkling, footsteps tapping.

At first, I thought that it could be Akio, free from her punishment, or whatever they had done with her, but the lock on the front door was still red and, glancing at my tablet, I could tell that no new entries in the door log had been made. My eyes started to close again—

The rustling turned to a deep scratching noise. My eyes opened again; the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I could feel someone watching me.

I held my breath deep.

With wary eyes, I tracked the noises from the kitchen, to the other end of the living room, and into the bedroom, where the sounds stopped.

Maybe one of the guards was messing with me?

"Hey, who's there?" I asked.

No answer. Maybe it was all in my head?

I exhaled, sighing loudly.

And then, it was like one of those old trains had hit its brakes behind me. An ear-piercing screech erupted through the room; I covered my ears and felt something slam into the back of the couch. The couch rolled, and I went with it, tumbling across the room...

Thanks for Reading Chapter 3!

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