

It's not like the rest of that vast volcanic plateau. Alba was not like Tharsis. The curious machinations of Mars' plate tectonics and geological faults don't show it, but in isolation it mocks all that is known of geophysical science. It is the womb of Mars - canyons and chasms spiralling out from it like stretchmarks, far and out towards the horizon. Its surface area is comparable to that of a continent rather than a mere country. The caldera, broad and weak - the rock swelling, bursting from the pressure and weight of primordial magma - all at once, and not in any great rush.

It is a tumour, not a tower.

The riddle of Alba is answered not by tectonics, but by heavenly motions. At exactly at the opposite end of Mars sits Hellas. Pale and milky. Deep and wide. There is no comparison to Hellas; it is as deep as Everest is high. Four billion years ago, a conqueror without equal hit this place with speed and mass comparable to little else. Upon penetrating Mars, the force of the impact travelled through the planet's mantle and core.

And so all the kinetic energy which had not become heat, sound, or simply lost somewhere hit Alba; an area comparable in size to the United States felt the pressure build up underneath. Magma and earth seeking to escape, pushed by tens of billions of tonnes of material to try to escape. The surface resisted. It held fast. For every single square metre of rock, up to a billion kilos of material were pushing against it. The entire ground convulsed, and was thrust upwards by the progeny of that asteroid. It stretched. It buckled. Magma poured through the weaker spots in the crust, screaming and demanding liberation.

The faults were open, the land was raised. The inside of Mars was disturbed, its distribution forever changed. For untold millions of years, magma viciously then gently flowed from Alba. Then it slowed. As Mars grew cooler and the trauma of that impact ebbed from memory, Alba again found peace. Forever scarred, but at peace.

Then the *Bonaparte* slammed into its side.

The heat of entering the atmosphere at five kilometres a second had caused it to break up as it streaked over the sky of Mars, scattering small pieces of melted debris over hundreds of kilometres. A sonic boom followed from it as it raced towards the ground, still shedding mass and still melting. It began to decelerate, and the carbon-dioxide and nitrogen plasma faded, the melted carcass of the ship exploded.

It was not a fireball. The melted ship simply cast itself off, like a discarded cocoon or a useless façade. What was revealed was a conical command pod, just four metres in diameter and two and a half metres tall. Only a few thousand metres above the surface, small rockets began to retrofire from the base; easing its descent. Slowly but surely its velocity dropped. Five hundred metres per second. Four hundred.

Land legs extended from the base, and it stopped spinning. Three hundred. It began to burn ever so gently to the side, heading towards a flat strip. Two hundred. A kilometre below, the *Bonaparte's* cockpit impacted, producing a cloud of dust and leaving bright streaks around the area. One hundred. The control stick clutched in his hand, Mikheil checked out the window to his right. Fifty.

The land sloped downwards ever so gently, stretching out just beyond the standard forty kilometres of the flatlands. From this height, he could see the faults – the graben looked like slightly embossed tiger stripes, occasionally punctuated by an impact crater. Where parts of the crust were pulled apart, the graben stood testament; sharp valleys between the faults, up to a hundred metres deep and two kilometres wide. Some stretched out a thousand kilometres – from California to Texas. Twenty.

The module was just a hundred metres over the surface of Mars. Mikheil watched as the altimeter ticked away towards zero, another eye fixed on the fuel indicator; nearly empty. He was down to ten metres a second, and twenty metres above the ground. He pulled down on the thrust one last time, and the velocity dropped down even more. He felt a sudden bump, and cut the engines. A third of a percent of the fuel remaining in the tank.

He sank back in his chair, relaxing for the first time in days. He realised he was covered in a thick layer of sweat – his suit felt incredibly damp. It was hard to discern how much he had actually sweat under the collar, since the suit was supposed to be as non-permeable as possible. He had been wearing it for less than twenty-four hours, but he already felt as if he had spent an eternity in the thing. He picked up his gloves from the floor, and proceeded to screw them on, making sure it was sealed up tightly.

He suddenly realised he felt it again – gravity, after so long. It felt like an eternity since he had left the torus. Even longer since he left Earth. The sensation of gravity felt alien; he felt very weak. Despite all the medication one can take, all the exercise one can do, one can only postpone the decay of bone and muscle when in zero gravity for so long. He slowly stood up, careful not to exert himself too suddenly; although the novelty of walking again in gravity was hard for him to adapt to, Mikheil found his range of movement unimpeded.

All according to plan. They had said the deterioration would be negligible. All he had to endure was the isolation and boredom for so many months in the capsule, and practice the procedure *ad nauseum*. He took his helmet, before looking in the mirror. His face had always been gaunt, but it was just a bit thinner and older, now. A few more strands of grey had emerged in the cleanly-cut black mat of hair. His dun skin ever so slightly looser than before. His eyes were wide, open, and attentive. Everything seemed to be in order.

He placed on his helmet, it clicking into place and interfacing with the rest of his suit. He tapped his wrist computer, making sure it was still operational. He reached out, before strapping on the utility belt with all the needed essentials – life support, tools, first aid. He

reached out for his holster, carefully hooking it over his shoulder and round his back and front. He briefly stroked the grip of the gun – all was in order.

The cabin was claustrophobic – all more the case now his movement was limited due to Martian gravity. It was awkward to move, he having to make a conscious effort not to put too much effort into moving his legs or raising his arms at the risk of losing control of his body. As Mikheil paced back and forth, he also checked the cabin for any last items he needed. He stared at the monstrosity of the toilet and shadow, the awkward harness of straps and buckles that passed for a bed, and the computers filled with incomprehensible volumes of banal entertainment. Nothing remained for him to acquire.

He reached under the controls, and took out the bulky and cumbersome tools. A wrench. A large magnet. A saw. A blowtorch. He had a few hours at best before somebody came. He turned to the panel of the capsule computer, and readied his tools.

Six hours passed. Not Earth hours. Six Martian hours. Or twenty-one thousand six hundred Martian seconds. All around two and a half percent longer than their Earth-based variants, allowing a twenty-four hour clock rather than a twenty four and-two-thirds hour clock. It was only logical. Since the change in the length of seconds was so small to be noticeable, the six hours passed as any six hours would without anything to occupy a man other than taking apart and destroying countless electronic components. Then out of the southern-facing window, he saw it – lights.

The time had come. He set down his tools, and did a final check. Then he slumped down onto the floor, sitting adjacent to the door. Mikheil triple checked that his suit life's support was on, and depressurised the cabin. The atmosphere rushed out. The only sound he could hear was the sound of his own breathing.

It was night, now. He turned his head towards the window, and looked towards the stars outside. He felt a sense of child-like awe overwhelm him as he admired them; he tried to discern any familiar constellations or arrangements, but was mostly taken aback by all the new objects in the sky. The atmosphere's weakness was beauty's strength, and Mikheil felt some boyish nostalgia wash over him.

He remembered one time he and Andria camped out in the hills that summer. The brightest and most beautiful night they had ever seen. They had talked about things boys talked about – girls, games, and their imaginations.

"They will have a million mines on those rocks up there," Andria mused.

"Don't they already?"

"No. But they will do at this rate."

"It's too far for me," Mikheil apathetically said.

"It's never too far, you're just an idiot."

"Get a life."

"Go screw yourself."

Mikheil stared at the sky, and the ripples across the sky; the turquoise and cyan aurora of Mars. He felt exhilarated for a second, having made the journey and came to witness this. To be on the real frontier of humanity, and see what such a minute fraction of mankind had seen. He had never been to Mars, but in that moment he knew why so many had been pulled in by it.

Then he felt it. A rapping against the metal. A knock on the door, as predicted. He readied himself, and tilted his head towards the door. It opened outwards, the outline of a hand just barely visible. Mikheil readied himself. He saw the tip of a helmet advance through the gap of the door, and the vague outline of a head behind that.

He grasped his gun, reached his hand out, and pressed it against the centre of the helmet. The head behind the material faced him. They froze. Mikheil gestured slowly at them, beckoning them away from the vehicle – they complied, slowly descending down the ladder. They raised their hands above their heads, slowly backing away on the ground. The area was pitch black, lit only by the lights on his suit and the lights of his vehicle. Still pointing at the man, Mikheil slowly extricated himself from the capsule, before gesturing towards his wrist. The figure complied, and quickly Mikheil was able to discern heavy breathing and the gruff voice of a man.

"Hey, hey, hey," the voice said quickly, waving his hands, "this ain't what I was told would be here. I don't mean you no trouble, mister."

Mikheil didn't speak for several seconds. He briefly glanced around the flat, black, and empty wastes around the two. He spoke clearly and slowly to the man.

"What's your name?"

"Uh, Greg. Greg Nugent. I'm just a scrap guy, that's all. I thought this was a mining-..."

"Don't panic. I have a few questions. Answer them, and I will be gone."

"Y-yeah, sure. Whatever you say."

Mikheil lowered his gun slightly, and took a couple of steps forwards. He turned on the lamps of his own suit to get a better look as the salvager. He wore a second hand suit with a large and cumbersome-looking port on his back, which rose above his shoulders in such a way to make it look like his head was at the centre of his torso.

"This is Alba?"

"Y-ye-..."

"Is the Confederation still operating?"

"Huh? Wha-..."

"Is Madigan still in charge?"

"Still?" Some indignation rose in his voice, "He'll always be in-..."

"Is he still in Newton?"

"What? I don't know, I pick up scrap," the man said more slowly than before, the fear turning into a darker and quieter tone.

"That will do. Give me the code to your vehicle."

Greg Nugent froze for several seconds. Mikheil heard his breathing intensify. He believe he saw him seize up and raise his shoulders ever so slightly.

"I ain't going to do that. That vehicle's my life."

Mikheil raised the gun again. The man's defiance evaporated as the barrel once again was levelled at his head.

"You trash... you're... not going to get away with this, you'll be..."

"Tell me the code."

"Seven four five one. Hold down enter for twenty seconds."

Mikheil nodded, before circling around the man towards his vehicle. He walked towards the cylindrical docking port in the side – briefly checking to make sure the suitport lock was sealed. He had his gun still raised at Nugent as he typed in the code and held down enter. Inevitably, though, he had to turn away for a few moments. When he turned back, Nugent's suit lights were off. He heard his breathing intensify.

"Think hard before you do anything. I will kill you."

Nugent didn't respond over the radio. His breathing seemed a bit heavier. And a bit shallower. Mikheil released his hand from the keypad, placing both hands on his gun. He stepped away from the vehicle, sweeping around in the pitch blackness with his own lights. He saw footprints in the dust where Greg had just been standing, leading away. Every angle was desolate for at least thirty feet.

The breathing over the radio slowed for a moment. Mikheil spoke again.

"I am taking your vehicle. There are supplies in the capsule for yourself."

"To hell with you..." he heard between pants on the other end, "Earth bastard."

He'd clicked the pieces together. Mikheil swept around a few more times, checking every angle. The only other place he hadn't looked was behind the vehicle. He slowly advanced towards it.

"I will give you ten seconds to come out with your hands up. Don't do anything rash."

He carefully circled around the vehicle, his pistol raised. His heartrate raised. The familiar feeling of adrenaline and anger overwhelmed him as he prepared himself for what may happen. Time felt somewhat slower than usual, and sensation felt much more visceral. He didn't hear his own count as he slowly angled around the back of the vehicle, only the movement of his lips.

"Four. Three. Two. O-..."

Greg's face was upon him – he had a thick beard and sunken eyes, his eyes reacting harshly to the light. Mikheil didn't have time to see where his arms were. Where he was moving. He was on him. He was over him. He was yelping.

Mikheil felt his finger squeeze the trigger. He couldn't tell if it was once or twice, but he felt the recoil of a thousand shots reverberate throughout his body. The light went out of Greg's eyes, and he sunk to the ground.

They were still connected by radio. The death rattle reverberated throughout Mikheil's ear and being. He paused, before hastily and frantically disconnecting himself from the now-dead man. His heart was pounding out of his chest. His mind raced. His vision too sharp.

His hands shook so badly that he had trouble clipping his pistol back into its holster. His mind so fast that he forgot to click the safety on. He shook his head, and cast his gun to the ground. He sat down, propping his back against the wheel arch. He needed a minute.

He needed a million minutes, but he didn't have the time. He had a mission to do. The vehicle's airlock worked as Greg had said – Mikheil feared that he'd been bluffing. The inside of the cabin was spacious. Greg had decorated the inside of the vehicle with a variety of personal effects – small sculptures made of scrap adorned spare surfaces, and a few amateur paintings and pin-ups were on the wall. No wife or kids, or at least pictures of them.

The vehicle was a converted Mars Ground Transport 100 model. It was at least twenty years old, but it had been serviced faithfully. The methanol tanks were virtually full, water levels regularly drained, and the software up to date. Mikheil thought about how long ago these had first been driven by the surface; before anything could be built on Mars, back when it was a few thousand people at most. He examined the underside of the cabin computer out of curiosity.

"MARTIAN IMPORT BATCH 85. MADIGEN INTNL."

The vehicle was tiny by comparison to Martian vehicles these days, but Mikheil still stood in wonderment at the machine. It had travelled around a hundred million kilometres from Mars, served for twenty years, and had found use beyond just hauling small batches of ore and

processed resources between the mines, factories, Newton, Huygens, and the then-dozens of disparate outposts that dotted the land.

The MGT had was a four-wheel vehicle with a fair degree of ground clearance. The cabin itself was rectangular and broad, with the shower, toilet, and two bunks available for the crew's use. Two-thirds of the cabin area was taken up by a cargo hold, which was empty aside from a few pieces of practically worthless salvage. Two spare tyres sat in the hold; both the height of Mikheil's chest, a half-metre wide, and at least ten centimetres thick.

He got into the driver's seat, and turned on the computer.

WELCOME, GREG.

He checked the navigation history. Some place called Arkady's Reach was the last place visited, although further back it seems Nugent had been visiting sites around Arcadia, Tharsis, and Lunae Palus. Old outposts, scientific facilities, abandoned mining stations. Millions of square kilometres of ground covered, all in the search of scrap. He followed up the last location

> query: arkady's reach

Last Visited 1.67 Sols Ago

Permanent Population: 27

Average Population: 67

Location: 150KM, HEADING 60°

Industries Catered: RESOURCE PROSPECTING, SMALL-SCALE RESOURCE EXTRACTION, EQUIPMENT RECLAMATION SPECIALISTS, GEOLOGICAL SCIENTISTS

Facilities: RIGI-...

Mikheil cancelled the program. He glanced at the map of the region. Then Newton. He plotted a course. The quickest way off Alba was due east, with the narrow bridges which traversed the graben and all the faults – a query showed at least twenty outposts with average populations well above two hundred people a pop. The mineral riches of Alba were very alluring.

He needed to make contact back first, though. Before anything, he had to make contact.

He checked over the next-nearest outpost.

...

BRYSON BASE

Last Visited: N/A

Permanent Population: 43

Average Population: 93

Location: 231KM, HEADING 14°

INDUSTRI-...

That would work. He started the vehicle and drove away. The aurora danced before Greg's eyes.