

There are three geological periods of history on Mars after it had formed and the dichotomy between north and south was established; the Noachian, Hesperian, and Amazonian.

During the Noachian, Mars lived and breathed as Earth does now. Tharsis roared, spewing forth countless trillions of tonnes of magma – so much that Mars fell on its side and its poles tilted. During the Noachian, countless invasions and battles were fought across the face of Mars – Hellas being the greatest battle of that age, but there was also Argyre and those countless hundreds of thousands of impacts that mark the land. The heat from this furnace of war brought vitality to Mars, giving it life. Water accumulated in the craters and the north, forming mighty seas; vast channels and cliffs were cut into the land as the water flowed from sea to shore.

Then the Hesperian came around thirty seven hundred million years ago. Mars began to change. The impacts slowed, and an age of peace came to Mars. It began to die. Only the motions of the planet's interior allowed change on the surface – the volcanoes of Tharsis became moderately more defined, a lonely island called Olympus began to rise, and the atmosphere became thick with sulphur dioxide and hydrogen sulphide. The oceans became toxic, with any life in them – apart from those few extremophiles – snuffed out as the water was contaminated with sulphuric acid. The atmosphere was blown off by the Sun. The planet became a snowball, with the remaining oceans trapped beneath a layer of ice. Occasionally the ice was fractured by volcanoes and tectonic activity, allowing the water to briefly gush forth to the surface and attempt to relive the lost days when it had sculpted the terrain. Inevitably they all receded, each attempt to reunite with the land and the air more miserable than the last. Eventually, the waters of Mars retreated away; remembered only by what they once did to the surface.

Three billion years ago, as the current Amazonian age began, even the water beneath the ice had been frozen stripped off. Most of the water had receded to the North Pole, the rest of it likely having sunk down deep into the Martian crust. The magnetosphere vanished. The increasing cold caused by it losing so much of its atmosphere began a cycle of the carbon dioxide freezing – much of it permanently – on the South Pole, some of it subliming back into gas when the Sun struck it every summer. The last of the ice finally receded from the northern flatlands, exposing their smooth and virgin surfaces to the cosmos at long last. The impact craters drained. The planet became dry.

Chryse Planitia – the Golden Plain – is the epitome of the terrain of the Amazonian Age. It is theorised to be an ancient impact basin; sixteen hundred kilometres in diameter and more than two kilometres deep. It is a flat and plain, with very few faint craters. It once served as a bay where the vast channels and canyons cut into the shores of that ancient ocean, and where life met land. If it was once the site of an impact, the water long since washed the rim away.

It was here where man first saw the surface of Mars – where Viking 1 transmitted the first pictures from the surface of the planet, where land met water. It revealed a land with a red and pink sky, and a dusty red surface. There man learned that the red of Mars was just a mask

– a pervasive layer of dust that sat atop its many rocks and surface features. Viking saw black and cragged rocks rising from under the dust, reminders of a time when this land sat beneath an ancient sea.

Diana sat upright, and prepared to assume manual control of the Beetle. It was soaring as gently over the Chryse as a vehicle could on Mars. The retrograde thrusters were firing slowly to ease its descent and make sure the vehicles landed as softly as was possible. She could see the place on the horizon, the only facility in sight. Odin was not the only mining complex on Chryse; there were at least a half dozen iron mining facilities on the plain, and the plains also played host to countless prospector digs and smaller uncharted sites working smaller deposits. There were also the countless outposts to entertain and deprive the miners, prospectors, and travellers of their wages.

Her hand wrapped around the control stick. She tugged at her belt, and placed her feet atop the pedals. The retrograde engines cut off. For a moment, the interior of the vehicle was silent. With her spare hand, she quickly removed her goggles and dropped them on her lap. The vehicle rattled and shook as it hit the ground, and the engine kicked in. She nudged the accelerator, and drove across the ground of the plain.

The immediate area surrounding her landing was rocky and uneven; there were many waist-high rocks adjacent to the vehicle, along with some steep slopes. She'd hit the ground with a fair amount of forward momentum, however – there was no worry of her not being able to get up the first hill before her. She steered sharply to the right, avoiding a sharp boulder from scraping her undercarriage, and climbed up a marginally smoother mound. According to the guidance computer, the facility was four kilometres to the north.

She turned left and slid off the slope, and rode towards slightly smoother terrain. She used her spare hand to check the computer – Central had promised to forward any information he received on the facility and strike to her. Nothing. She turned her eyes to the complex as it loomed larger, deftly avoiding the rocks of the surface.

The most prominent feature of Odin was a large dome, around fifty metres in height. Its dark bricks stood out prominently in the hazy light of the surface, small scaffolds and maintenance platforms surrounding it. A steel airlock at least half its height protruded from its side. Diana could make out a stationary half-assembled drilling rig sitting adjacent to the airlock, alongside a large number of shipping crates which looked like they had been out in the dust for decades.

There was little doubt that the strike was real.

There were many smaller domes ranging from ten to twenty metres in height behind the mine's perimeter fence, some with entrances and untouched equipment and goods stacked outside, some with a range of vehicles parked outside of them, and others being featureless structures. There was a plethora of non-brick structures; there were around a half dozen

greenhouses side-by-side, each shaped like an inverted-trough and made of that same curved and eternally sturdy polycarbonate. A small chemical stood above ground with a suited figure checking one of the spherical oxygen tanks, doing some maintenance. There were a couple dozen stout and prefabricated steel structures, with the top sections of tunnels connecting them to the rest of the structures in the complex just visible before they sank into the ground.

At the centre of the complex sat a broad, squat, and smooth hemisphere, with a three or four rectangular structures branching out of it. A black and yellow radiation warning was painted on its side, the only piece of external paintwork in the entire complex which appeared to have been touched up. Diana slowed down as the Beetle bumped onto the worn and pre-driven terrain heading towards Odin's gate. As she approached the gate, she pinged the mine's administration.

She allowed the Beetle to roll to a stop, putting the brake on as she rolled up in front of the fence. No answer, so she pinged again. She looked around the complex, seeing for any signs of life other than the one or two maintenance crew she had spotted on the drive up there. She saw a fair few people ambling around the greenhouse, and a fair few people staring from one of the prefabs closer to the gate. She shook her head, before pinging the mine again. She finally got an answer this time.

"Yeah?" The voice was irritated.

"I am representing the Confederation."

"Madigan listened, eh? Head on to building six."

Diana felt tempted to tell him the Confederation was more than just Madigan, but she just terminated communications and drove on in towards building six. It took her a moment to see the numbering on the buildings through the dust and the chips, but she eventually spotted it. She rolled the Beetle up, spotting the interface port. She flicked on the docking programme; she had to reverse slightly to make sure the building and the vehicle were parallel and aligned, but other than that her driving had held up despite not being at the wheel for so long.

She stood up, and zipped up her jacket and walked to the docking interface, and flicked the switch. The vehicle hissed as the port extended out to mate with its counterpart on the building, and then clicked as they locked together. The computer took twenty more seconds to conduct all the obligatory checks. The lights were green, and the port opened. Diana grasped the rung, got on her knees, and crawled through.

A man with a thick moustache and a wide, heavy, and distinctively Slavic face stood at the other end. He waited for her to clamber out and stand up straight, before giving her a brief and rigid salute. He looked disappointed when she did not reciprocate his gesture, but beckoned her to follow.

"I am the Sergey Vinkayev, the foreman." He spoke robotically, offering a hand out towards Diana.

"The Confederation sent me. I am Diana," she offered an insincere smile and reciprocated his handshake. "Can you take me to Overseer Shepard?"

"We'll speak in my office. It's in the mines."

"I would prefer to speak to the overseer."

"You can't speak to him," he said firmly, shaking his head. "I am representing the facility and the staff."

"All two hundred of them?"

"Yes."

The man's blank refusal or his stubbornness did not cause too much concern. She gestured at him to go forth.

"Your office is near where the work is?"

"I must be near the men. Mining is never a safe business. Always be ready. There a million things in those tunnels that can kill us all if we aren't careful."

"The mine just does Thorium?"

"We often find iron ore, and if they're high quality we extract them."

"You sell them to refineries?"

"I know what you're getting at," Vinkayev said, his cheeks turning slightly pink. "We're owned by the Confederation, but there is nothing in our contract saying that we can't try to increase everyone's earnings."

"I really do not care too much what you and your men do in your spare time, all I need to see is the Thorium moving," she slowed down slightly before continuing. "Any additional private work **does** happen after the quotas are met, yes?"

"Of course, of course."

"Then your only problem is your strike. And not letting me see the overseer."

"He's detained."

"I'm sure he can break off his lunch."

"I mean the literal sort."

She did not see any anti-establishment propaganda around. There was graffiti on a lot of the safety posters and more than one information board had broken and not been fixed, but in most of the graffiti seemed banal and innocuous, and the information boards seemed mostly attributable to laziness. If they had detained the overseer, they did not seem to be doing it for an ideological reason or out of a bad case of revolutionaryism.

Building six seemed to serve as an entrance and refuelling station for vehicles. As they entered the brick tunnels beneath the surface which connected all the facilities, Diana tried to look around for a sign. She saw a series of them as she followed Vinkayev, and she gained a greater appreciation for how convoluted the complex was.

<- CAFETERIA

COMPUTER ROOM ->

GREENHOUSE 1, 2, 3 ->

<- GREENHOUSE 4, 5, 6
^ IMPORT/EXPORT DEPOT 1
SHAFT ENTRANCES (A-D) ->
<- SHAFT ENTRANCES (E-K)

They followed the last sign, then following a few more until they emerged into what appeared to be one of the moderately-sized dome brick buildings. On the inside it was coated in sensors and insulation to prevent the atmosphere from escaping, and had a large letter "I" painted into its side. Several elevator shafts stood at the centre of the dome – one truck-sized platform hovered over the abyss, along with three moderately sized lifts which five people at a time could squeeze into. Vitkayev gestured at Diana to get in the lift to the left.

"Will we need suits?" Diana asked as she stepped on.

"No. We keep our vertical shafts pressurised, and our oxygen supply takes it fine. We've airlocks on the tunnels which branch out. Unless we're drilling or erecting supports, we don't have anyone in there."

The lift descended slowly, with the acceleration of Mars' gravity making the process take significantly longer than it would have done on Earth or a facility like Weinstein. At its fastest, Diana doubted the lift reached more than four metres a second. Vitkayev's level was around six hundred metres down.

The metal floor of the dome gave way to the bedrock of Mars beneath the dust. Mostly the rock was dark shades of brown with the occasional streak of black and grey. She spoke as they descended.

"You never communicated your demands or reasons to us."

"And if we did? We would have been given the runaround. Your people would have lied to us, the men would believe it, and the problem wouldn't go away."

"This problem is related to Shepard?"

He did not respond to her. She would crack down on his evasiveness when they were in private, but for now she focused on looking at the mine and any evident problems. She saw the men going about the shafts, with the drills and machines switched off. She saw them sat out in front of the elevators playing card games or idly chatting. Many of them had looks of impatience and confusion on their faces as they saw the elevator descend.

"Why are they in the shafts if they're on strike? Why not the barracks or the rec rooms upstairs?"

"They want to get back to work straight away. They're waiting to start up work again when we've finalised negotiations."

They finally reached Vitkayev's level. It clicked into place, and the waist-high doors opened outwards. Pieces of equipment and drilling machines were ordered around the walls of the

shaft. At the centre of the chamber was a large drilling rig – the one which had dug the central shaft down.

“You just leave it there?”

“We build walkways, railings, and put down all the supports on each level first – like all of the ones you saw above. We branch our tunnels at each level and also do some geological probes. We may be hitting the best ore of this shaft here.”

“The drill is a large asset to haul out.”

“That’s your people’s problem. This is the fastest way we can do it.”

“I think it may be dangerous.”

“Well, you don’t work here. The men are all happy with the way this is, and we haven’t had one fatality for the past forty-six months.”

She gave a deferential nod, and let him lead the way towards a small prefabricated cabin. The elevator rose back up towards the surface as she stepped off onto the rock. Five or so men and women were sat around the central drill, the smaller ones littering the bottom of the shaft, or some collectors and scraps. Three of them were huddled in a far corner, looking utterly oblivious as Diana and Vitkayev walked by. He opened the door to the cabin, and she stepped in. It had a desk, a computer, and charts all over the place. He sat down. There was no second chair.

“Are you going to start talking, now?”

“I have nothing to hide,” he shrugged and poured a glass of water. “We won’t start production again until our demands are met.”

“What did you do to the overseer?”

“Well,” he began with a self-important smile, “it started a month ago. One of our workers – Parker – got sick. You know how it is, the cancer. We all know the risks when working surrounded by Thorium and all the radiation, but on the condition we get emergency medical help when needed.”

Daria nodded.

“We send the request for the drugs and equipment to treat her. Shepard filed the report. And then nothing.” Vitkayev leant back in his chair, his eyes narrowed at Diana.

“I have never heard of us never delivering on our promises.”

“You never got it. You see why he’s detained, now?”

“What did he do, exactly?”

“Turns out he’d been siphoning money off our pay for months. Just half a percent, but enough to make him a small fortune. He got greedy, though.”

“He pocketed the medicine money?”

Vitkayev sneered. “Bastard. Problem is, he was sending it to family. We can’t claim it back. And it’s too late for Parker, at this rate. I think it spread.”

Diana shook her head, considering the story for a moment.

“That explains nothing about why you went on strike.”

“Even if it was just Shepard, we are not going to risk going down there again until we know that if any of us does get ill we’ll get treat. Your system is broke – you should be sending the drugs and equipment to us to use straight away, not giving the overseer millions of bucks at once to fritter away.”

“That’s a costly way of running a mine.”

“Madigan didn’t seem to care when he ran the show. No expense spared. Before this Confederation nonsense, he gave us all the meds we needed. Autodocs, triopzyne, disposables, everything. That medical bay used to be stacked full. Then you started skimping.”

“We are in the middle of a war. We do not have the resources to transport millions in medical equipment to every single mine with enhanced radiation risks on Mars. You are given the money needed to cover the expenses of any goods.” She spoke tersely, her eyes going over the men outside the cabin and their chatter and idling.

“What good is your money compared to the Yuan or an American dollar? You realise a lot of the dealers in Newton price in them, and they’re worth more than your money every day.” The man’s apathy was slipping; he sat upright, pointing and shaking his finger at Diana, “then there is the cost of transporting the goods, which you don’t seem to add in at all. Maybe we could have saved Parker if that bastard hadn’t conned us, but we would have had to pay a several thousand just to get it shipped over here, and account for the fact that medicine is extortionate!”

Diana turned to him, a hint of her frustration – both here and everywhere else – boiling over. She advanced menacingly towards the desk, her eyes like slits.

“So you want medical supplies provided directly by the government at your discretion? And you couldn’t say this in a call? You have a lot of nerve doing this, but I am not going to let you spout crap about a runaround, you self-important idiot!”

Vitkayev grimaced. He let go of the desk and placing his hands on his lap.

“I want to see the overseer and the other miners, other than you. I want to know why you really led me to the bottom of the shaft instead of the overseer’s office. And I want to know why you’re carrying a gun under your overalls.”

He froze, before suddenly jerking to reach his hand underneath his overalls. Diana quickly reached under her jacket and pulled out her pistol, pointing it squarely at the man’s head. He sighed and raised his hands above his head.

“Keep them there,” Diana said. She reached towards him and placed a hand under his overalls, fishing it out. She released the magazine and tossed the weapon aside. She patted him down in his chair, making sure he was not carrying anything else. She nodded, and he dropped his arms. Diana lowered her gun, and stepped away.

“Is the overseer dead?”

“It was an accident. He tried to fight back when...”

She gestured at him to stop. "You're really the foreman?"

"Yes."

She glanced around the shack once again.

"You have no cameras in here. That gave it away. That and the elevator rising off. And the fact the workers are in the mines."

He stared blankly at her for a second. "What?"

"No cameras in an office. You don't conduct negotiations without something to record it. The miners clearly have no idea there's a strike. You just sent a message in."

"I just needed a hostage. I never intended to--"

"Your intent is meaningless. You killed an overseer, and you planned to attack me."

"If we'd told the truth, all of us would be punished! They'd march the militia on us!"

"That would happen if you had just succeeded. If you had announced the truth **you** would be arrested – I'm going to guess it was you who killed him, wasn't it?"

"You have no proo-..."

"Either claim he vanished or died in the confusion of the hostage situation, or use the siege to destroy the evidence. If you called and issued straight demands, the recording would be used against you. Am I understanding you, Vintayev?"

Vintayev, who had been turning increasingly pink all this time, became as red as a tomato and stood up.

"This is all YOUR FAULT!" He slammed a fist on the desk. "I meant what I said. Costs are being cut on medical, equipment, safety. We are being pushed harder and HARDER. You expect us to just take it?! Madigan knew how to run the colony! Do you?! This Confederation is a failed experiment, and it's killing people. Thieves like Shepard are just a symptom of this nonsense!"

"Don't try to tell--"

"I will tell you. I WILL! I met him – he was brilliant, he knew how it worked. Everything. Where is he now?! Probably trying to save the planet while you all ruin it around him. We were trying to reach out to him. HE would have fixed this!"

"He's not able to fix everything."

"What do YOU know about him?! About us? You're some fluffheaded bitch who came straight from Newton to tell us how to work our job, all while people like Parker are dying! There'll be more like Parker, I know it."

She resisted the temptation to hurt the windbag. Diana blink, and spoke back with dispassionate nonchalance.

"You are under arrest for treason, sabotage, murder, and assault. I'll decide what to do with you after appointing a new foreman and reporting what happened here. Where is Shepard's body?"

He defiantly shook his head.

"I would only tell Magiden. He's the only one who'd understand out of all of you."

Diana picked up his gun and pocketed it. She exited the shack and slammed the door behind her. All five of the miners on the floor had gathered around the shack, and a few dozen more from a few more floors up had come down the elevator to join them. Diana surveyed them, before giving a nod.

"I'm from the Confederation. Have any of you seen Overseer Shepard recently?"

"Not for a fortnight."

"May have seen him last week."

"Wasn't he in the canteen six sols ago?"

"Alright," Diana raised her hand, "why haven't you been working?"

"Foreman was saying something up with geology."

"There could be a radon leak if we drill."

The rabble continued, offering a variety of non-contradictory but different accounts. Diana holstered her weapon, and prepared to try to clean up as best she could.

"...Singh took the job. They're starting extraction again now. I think Vitkayev was serious about the demands, but he was trying to use it to get himself out of trouble. Worst plan I've heard in an age, I don't know how he expected to get it done."

"We're glad you're safe," Central said, coughing into his hand. "That could have turned ugly."

"I said I'll take Vitkayev back to Newton at first, but the sick miner – Parker – seems pretty bad. I don't know if it's terminal as Vitkayev is saying. I think he may have been trying to ease his conscience."

"There are no outposts for quite a distance with any meds or supplies to treat pancreatic cancer. None that we have a claim on, at least."

"If we can get her to an autodoc and give her some lipzeromyne, she may have a chance. It would help morale here."

"Let me run a check..." Central typed away, squinting at the monitor. "Closest one is Luther Point. It's an agricultural settlement in Northern Kasei. It may be quicker to head north, one of the other Thorium mines in Acidalia still has inventory. Although it will take you longer to get back."

"I'll head to Luther Point. You know it doesn't take me that long to travel."

"The new overseer will be over in a week. Vitkayev probably will get the exile. From what you told me, he seems stressed and it was a crime of passion."

"Seems fair. I am going to go and collect Parker and load her up. If I stick to the tracks and near outposts, I may be able to reach there in two days."

"No sleep?" Central raised a brow, before smirking. "Well, I couldn't expect less from you."

Diana impatiently checked her wrist computer. Central didn't cut the line.

"He was worried once I told him you were gone. I thin-..."

"Tell him I'll speak to him when I finish up with this. I'll probably have to bring Parker to Newton after Luther Point if I want to make sure her condition is alright."

"You're really taking responsibility for her here, aren't you?"

"I didn't entirely disagree with the foreman."

Central grimly nodded, saluted, and cut the line.

Vivian Parker looked emaciated and exhausted. Her skin was jaundiced and sagging. Her eyes heavy and bloodshot. Her personnel record read that she was thirty-eight, but she looked at least twenty years older than that. Streaks of grey were clearly discernible amongst rough and uncombed blonde hair. She was barely able to keep up the strength to walk and haul her backpack along with her as she approached Diana.

"Parker?" Diana wasted no time in reaching out to take her bag, and proceeding to push it through the port. She placed a hand under Vivian's arm, careful to help her into the port. The miner buckled up, not even making a sound as she did so. Neither did Diana as she clambered into the Beetle and sat at the cockpit. The woman gave a meek smile towards Diana.

"Thanks for picking me up."

Diana didn't respond. She ordered the Beetle to undock from building six. She smiled at the blue and green aurora before driving away.