

Superintendent Richard Davis clambered off the carriage. He gave a hearty cough into his sleeve and wiped it against his vest. Archer was waiting for him on the platform. He offered Newton's Security Chief a steaming cup of water. Rick took it and gulped half of it down at once.

"Still got the cough?"

"Do I need to answer that?"

The kid smiled at his boss, before raising a wrist to his ear. He gestured at Richard as the dispatch communicated to him. He responded to whatever call was on it.

"Ten-four. Me and Rick have got it. Jim out."

"What now?" Rick said, looking simultaneously amused and defeated.

"Some kids in forty-two are vandalising a dispenser. Three or four of them. Twelve to fourteen years."

"Little assholes. I was wantin' to sit down."

The two walked towards the stairs leading from the platform to sector F proper, elm leaves crinkling underfoot. A bored looking janitor in blue and white overalls was walking around with a brush and trowel, scooping up the foliage on the platform. Rick looked overhead, smiling as he saw the beams of light from the surface shining down through to the platform.

"These kids don't have any respect. They're worse than the ones on Earth."

"Stop being an old man, Rick. They're just fooling."

"I'm telling you Jim, for every good kid there's four thugs. Parents don't know how to teach 'em."

Jim walked slowly, adjusting his Kevlar vest and allowing Rick enough time to climb up. His hands ran over all his equipment and utilities; tasers, batons, zip-ties, first aid, wrist-computer batteries... it all seemed in order.

"...take me and Sue, for example. We raised Lewis, Carol, and Steve right. One is running an outpost. Model citizen. Doing us all proud; these kids just sit around. Lew actually worked his ass, if you see what I'm saying."

"Sure, Rick."

"Then Carol is a real doctor; not some sort of autodoc mechanic or a pill-server, but a real mechanic. And Steve, Steve's like us, you know? Could be the first man on Ganymede, at this rate. You're a good kid, too. You're what, twenty-two?"

"Twenty-six, Rick."

"Well you look good for your age, Jim. Well, you were born in Newton. Your parents raised you right. You are Ben and Mary Stahl's boy, right?"

"That's right, Rick."

"Good couple. I saw them at the reunion for the first ten thousand last month. Barely aged a day, your mother."

"I can't say nothing about that, Rick."

"Of course you can't, since you've got manners. Not like these punks. Madigan busts ten trillion dollars to send man to Mars and live like kings, and these punks just don't care."

"It's a damn shame, Rick."

"It sure is. I remember..."

Jim did not bother to listen to Rick. He loved the old man a lot, and he knew how much telling his stories and anecdotes meant to him; even if this was the fortieth time he brought them up. He heard scraps of phrases or memories. What he had done with his final days on Earth. What it had been like on the launch pad. When Madigan had shook all their hands as they boarded. When the centrifuge broke and twenty of them had to do an EVA.

The two rose up to the centre of sector F, the smallest of Newton's six dedicated residential districts. Long rows of trees and bushes lined the centre of the corridor, the tallest of them just shorter than the base of the second level. SkyTran lines criss-crossed the top of the sector. Rick was still talking.

"...you follow me?"

"Yeah, Rick. It's a real shame these kids don't get it."

"Yeah, I gotta tell yo-..."

"Hey, Rick," Jim masterfully interjected, "wanna catch the SkyTran there or walk? It's only a click down."

"Sounds like a walking job. They on the first or second level?"

"First."

"We can walk. By the time we get in and out, it would take just as long for the skyrails. Never trusted those. Always scared we'd fall off."

"Haven't they been around since you were a kid?"

"Yeah. Never liked using them too much."

"You got in an interplanetary rocket, but you're too afraid to use a skytran?" Jim smirked.

"Hey, hey, I ain't afraid of them. Just don't like 'em. And unlike a rocket, I don't **have** to use them."

"You had to use a rocket?"

"If I hadn't done it, punks like you wouldn't be around to be smartasses and smash windows, would you?"

Jim rolled his eyes. Men like Rick seemed to him as so many of the children of Mars saw their parents – an enigma.

"I just don't get it, Rick. I don't get you or any of the first ten thousand. The first hundred thousand, even."

"If you don't get it, I suppose that means we did our job right." Rick's old and finely wrinkled face relaxed, the ever-present facetiousness evaporating for a few moments, "what we did was 'cos we felt we had to. Everything he said or we did, it felt like... like we had something pushing us. Thrusting us. I don't know, it's hard to get for me."

"I don't think even you know what it is, Rick."

"I probably don't. It was like we were being called. You ever wanted to go on an adventure? Do something good? Be able to just be a man?"

"Not-..."

"That's because you already can do that."

They spotted the kids in the distance. Three boys, one girl. They stared at the black and white uniforms for a second, before proceeding to yell in fear and try to run away. Jim rolled his eyes and gave chase. Rick dropped his empty cup and vainly tried to follow.

Mikheil crawled through the port and into Johnson's Frontier. The place had looked squat and unassuming as he approached, coated in a thick layer of dust which had scratched away most of the paintwork on the outside. A combination of brick, steel, and plastic which was slowly being covered by the dust of Mars. He headed straight over to the refuelling pump, and set to draining any water from the tank and filling up methanol. He'd removed his spacesuit before coming in – nobody wore a suit that didn't have a suitport, except for military men and villains.

He wore a grey shirt with a pair of worn denim jeans, alongside a set of hiking boots. So long as nobody moved to inspect the suitport on the MGT and see that it was missing its suit, he felt pretty comfortable to move out in the open around the base. He walked up to the information terminal, and searched the services offered on the outpost.

>BAR AND CANTEEN

>HOTEL

>BARBER

>CLAIM MANAGEMENT CENTRE

>CLOTHES AND UTILITY STORE

>MECHANIC

Mikheil glanced at the metal detectors that lay beyond the refuelling area, and the bored-looking guard who stood near them, eying the newcomer with some trepidation. Mikheil turned off the terminal, before proceeding towards the detector and the guard. It beeped as he passed through. He emptied his jacket pockets, placing some screwdrivers, wrenches, and clunky pair of goggles on the counter. The guard squinted and casually examined the items, but seemed to find little of interest. He nonchalantly beckoned Mikheil to continue on through to the outpost.

There were Confederation posters adorning the walls.

"FIGHT FOR FREEDOM – ENLIST NOW"

"PATROLLING THE FRONTIER"

“PEACE THROUGH VICTORY”

Mikheil shrugged, and headed towards the bar and canteen. It took only a minute to get there; judging from the size of the place, it served as the centre of life for the outpost. He smiled faintly at seeing the bright green glow of the plants by the window. After a moment of thought, he walked towards the booth just next to one of the largest plants. He sat down and stroked a large and broad leaf.

He was not the only one who seemed to be captivated by the plants. A woman in her fifties or sixties who was wearing a set of dark and long-sleeved overalls was sat at the other end of the canteen, her eyes fixed on their beautiful green glow. It was late – or early, depending on perspective. The aurora had stopped dancing in the sky, but dawn was yet to break. There were only faint pinkish-red tints far in the horizon, indicating that dawn would break soon enough.

He took a proper look around the area. At the bar itself sat four people; three women, one man. Two of the women and one of the men were wearing light short-sleeved overalls, all with the badge of the Tartarus Mining Company stitched in the side. The man – a lively looking guy of around forty - was flirting with one of his colleagues, a woman of no more than thirty who had shoulder-length black hair. Mikheil could not tell if she had picked up on it yet.

“Well, it was nothing. The equipment is to commend, not me.”

“You’re too modest. It took real alertness to spot that.”

“The entirety of the cabin was lighting up.”

“I could have easily missed that. Those eyes of yours-”

Mikheil turned away, resisting the urge to boyishly snicker. The third woman at the counter caught his eye briefly, and gave a smile. She was a pretty girl in her mid-twenties, with one eye green and another brown. She wore a tight blouse and a short skirt. Mikheil looked around the rest of the canteen.

There were four or so men in their fifties sat at a table, two young women in coats and fishnet leggings. The men were all laughing and having a good time, making some geological puns and talking about their claims in the area. The fact their synthetic leather jackets were all covered in patches of different outposts and other small details alone was enough to show that they were prospectors. One man with a flabby face caught Mikheil looking, and sized him up. Mikheil gave a single apologetic nod to him before turning away.

When he turned his head back round, he found the girl with mismatched eyes sat opposite to him in the booth. He forced a smile and a look of pleasant surprise.

“Oh. Sorry. Were you-?”

“No,” she said softly. “I just thought you could use some company.”

"Thanks, that's good of you. I'm just making a stop here to get some rest before heading to Terra Temple."

"You a prospector?"

"No. I'm on Confederation business."

She bought it, she looking with greater deference towards Mikheil.

"You're a soldier?" She rested an elbow on the counter, bending over ever-so-slightly.

"Nah. Geological scientist. Research."

"Oh? Nothing the guys back there won't kill you for?"

"Could be, from what my data is telling me." He gave her a coy and flirtatious smile. She reciprocated.

"It'd be a shame if I told them," she said half-seriously.

"I'd have to stop you."

"How?" She rested the hand she wasn't use to prop up her chin on his.

"I'd probably tie you up."

"That's pretty dramatic."

"Would it work, though?"

"I'll have to see what your handiwork is like."

They both laughed, leaning back in the booth. The inept miner at the bar glanced jealously at Mikheil.

"What's your name?" She asked.

"Micky." He almost swore at himself for using his real name. "You?"

"Abbey."

"That's a pretty name."

"Want to go for a walk?"

He shook his head. The look of disappointment and rejection briefly flashed in her eyes and her smile sagged, before the smile and sultry warmth came back.

"That's a real shame..."

"I was only here to see the plants. I need to make a call to someone I know on Deimos on some results."

"Deimos? Wow, that's long-distance."

"After I call them, I should be free."

"What, does the Overseer know you're using his terminal?"

"Hm?" Mikheil feigned blissful ignorance. "I thought the terminal here was open."

"Not here or any other place on Alba. If you're going beyond the planet, you have to use the overseer's terminal."

"Why's that?"

"I dunno. Probably espionage and all."

"It's really sad when things get this bad. Can you show me to his office?"

"He'll probably be asleep."

"I can wake him. It's important enough. I'd like to spend some time with you."

"You'll wake up the overseer to make a phone call?" She said with an incredulous smirk.

"Or tie him up with you."

She smiled, and stood up. She led him towards the exit of the bar. They walked through the broad but mostly barren corridors of the outpost, passing stores, homes, and services. Most were closed at this time, their owners sound asleep. Most of the activity was beside the place's hotel, where miners, prospectors, and visitors galore were talking, sitting outside, or heading into their rooms.

"What do you think of the outpost?"

"It's alright. Always someone new passing by."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Earth, actually."

"You're pretty young to be born on Earth."

"Well, I've been here five years. I'm from the Federation."

"Where about? I'd guess you're Canadian."

"Alaskan."

"Guess you're use to desolate wastes."

"It's greener back home."

They continued walking along, Mikheil's hands in his pockets. Her carefreeness was fading as their conversation went on.

"Why'd you leave?"

"It was the Subversion Act, dad was angry as hell when it passed. He just kept going on about Mars and how it wasn't going down the toilet. I was... twelve, I think."

"Yeah? How'd he get you off Earth?"

"Remember that Nova Twelve that got hijacked?"

"You were on there?" Mikheil raised a brow with genuine surprise, his façade slipping.

"There were a hundred or so of us. When they opened fire at the fence, dad didn't make it. Mom, my brother, and me made it, though."

"You like it here?"

"I..." She paused, before shaking her head. "I just want to go outside again, you know?"

"Where's your brother and mother?"

"We drifted apart. You know. I didn't learn a trade, so..."

He placed an arm around her as her eyes turned red. He faintly shushed her, and she said nothing. After walking another minute through the corridors, they stopped before the Confederation offices. The lobby was empty.

"You want to head outside the hotel? I'll be twenty minutes."

She forced a grin and walked off.

Mikheil spent a minute pacing around outside the office, staring in and out of its windows. He went to a nearby toilet. Then back to the office. Through the windows he could see a camera on the wall, sweeping around the place. The doors beyond the lobby were magnetically sealed. The ceiling was higher in there, with the ventilation ducts hugging it closely.

For a minute he paused and considered the problem. He checked the ducts in the corridors overhead, and traced them along. Past the toilet. Past some purely residential blocks. Past at least a dozen brick arches. To a skylight at the eastern end of the outpost. The only plant outside the bar sat there – an ash tree. He stared at the skylight; below the polycarbonate glass, the steel, and the brick at the top of the concave skylight, there was an open air duct. Mikheil glanced around; at this time of night, he only saw one person a minute pass by. There was a camera, but its arc was slow. If he timed it right...

He squinted, before moving around the tree and clutching its lowest branch. He gave a grunt as he hauled himself up. And another. And another. He wasn't wearing gloves, and his hands felt soft after the long time in space. He hadn't climbed a tree since he left home. Mikheil hauled himself, the leaves rustling as he shifted his weight. For a moment he thought he saw somebody stopping to look at him, but he seemed to get by without being caught. He readied himself and jumped towards the air duct.

Clarkson was overworked. He scratched away at his pathetic excuse for a beard, staring blankly at the terminal screen. All night he had been working. Whenever he had tried to go to his bed and get some sleep, thoughts of his work kept him awake; he had traffic reports to do and many geological compilations to file away. What kept him awake, however, were the precedents. So many precedents.

When he first had become an Overseer – eight years ago, arounds – he was under the impression that the task was a simple case of keeping the guards in check, making sure the law was followed, and any resources the outpost needed were distributed equitably and carefully. He was the bureaucrat. The administrator. He thought his role was important, but only to men and women of flesh and blood. Not to posterity.

Mars, however, dictated otherwise. And Madigan. Although he worked for the Confederation, he'd never once been given an order or an inspection from them; he was accountable to the residents. The working girls, the shopkeepers, and even the one or two families who had called Johnson's Frontier their home. There were no votes or democratic here, just an expectation. He knew what would happen if he fell short; he would be out. No checks and balances. No vetting. No drawn out process. If the residents felt he was incompetent or a failure, he'd be dealt justice personally – chased out onto the slopes of Alba, with a spacesuit on if he was lucky.

It was direct and there was the risk of failure, but it was direct. Small. Personal.

Dotting the surface of Mars – in the Mariner Valleys, on the slopes of Tharsis, deep in the canyons of Kasei, or on the plains of Acidalia and far beyond that – were hundreds upon hundreds of outposts like this one. Then there were the mines. The refineries. The larger settlements, too. All of which were run by someone; all run by the justice of the frontier. No codified or universal laws to restrict the rulers, nor to inhibit the mob when it was roused. The Confederation militias intervened when they could when clear laws were broken, but the distance of Mars and the number of installations meant that it was impossible to enforce a universal law. The Confederation was exactly that – a grouping of so many individual communities, each with their own identity but with a common set of beliefs and visions. Each community with vitality and enthusiasm.

Some posts had gotten rid of the lone overseer model altogether, and were run by all the residents at once; a truly Athenian democracy. Others were pure autocracies, led by charismatic and capable men who worked for the commonwealth. Most were like Johnson's Frontier, however – informal, uncoded. There were failures, but so many models developed for each community.

Geographical distance, the resources and industries of the land, the exact people inhabiting the places, all of these mattered. There was no inertia. Every person could clearly and easily influence their community. No bureaucracy and no inertial process held back the momentum of human decision and passion. The stations and the politics were malleable.

There was where the precedents came in. Clarkson fretted as he stared at his letter to Overseer Bannon's popular journal:

"...L claimed that the transaction had been unfair, and that he was entitled to either a refund or a free re-servicing of his vehicle. J maintained, however, that the agreement was as per the contract agreed upon; the failure of the sealant was due to manufacturer failure, not his own. The question of liability for the failure is now in question.

As with most compounds, the formula for the sealant is open-source. It is not a failure of the manufacturer of the sealant that the failure occurred in any sense. It is a problem inherent in a binding formula which is widespread and considered the standard for repair work. L signed a contract accepting the possibility and liability, but the failure left him incapable of working and thus without the income to obtain further repairs. There is the question of whether L knew whether the liability was a realistic risk, or judged the circumstance so improbable that he counted it as virtually impossible; if so, he did not sign the contract in full understanding of the risk. J holds by the law of the contract in this circumstance to be supreme.

I decided in favour of L. J was the only mechanic available in the settlement, and so there was no ability for L to choose an alternative possibility. Even if the contract did emphasise the risks adequately, L would have had little chance but to take it. It is my judgement that monopolies

in settlements providing any service have an additional obligation to consumer welfare, owing to the risks of such a lapse in service quality to the health and safety of consumers inherent to the Martian environment. I ordered J to provide another repair to L.”

Once he published it, all who were interested could read the precedent. Slowly, very slowly, a common set of laws built of precedent and the common customs of all Martians would be built up. The frontier of Mars would serve as a basis for a new law. Free from the politics and culture of Earth, but based on the practical and personal needs of the people. The Confederation enforced simple and morally black and white things – murder, sabotage, and all the other simple things – but it was the citizens and the Overseers who decided the law applicable to them. The new Common Law was emerging, to the chagrin of Earth.

Was this what Madigan had intended? Clarkson paused from his writing, and stood up. He often wondered that as he worked, and the unique Martian system of governance sprung up around him and built itself into something so distinct from the contemporary notion of cold, bureaucratised, and impenetrable law and order that they had left behind on Earth. He still remembered the declaration of secession, all those years ago. On the screens, he’d appeared. His eyes clear. His voice echoing through the annals of time.

“...Earth’s attempt to replace administrative staff represents a failure to understand the needs of the people of Mars, the asteroids, and beyond. The states, superstates, and multinational bodies who are attempting to replace the domestic system of government with a centralised Martian superstate which conforms to international standards are, in the judgement of the thousands I have spoken to, unacceptable.

More simply – Mars is not Earth. The asteroid belt is not Earth. Space is not a blank slate upon which the political and social fashions can be stamped upon. It is a different slate entirely. If it is stifled with laws that are archaic for its purposes, the settlement of space by mankind will slow to a halt. Bureaucracy will stifle economic and social development.

Mankind needs a frontier. Not just for an adventurous subset of the species who wish to make their fortune or feel powerful. But one in which man can be truly free, unshackled by the precedents of his ancestors, and where the sacred cows and ideas of today may be tested through sweat and toil.

I have tried to bring man to this frontier. I have given my life to this cause. It is a cause I shall not abandon...”

Clarkson reached down to continue to type, but then he felt something pressed against the back of his head. Something hard and metallic. He heard a single word.

“Up.”

He obliged, and raised his hands above his head. Sweat poured down his forehead, his eyes dilated. He wanted to run faster than any man had run before – but the knowledge that his memories and personality would end up splattered all over his legal precedent managed to hold him still. He found his pockets patted down, before being swung around to face a dun-skinned, gaunt, and dust-covered man.

“Don’t panic,” Mikheil said, placing a hand on Clarkson’s shoulder. “I want you to walk to your comm terminal, and log on.”

Clarkson, his hands still raised, obliged. He exited his bedroom, and walked into his; the gun still to his head. It was just adjacent to his room – the camera looked like it was off. He began to panic more and more, his heart racing and his breathing erratic. The urge to run was so strong. Mikheil noticed this. He placed a firm but gentle grip on the overseer’s shoulder, guiding him towards the door. They walked through the staff offices, and past the security office. Dust was everywhere in there, and the air duct above was swinging open. He saw young Johnson out cold, his gun missing from his belt.

“Is he-“

“He’s fine.”

Clarkson sighed in relief. He liked that boy. “I’ll give you whatever you want, just don’t hurt anyone.”

Was this an outlaw? A bandit? Some sort of political rebel? An anti-war activist? He slowly reached into his front pocket to take out his keycard, the man’s grip tightening on his shoulder as the door to the comm terminal opened. He quickly entered his credentials in.

>WELCOME, SIMON

>NO INCOMING TRANSMISSIONS.

>TRANSMARTIAN COMMUNICATION CONSTELLATION HANDSHAKE COMPLETE. PLEASE ENTER COORDINATES, FREQUENCY, AND RECORD OR TYPE CONTENTS OF MESSAGE.

“Good. Lock yourself in the security office with the boy there. Don’t bother trying to sound the alarm.”

Clarkson felt himself shoved away, the man pointing his gun at him. He had a steady aim, and a ready eye. He turned to Johnson, before carefully dragging him inside the security room and closing the door behind him. He heard a loud knocking sound, and the keypad shut off. He groaned, trying to pull open the door. No good.

Mikheil had rote remembered the protocol. They had him repeat it a thousand times before boarding the *Bonaparte*, and he told it to himself ten thousand times more whilst cruising through space in that hulk. He had got onto Mars without being shot down or garnering attention. Now it was time to see if his mission was a go. The terminal recognised his

wavelength and coordinates. Now it was time to send his message. So far and so much risk to send this one message:

>mg. arvl conf. mission goahead req.

He hit enter.

>MESSAGE SENT

Now he had to wait. As he spoke, the outpost's antenna was beaming the message to the most well-placed satellite in the constellation. It received the coordinates and the wavelength of the message, and burned a negligible amount of monopropellant to orientate itself towards the coordinates. It received the message, and beamed it out into the depths of space travelling at three hundred thousand kilometres a second. It would take around nine hundred seconds for the message to reach its destination. And nine hundred seconds to get a reply back. And a hundred seconds to count the composition of the reply and its receipt, give or take a few.

Around nineteen hundred seconds, or thirty-one minutes and forty seconds. All for just for the briefest conversation. Mikheil readied himself.

Clarkson was against the wall, shaking and panting. He stared at Johnson, nursing his head and slowly regaining his lucidity. He just noticed his incredible thirst, and the fact that his clothes were completely and utterly soaked with his own sweat. He stood up, and turned to the smashed security console. That man wasn't joking, they couldn't sound an alarm.

"How'd he get you?"

"I was looking at the footage, I turned around, and he socked me one."

"Damnit. How'd he get in the ducts? You seen him on tape?"

"I thought he was going with that girl... Abbey. I saw him on the corridor cameras. They were taking a scenic stroll or something."

"He a regular?"

"Never seen him before. He looks serious, Simon."

Clarkson bit his lower lip, before proceeding to point at his friend.

"Whatever he's up to, we can't let him get away with it. We can't be made a damn laughing stock."

"What's he doing?"

"Using the comm terminal. Maybe he's got some friends far away who want an outpost of their own."

"I ain't gonna let nobody take my home."

“Good. Wait...”

Clarkson paused, and stared up at the open air duct, and the dust still blowing out of it. He blinked, before looking down at Johnson.

“If he came in from there, then...”

Johnson tried to pick himself up, realising the idea. He was still in a stupor from the socking, however. Clarkson shook his head as the kid tried to volunteer himself.

“Just give me a boost, kid.”

Mikheil had waited twenty-six minutes. The message had to be on its way back by now. He paced back and forth around the staff office, occasionally eying the closed doors of the security room. Should he open it? What if they were waiting to try and gang up on him if he opened it? It was too big a risk. He’d realised his mistake a few minutes beforehand, with the air duct. If the guard had regained consciousness...

He shook his head, tipping over one of the staff desks. Just in case.

Abbey stood outside the hotel. She’d really liked that Micky. Not just in the sense that she found him cute to look at – there was something masculine about him. There was some personality to him he didn’t quite let on. His eyes were wide and attentive. His mannerisms calm. He was a good flirt. There was some sophistication there that she didn’t see that often.

Not just a lonely guy with a big wallet.

She heard the sound of running, and stepped back when she saw Overseer Clarkson run past the corridor, covered in dust and his own sweat. He was shouting something.

“...ACK. WE’RE UNDER ATTACK...”

He disappeared down the corridor, at least a dozen people following him. They were headed towards the armoury.

Twenty-nine minutes. Mikheil was getting restless. Impatient. Then the alarm went off. He cocked his pistol and flicked his safety off, and got behind one of the upturned desk. He stared at the console, praying that soon he would get the message. He hadn’t had too much time to

research or learn this complex; expediency over efficiency. He felt like he'd finally fell short with trying to balance both. That hulk had taken more out of him than just some muscle mass.

ALERT. ALERT. ONGOING THREAT IN FACILITY. ALERT. ALERT.

He briefly thought of Irina, the kids, Andria, his mother and father, and all the faces he knew and cared about. Random memories spilled into his mind. He saw the stargazing one again. The last time he saw Natia. The times he'd played hide and seek in the...

His mind clicked. A vague memory coagulated into an idea, which in turn formed a solid concept. He stared towards the back of the room, behind the door. He spotted it – a utility locker. With a slit in the middle. He ran up, yanked it open, and pulled out the various spare parts, tools, and sheets of synthetic paper. He made sure not to scatter them all over the floor, despite his rush. He placed the paper atop a cabinet, and shoved the tools and parts inside the drawers of the upturned desk. He turned to the comm computer – it was still logged on. Still ready.

ALERT. ALERT. ONGOING THREAT IN THE FACILITY.

He got in the locker, breathed in, and slammed the door behind him. This had to work.

"He's armed and he's dangerous. We want him alive, remember that."

There was a sea of nods to Overseer Clarkson's statement. There were sixteen of them. Not just guards, but citizens armed; mostly armed with truncheons, but some had been trusted with pistols and shotguns. They marched towards the administrator's office. They entered the lobby, and approached the door to the staff office. The security men took the point, followed by the administrator and then everyone else.

"One. Two. Thr-..."

They got ready to ram the door. It wasn't necessary, as it opened on its own accord. Unsealed and unclamped.

"Clear! Nobody here!"

The people burst in to the room, with its dim light and upturned desks. Dust and clutter was all over the floor, turning the place from a model of efficiency and tidiness into a pigsty. Clarkson glanced around. It was empty – he was gone. There was only the flickering light of the terminal. Clarkson cursed and kicked the desk.

“He got away,” a guard said. “He must have made the slip while you were locked up. Or maybe while we were on the way.”

Jacobson moved towards the door of the security room. Despite it literally just dawn at this moment, he was already in the mechanic outfit. They’d caught him doing his lifting when they called for him. He squinted, the light of his plasma tool illuminating the room.

“Just a sec, Johnson. We’ll have you out.” They got a single tap in response.

Clarkson shook his head in disbelief, glancing about the place for any sign – any – of what he’d been doing. Where he’d gone. Why he-...

>TRANSMISSION RECEIVED

>COMPOSING

The comm terminal rang and began to creak as it received a string of data. A series of numbers appeared on the screen; a sequence of nonsense characters. The screen filled up, then paused for a moment. The nonsense numbers were wiped. It had composed the message. Clarkson stepped forward, squinting at the white on black text.

>MARTIAN INSERTION CONFIRMED. CONGRATULATIONS. NEUTRALISATION PROTOCOL CONFIRMED.

Clarkson was confused by the meaning of the words. He felt something click in his mind, however. If what they were there for was the message, then-

He heard a creak, a shout, and a bang. He spun around; Lancaster was holding a smoking gun, having succeeded in shooting a filing cabinet. He saw a hiking boot and a leg of denim stick out the door. The door to the utility locker was ajar. Everyone was shocked and confused for but a moment. All but Lancaster, who had been the only one to see it. Clarkson swore, and moved to follow.

ALERT.

Mikheil nearly slipped as he ran through the complex, quickly grabbing a corner and swinging himself around it to try to steady himself and keep up his momentum. He was running faster than he’d ever remembered in his life. He sprinted through the corridors, giving the rubberneckers who stared at him with sheer confusion a wide berth in case they decided to join the posse. He heard the shouts of the mob through the alarm.

ALERT.

He passed the hotel. Abbey stared at him in disbelief.

ALERT.

Those who were still lurking in the bar or getting ready to open their businesses stared at him as he continued his mad sprint. Some looked like they were getting ready to tackle him. He dashed towards the refuelling station, spotting the turntables and metal detector from afar.

ONGOING THREAT-

He vaulted over the turntable, the operating part of his lucid mind behind the adrenaline thanking everything that the guard there was in the posse that was chasing him.

“HE’S GETTING AWAY, SHOOT HIM!”

-IN THE FA-

He didn’t have time to be careful. He jumped towards the port of the MGT he arrived in. He couldn’t risk the momentum and his life. He felt something soar by close to his ear, and the sound of metal and metal. He grunted as he landed on his stomach in the pot. He crawled quickly, ready to kick hard in case he felt a hand.

-ILITY. AL-

He fell to the floor of the MGT. He scrambled to the docking controls, and hit undock immediately. The shouting got closer, the sirens blared. He took a deep breath, ready for them to jam the door or for someone to pull themselves through. His heart was in his chest.

“QUICK, OVERRID-...”

The sound of the siren and the mob was cut off. The port was sealed.

>Undock successful

>De-mated from JOHNSON’S FRONTIER

Mikheil was tempted to fall to his knees. To praise God and all the saints he could think of. Instead, he shambled over to the cockpit and made sure to push his foot down on the accelerator as hard as he could. The MGT blazed away. At the moment, he didn’t care what direction he went; he decided in the direction of the pink and red haze, and the Sun.

It took him several minutes to process everything. To get his breath back and repay his oxygen debt seemed like an even greater task than fleeing. The flow of time returned to normal.

The enormity of the real task dawned on him.