



BURNING BRIGHT

A Science-Fiction Tale of Options

The journey to the new world was a technical challenge for Columbus and his crew. No one had ever gone that far on the water before. They had no idea if the medical challenge of scurvy could be overcome. But in the end, they overcame the challenge and landed in the new world. Just like Columbus, the Mars Habitation Project used human innovation and determination to make the human species a multi-planet species. To ensure its long-term survival. Humans landed on Mars in 2039. That's when the trouble began.

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Mars Elect Council Operations Center, Cerberus Plains

Klaxons started wailing. Everyone started to busily work at their stations. Every person's actions were calm and purposeful as if the emergency had been rehearsed. Throughout the entire room, reactions made people appear as if they were rocks standing alone in the middle of a hurricane. First Citizen William Franklin, the Director of Mars, calmly stood. He started gathering the data from the staff reports.

The control room space was a small oval shape, lit from light panels on the floor. Six stations were crowded into this space; humans and consoles crammed together. In the far wall, occupying more space than any given to the room's human occupants were four large data screens. The room hummed with a slight electronic buzz and the sound of chair casters on the hard floor. The air had a twinge of ozone in it. But you wouldn't have noticed. Not if you were a Martian.

"O₂ levels nominal."

"Structural integrity at 100%, no flaws detected."

"Water systems nominal."

"Systems sensors report no equipment failures."

"Diagnostics report all systems within standard operational parameters."

Bill looked at the oxygen circulation system over his head. Years of experience had taught him to question every report, every readout. He half expected to see cracks forming over his head, dust falling from the ceiling. But there was nothing. This, in itself, Bill found disconcerting. He knew, on Mars, when things went wrong you didn't normally have to wait long to find out what it was. Solving the problem was the tricky bit.

From the corner of his eye, Bill Franklin spotted Herb Feltner poised over his command console, staring at it. Herb wasn't a middle-aged man, but his hair was mostly gone. What was left was cut down to within an inch of its life. This, combined with the deep scar under his right eye, made him look older than he was, with a fair amount more experience. "Herb, what have you got?" Herbert Feltner never moved, his reactions were as if he was deaf, unable to hear and thus respond. Bill put his arms down on the console in front of him. There was a sharpness in Bill Franklin's tone. "Herb?" With a jolt, Herb sat bolt upright. "Herb, what's going on?"

Herb glanced over at the First Citizen, his eyes wide, blood vessels visually pounding in his forehead. "There's no telecom. We've lost contact with Earth."

Mars Elect Council Conference Room, Cerberus Plains

The conference room was about twice the size of the operations center. One long, square table occupied most of the available space. The center of the table was cut away and filled with plants and a fountain. Surrounding the table were chairs and even more plants. In fact, there were plants all over the station. Any free space was given over to anything which produced oxygen. The designer for the conference room had a real thing for palm trees. They did double duty, oxygen and food production. Only the main wall was free of leafy structures. Hanging there was a large black, presentation screen.

Lance Gordon leaned back in his chair. "I'm not sure I see the urgency. So, we lost contact with Earth. Could be a problem at their end."

Mary McConnell voiced a calmness that was almost frightening. Some might even have referred to it as a flat affect. "I'm sure we'll reestablish contact soon."

Lance grinned. "I say we go about our business and worry about it later."

Herb's face was pale. "Doesn't it bother anyone that last week the Arab Union declared a jihad on the Western consortium?"

"It's saber-rattling," Lance declared. "A pure coincidence, nothing more."

"I'm sure if the situation had escalated, we'd have heard something before things started going haywire. Besides, isn't this why we are here in the first place? People on Mars ensure humanity's survival." Mary remained stoic.

First Citizen Franklin stood before the main presentation screen taking everything in. He'd found, in these kinds of meetings, it was best to let the staff speculate before the real meeting started. It tended to reduce overthinking the problem later. "I want to introduce Nicky Elgart." He indicated a figure seated at the back of the table. She stood out in several ways. She appeared to be far younger than anyone else in the room, but then there was the matter of her dress. There was no question about the look and demeanor of everyone else in the room. It was an IASA-style professional. But Nicky was clearly an exception. She was wearing, what could casually be described as a nightgown. Procreation among the civilian staff was a substantial concern, one might even say a considerable pastime, of the Mars population. As a result, the dress code in the civilian sector tended to be rather lax.

As was typical for the governmental staff, the others in the room made a serious effort to ignore her presence. Or at least what she was wearing.

"Nicky," Bill explained, "is an employee of the government ruling council. She's the official Mars Historian."

No one in the room seemed either shocked or moved by the announcement. Lance was the first person to open his mouth. "A glitch doesn't seem to be worth making a historical note about it, Mr. First Citizen. A historical footnote would seem to be more appropriate. I'm sure we can write something up later."

There was a snicker inside the room. Only Bill and Nicole skipped the levity.

Bill crossed his arms. "There's a bigger problem. Nicky, would you explain?"

The one thing everyone could agree about was the fact Nicole Elgart's smile would light up a room. She was what most people refer to as perky. "Mars almost wasn't established as a settled world. Back in the 2050s a war almost broke out over it. The world's aggressive tendencies then, as it is today, was kept in check by Mutually Assured Destruction. The concern was, once Mars became an inhabited world, the fear of destroying the only habitable planet in the system would be removed. People might actually start pressing the button."

Lance clicked his tongue. "I don't follow. What's that got to do with us?"

Bill's eyes narrowed. "The US, Russia and China came up with a solution in 2059, allowing Mars colonization to go forward."

"The Unilateral Weapons Agreement. I think I read about it in school," Lance commented.

Nicky turned to Lance and turned on the charm. "There's a secret clause in the agreement. Under each of the Mars settlements, there is a weapons store."

Mary's eyes flickered. "You mean a bomb?"

The light in the room flickered for an instant. it was almost prophetic. "Yes," Bill agreed with the definition. "They are automatically detonated if Mars Central loses contact with Earth."

Mary was incredulous. "Any nobody knew about this?"

"In the current governing council just myself, Herb and Nicky were kept in the loop."

"Why?"

"Well, it's not generally good operating procedure to tell people there's an armed bomb placed under their house designed to incinerate them. It tends to make people nervous," Bill declared.

"Well, there's nothing to be concerned about," Lance announced casually. "They must have been placed there 75 years ago, right? Can't still be functioning or we have all gone boom by now, am I right?"

Nicky shifted slightly in her chair. "There was a time lag built into the system. It was put there in the event of a communications failure."

"So, when is it supposed to go off?" Mary asked.

Bill sighed. "We don't exactly know. It could be 72 hours or three weeks."

Mary's face returned to its stone setting. "And no one tried to disarm these weapons in advance?"

"Earth could detect any tampering if communications were up and they would be detonated remotely," Bill announced.

"Anyone else agree this was a massive stupid plan," Mary declared. "Why don't we just do down to the basement and disarm them now?"

Bill appeared tense. "There's one small problem we'll have to deal with."

"It's part of the secret protocol," Nicky added.

"They were hidden," Bill choked slightly, "And no one on Mars knows exactly where they are."

Lance let out a deep exhale. "So, we get out the Giger counters and go find them."

Mary shot Lance an angry look. "There are thousands of reactors on Mars, it's the primary tool for energy production. You'd be getting false reading all over the surface."

"How the hell can you keep this kind of thing a secret for 75 years?" Lance spat.

The room grew quiet. It was an eerie silence. One which had to be broken, but no one wanted to go first with the obvious conclusion. "Let me see if I have this straight," Lance tried to sum things up. "We have an unknown amount of time to find and disarm a series of deliberately hidden nuclear devices or they might detonate and blow us all to kingdom come?"

"That about covers it," Bill agreed.

Lance leaned back in his chair. "Please tell me this isn't a government-run operation."

"Mary," Bill used his full commanding tone. It was what got him elected to the position of First Citizen. "You'll come with me. Lance, I want you to work with Nicky to use the transport tubes to find the device under Chryse Planitia. Herb, you keep monitoring the communications channels. Let us know the minute they come back up."

"But we're still going to disarm them, right?" Lance insisted.

"What happens if Earth finds us tampering should communications come back up?" Nicky interjected.

Lance's shoulders drooped. "Then they set them off."

Bill sounded intense. "I think you have the picture."

4 Hours and counting, Mars Habitat Number Two, Chryse Planitia

The spaces underneath the habitats were dimly lit rough-hewn caverns. Some of them no bigger than crawl spaces. The whole space had the odor of dried cement. They reminded Lance of someone trying to tunnel out of a prisoner of war camp. Stringed lights hung from pitons hammered into the ceiling. Nicole followed along behind Lance, adjusting the one or the other fallen strap every other corner. Without turning around, Lance muttered, "Interesting attire you have there."

Nicole's voice was like a ringing chime. "Are you suggesting that I take the time and go back to change into something more appropriate?"

"No, heavens forbid." He had to hold back a snicker. "I was simply trying to make conversation. This might take a while." The ground crunched under their feet. "Say, aren't you a bit young to be the official Mars historian? It's usually a job for men who are losing their hair, like Herb."

Nicky sounded annoyed. "My great grandfather was Ben Maxim, the first man to land on Mars."

"I hear he always wanted to be called the first Martian."

"Well, he's buried down here somewhere, so I guess he is the first Martian."

"How do you suppose?"

"It's an old Earth adage. You're from wherever you are buried."

They passed their first power station. The reactor was a large piece of machinery, generating power for the station. But the unit was fully automated. People only came down here to do the occasional spot of maintenance.

Lance whipped the sweat from his brow. "Is it getting hot down here or is it my imagination?"

“These tunnels were originally constructed as shelters, but later they were dug deeper to tap into the planets thermal core.”

“So, you’re saying *it is* getting hotter.”

Nicky clicked her tongue. “You can stop leering at me now.”

Lance’s tone indicated he wasn’t phased in the slightest. His repartee had a rather know-it-all quality to it. “My dear, you’re behind me. I don’t think I can be leering at you.”

“You’re doing it with your voice,” she protested.

“I had no idea you could leer at someone with your voice. I’d have thought eyes were a required component.”

“I didn’t think anyone could do it with their voice either, but you are. Knock it off.”

The string of LED lights came to an end, but the tunnel continued. The two proceed but at a slower rate, groping to find their way in the darkness. Lance came to a grinding halt. “Did you find something?”

Lance sounded concerned. “You could say that...”

Nicky leaned her head around Lance, who’s bulk was blocking her sight. A set of lights in the wall flickered on. In front of them were four stick-like figures, between seven and eight feet tall. They looked like emaciated humans with oversized heads. Wearing only shorts, they could easily have been Slenderman nightmares. Their hair was long and jet black. Three of them had brown eyes, but there was one with ice blue-eyes Lance found particularly unnerving. Each one was holding a long steel pole. The ends had been hammered flat and then cut into gagged edges, so they resembled wicked-looking spears. Their points were alarmingly leveled at the two council members. “Dwellers...” Mary muttered.

Lance slowly raised his hands. “Dwellers?”

“About a fifth of the population are more adjusted to Mars’ lesser gravity,” Nicky explained. “They tend to be taller, but the effect tends to cause the muscles to stretch out.”

Lance practically spat. “So, you force them to live down here? You’re despicable.”

“And you jump to conclusions,” Nicky’s voice turned gravelly. “With the lesser amounts of body fat, they prefer warmer temperatures. It a climate choice.”

“Don’t they talk?”

“Of course, we talk,” the blue-eyed one muttered. “Don’t be stupid. But it was rather amusing to listen to the two of you rattle on. Now let me tell you something the girl hasn’t mentioned, we not fond of interlopers. Why don’t you two turn around and hike back up to the surface?” He thrust his spear in Lance’s direction to emphasize his point.

“We have to tell them,” Nicky whispered.

Lance wasn’t convinced. “I think telling them would be a monumentally bad idea. The First Citizen was also quite explicit. He didn’t want us to inform the public.”

“Our hearing is pretty good too,” the blue-eyed one continued his spear thrusts. “Now, what’s this you’re not supposed to tell us?”

At first, Lance was not persuaded, but some repeated thrusts with the pointed end of a metal rod finally convinced him. He explained the situation, adding only at the end with the news of the growing tensions on Earth and the loss of communications.

“Okay,” the blue-eyed one remarked, “maybe you do have a good excuse to be down here.” The group lowered their makeshift spears and Lance lowered his arms slightly after them. “Follow us.”

“Where are you taking us?”

The blue-eyed one looked annoyed. “Not only do we have proper eyesight and perfectly good hearing, but we can also be reasonable as well.” Without further explanation, they started walking down the tunnel. Their feet shuffling on the loose dirt covering the floor. “You didn’t think to mention we might run into these people down here?” Lance’s voice grated on Nicky’s nerves.

“No,” she answered sarcastically, “my mind was a little distracted with other things. You know, the imminent prospect of being blown up comes to mind.”

The sound of their feet echoed off the tunnel walls. Mary Tapped Lance on the shoulder. “How can you be so ignorant about one-fifth of the population? You’re with the government for crying out loud.”

“Well, you said they stayed down here. You tend not to pay too much attention to people who don’t attend political rallies. It’s a sad fact of government, but it’s true. If we don’t see you, you’re just a vote in a recording device. Besides, I’m material management, not the Director of Housing.”

The group turned down a non-descript tunnel. This one seemed to be used for storage. Lines of old-fashioned plastic barrels occupied the walls, stacked three high. They looked as if they’d been here since the first supply missions from Earth, The Slenderman dwellers slowed their pace and then came to a halt. One of them used a long index finger as if he was counting off the barrels. Satisfied with the result, he directed the others and they disassembled one stack.

Lance peered into the resulting space. Set in the wall, no longer hidden by the barrels was a small crawlspace. The word crawl was the operative word. Lance didn’t even think he could walk down the space on his hands and knees.

“You should find what you are looking for at the far end.” Blue eyes indicated the tiny space. “You excuse us if we don’t join you. My fellows and I find the space a bit cramped, you understand.”

“Ladies first,” Lance indicated the entrance.

She grumbled. “In a pig’s eye.”

“I was afraid you’d see it that way.” Lance forced himself into the crawlspace. It was indeed as narrow and as low as it first appeared... if not worse. Lance contemplated how long his elbows and knees would last before he wore them out completely. He imagined Nicky was having a far worse time behind him. As he proceeded dust and debris fell from the ceiling. At first, the dust merely obscured his vision in the dim light. But as he proceeded the dust started to mix with the sweat covering his forehead, turning it into sludge and causing a nasty itch. He was soon wiping his brow every few minutes.

The light leaking in from the barrel hallway behind them was growing increasingly dimmer, but Lance could tell there was something ahead. He craned his neck backward. "I think I've found something."

Before he could say anything further, he took a tumble. He'd found something all right, it was a bigger room. The floor seemed to be covered in some kind of loose tubing. He tried to sense what it was with his hands. Feeling around with his fingers he had a sudden inspiration. Each one of the tubes had a plastic covering at one end. He flicked off the plastic cover with his thumb and the flare instantly ignited. The room was filled with a red glow.

Nicky's head appeared sticking out of the tunnel about a foot above the floor. Lance could have sworn he'd fallen farther, but at the moment, he was pleased nothing appeared to be broken. He noticed Nicky wasn't looking at him, her eyes were staring straight ahead. "Ah, oh."

Lance spun his head around. Against the opposite wall was a large device. At first, it didn't appear menacing, only a few blinking lights. On closer inspection, the screen with the counting numbers didn't seem at all promising. Nicky dragged herself into the chamber. "Well, I think we can retire the plan which says they are no longer working."

"I'm afraid so."

"Do you think it is armed?"

Lance stood and brushed the white dust off the screen. The numbers continued to count. "Yea, I'm afraid so."

"Well, we found one at any rate."

"Yeah. Well done us. Now we only have seven more to go."

"Seven?"

"One under each complex."

Nicky looked puzzled. She watched the numbers, they were increasing, not decreasing. "It would have been nice to see the numbers counting down. At least we have some idea how long we have. Maybe it just does that. Count up, I mean." As she spoke the last sentence the screen turned to a line of text.

Earth Communication Lost. Procedure Initiated.

Then it returned to displaying numbers. Lance squinted. "That looks fairly ominous."

Nicky brushed the dirt off her hands. "I guess there is nothing for it. We'll have to disarm it manually. What do we do first?"

Lance's voice rose several octaves. "Why are you asking me, I'm the materials manager. What do I know about nuclear weapons? Don't you know how to disarm it?"

Nicky's shoulders drooped. "No, they didn't cover that at the academy."

"Great, just great."

10 Hours and counting, Mars Habitat Number One, Cerberus Plains

Mary was a stoic as ever, so she led the way. It was better this way, Mary realized. It kept her from staring at Bill. He looked like a Greek god. Strike that, he made Greek gods appear like hapless ordinary men. Pale imitations of real people. She didn't want her face to give away any of her secrets.

The tunnels underneath Habitat One were well-lit corridors. Most of them were used for storage, resulting in long rows of shelving filled with containers. As Mary and Bill Franklin proceeded further the smooth walls of the corridors disappeared and the walls became rough tunnels. The smell changed too. What was once ammonia was now the raw smell of calcium.

Mary's eyes narrowed. "You ever hear of any cave-ins down here?"

Bill gave her a sideways glance. "Well, Mars is not nearly as geologically active as Earth, there's no plate tectonics going on, so you don't have the same problem Earth has with quakes. Those tend to be the cause of most cave collapses."

"But there's still some geologic activity, right?"

"Certainly. If you look outside from the habitat observation dome, the first thing you'll notice is Olympus Mons, the largest volcano in the solar system."

The light in the tunnels changed from recessed lighting plates to strings of small LED bulbs. "Do we have to worry about lava flows, then?"

"No. Olympus Mons may be big, but it took billions of years to form. It hasn't been active lately." Bill gave her a slight snicker. "Why are you worried?"

"I was just wondering."

They turned the corner and the shelves disappeared. There were a bunch of bundles on the floor. "These are some of the oldest tunnels in the complex."

Mary glanced at the bundles. They were far longer than they were wide or tall. They appeared to be some sort of cylinders wrapped in a form of tight-woven cloth. Dust on the material told her they had not been unwrapped in some time, perhaps not since they were placed down here. It reminded her of images she'd seen of old museums where the furniture was enclosed in canvas drop cloths. Farther down the hall Mary noticed a form in a spacesuit, lying prone on the floor. She approached the suit, concerned there might be an injured person down here. She pulled up the visor in the helmet to see inside.

Mary screamed.

Franklin had never recalled Mary being unnerved by anything, let alone release an actual scream. Inside the helmet was a very white skeletal skull. "It's one of the first settlers," Bill remarked. "They all are." He pointed down the rows of wrapped bundles they'd already passed in the tunnel. "These are the Habitat One Catacombs." He examined the suit with a wary eye. "Seems like they didn't bother to wrap this one. I wonder why. I guess this one passed away before we started making cloth on the planet."

Mary spent some time trying to recover her composure. “What other surprises should I be expecting down here?”

“Well,” Bill remarked, “There is a rather large bomb down here intent of blowing us all to kingdom come if we don’t hurry up and find it.”

“Right,” Mary took a deep breath, “we should get on that then.”

Farther down the tunnel even the floor took on a rough quality, matching the walls. Their feet slid on the gravel-covered floor as they walked. Despite the time factor, both Mary and Bill had learned to proceed at a deliberate pace. Living all their lives on Mars it became a learned habit. At only 38% of Earth gravity, you could easily run, but if you slipped, you’d go much farther than on Earth. Slamming into a far wall at full speed wasn’t something you wanted to repeat. “Have you been down here before?” Mary asked.

“To some of the lower levels, yeah. But I haven’t been this deep. These are geological heat vents for the habitat. There’s really no reason to come down here.”

Mary sighed. “We’re going to have to tell everyone. You know that right?”

“Tell people what?”

“About the bombs.”

Bill snorted. “What good would that do? Do you think everyone will have enough time to... I don’t know, evacuate to Venus?”

“People have to know they are sleeping over bombs that might kill them. They have a right to know.”

“They don’t want to know,” Bill insisted. “Besides all I need is some nut case sneaking down here to try to set one of them off.”

“Then we have to get rid of them.”

“No. We have to make sure Earth Central doesn’t set them off because we are tampering with them. Once we’re sure they can’t blow them up in our faces, then we get rid of them.”

Mary cringed. “And just how exactly do we go about doing that?”

“One step at a time,” Bill chuckled. “We have to find them first.”

Turning another corner, Mary spotted a door recessed in the tunnel wall. It was covered in a fine layer of dust. Bill scraped some of it off. In the center of each door was a symbol. A smaller circle surrounded by three rhomboid shapes all inside another circle. “Well,” Bill remarked, “It either a radioactive symbol or we’ve accidentally run into a huge storehouse of reel-to-reel magnetic tapes.”

Mary shrugged her shoulders. As she glanced at the door her skin started tingling as if she’d been in the way of a wild stampeding herd of ants. “I thought used radioactive material was all being stored at the abandoned landing site at Noachis Terra?”

“It is.”

“So, what’s this?”

“If I had to make a guess, I’d say this is also a radioactive storage location.”

“For what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe say a large bomb?”

“Oh.”

Bill pressed the stud on the wall and the door opened, each side recessing into the adjacent wall. They made it about half-way until the dust on the surface stopped the motion and with a loud grinding sound, the door motion came to a halt. Fortunately, there was enough room in between them to allow Mary and Bill to squeeze through.

At first, they thought they’d been misled. They were in a rough-cut chamber which appeared to be empty. There were four walls, alright, but other than a lot of dust, it was decidedly empty. Mary and Bill looked at each other before they started heading back for the door. “Hold on a second,” Bill muttered.

“What?”

“Do you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

Bill started jumping up and down. Each time he landed a spray of dust rose up in the air perhaps an inch or so and then settled back down again. But the dust didn’t perform this trampoline act across the entire floor, only in the center of the room. Bill looked over at Mary “Stand over there by the wall will you.”

Mary complied, but she gave the First Citizen a confused glance, arching her head to one side. “What is it?”

Bill kneeled and moved the dirt on the floor around with his hands. At first, all he uncovered was more dirt. Then his hands ran into something metal. There was a slight clanging sound as if two pieces of steel were striking against one another. He cleared away more of the dirt and a sunken metal ring appeared on the floor. He pulled it up with his fingers. “Stand back.”

Lifting the ring, Bill sent an even bigger cloud of dust into the air. Before long, Mary couldn’t even see where Bill was standing. There was a cloud of white dust everywhere. When the air finally cleared, the First Citizen stood, covered in dust like a flour painted ghost. He had a massive grin on his face. At this point, Mary noticed she could no longer see anything below Bill’s knees. He was standing on a set of steps uncovered by a trap door. “Follow me.”

In a flash, Bill’s head disappeared down the hole. It took a moment, but Mary finally followed him down the steps. At the bottom of the steps was a large device. It could easily be 75 years old, if not older. Mary’s eyes narrowed. Lights were busy blinking on the device’s surface and a small screen was displaying a set of numbers. they were incrementing. “That can’t be good,” Mary muttered.

Bill shrugged. “Lance is going to be disappointed. This sure looks active to me.”

12 Hours and counting, Mars Elect Council Operations Center, Cerberus Plains

Herbert Feltner's eyes were staring deeply at a view screen. "It's the green one. You cut the green one."

There was a voice emanating from the viewing screen, but all Herb could see on the screen was an open access port filled with different types of wiring and circuit boards. "How do you know it's the green wire?"

"It's always the green wire."

"I thought it was always the red wire?"

"No, the sidekick always thinks it's the red wire, but it's never the red wire, the hero always cuts the green wire."

Mary's voice could be clearly heard. "You're kidding me. You're telling me how to disarm a nuclear weapon based on scenes from movies? Please tell me you actually know how to disarm this thing."

There was a moment of silence. Herb tried desperately to get the redness to fade from his cheeks. "Well, I ... Ah, you know..."

Mary sounded like she was about to be forced to pay a charge for an unnecessary service repair. "You don't, do you?"

"Well, if you want to get technical about it."

Mary used up an entire month of exclamation points in one breath. "I do want to get technical about it. I WANT TO GET VERY TECHNICAL ABOUT IT. But more than that I want to avoid blowing myself and everyone else up in a huge, glowing blast, incinerating half the planet in the process."

Herb shrugged his shoulders. While he was being engaged in being insecure, a bright blue light started to flash on his console. "Get out of there," Herb yelled.

Bill Franklin's voice sounded concerned. "Why? What's going on?"

"No time to explain, just get out of there NOW." There was a slight pause before Herb added, "And if anyone ever asks, you were never down there."

The screen went dark. The timing couldn't have been better. Another screen across from the console lit up. The familiar face of Dr. Fredrick Lawson appeared on the screen. "Everything alright up there?"

Herb tried to hide his uneasiness. "Are you kidding, what's going on down there? Are you folks alright?" The next part almost had Herb climbing the walls. He started nervously tapping his foot. There would be roughly a four-minute delay for them to even hear his question. Followed by another four minutes before Herb would hear the answer. Right about now, it felt like an eternity.

Finally, the screen crackled back to life. "Nothing to worry about, everything's fine. Your usual saber-rattling. It caused everyone to get together and sign a new disarmament treaty, so that's good news, eh?"

“So, what happened? We lost all the feeds up here.” Now Herb again had to wait out the delay. He considered opening a book. Maybe reading a few chapters while he was waiting around. *There are never enough magazines in the waiting room.* He thought to himself as his impatience reached a flashpoint. He wanted to make the inventor of radio stand on hot coals while he was waiting for the answer.

When the link was back up, it was Lawson’s turn to look queasy. “Well, it seems one of the night janitors turned off the power in the satellite uplink room. He thought he was turning off the lights. We just turned it back on. Sorry.”

Herb sighed. “Do me a favor. Never do that again, okay?”

Mars Elect Council Conference Room, Cerberus Plains

William Franklin looked out over the assembled group. He appeared about as tied as everyone felt. “Do you think they knew? You think they got any indication we were tampering with the weapons?”

Herb shrugged his shoulders. “It doesn’t seem like it. They are supposed to go off if Earth Central detected any tampering. Since we’re all still here, I say they didn’t get any wind down there what we were trying to do.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way.”

Mary McConnell didn’t look eager to simply let things drop like nothing had happened and hope for the best. “What are we going to do?”

“Do?” Bill suggested. “I know what I’m going to do. I going to get some sleep.”

“How can you sleep.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to make these kinds of decisions when we’re all exhausted?”

“No. Mr. First Citizen. Of course not.”

“I’m glad you agree. I suggest you get some sleep too.” Everyone stood as Bill headed for the door.

“We’ll talk about fixing this tomorrow. Let’s all hope no other janitor pulls out a power cord while we’re taking a snooze.”