

Prologue

The sphere floated red, intact and virginal; rotating innocently in its orbit, Mars spun dormant. A second later the screen showed a moving object thrusting its way through the fragile layer of atmosphere. Speeding at the rate 150 m.p.h. and now accelerated by the gravitational pull of the planet, it was silhouetted for a second against the white polar cap, and like a lone sperm nudging up against a huge ova it paused for a moment before hurtling down toward that frigid yet expectant surface. Four seconds later the nuclear explosive, a massive ten tonnes of missile head, ignited an explosion a hundred times larger than Hiroshima. Three seconds after that a slow tsunami of shatter ice and cloud dust began to ripple majestically across the surface. Sarah leaned back in her chair. She loved playing God.

Sarah Kavish was a scientist working for a terraforming unit under the auspices of NASA. Terraforming, as she was constantly finding herself explaining, was the art of creating life-supporting atmospheres on other planets.

Mars was the most obvious candidate because of the vast amounts of water and solid CO₂ trapped, frozen, under the polar caps. The primary goal of

the terraformers was to find ways of warming the south pole, initially to release the trapped CO2 from the dry cap into the atmosphere, so that a greenhouse effect would result, which would heat up the blanket of gases and melt the cap a little more, and trigger the germination of an atmosphere that could eventually support life. There was a variety of theories about the best method to use to melt the south pole.

Sarah, whose original training was in nuclear physics, believed in speeding up the initial process by bombarding the buried fields of nitrates with hydrogen bombs which would melt the hidden permafrost thus releasing the trapped oxygen.

She watched the slow spreading blue begin to inch its way across the frozen desert plains. It was the hundredth bombardment of the planet she'd made in half an hour and at this point the permafrost should be finally melted. The tidal waves of the released water would be gushing over the rugged terrain, filling up the deepest canyons and lapping up the sides of the towering volcanoes.

She got up and went to fix herself a double espresso. It was seven o'clock and it was going to be a long night. The laboratory she worked in was located in a old porn movie house just past Highland at a desolate end of Hollywood Boulevard.

Robert Lowman, the head of the unit, had converted the auditorium into the main laboratory with sponsorship from Boering Co. and Lockheed Martin Corp. Sarah loved the seedy atmosphere that still, even after ten years, hung around the corners of the small offices that were set off the large open space where Robert kept his paraphernalia.

She thought it was a great irony that here, surrounded by the gang-bangers, the homeless and the dazed tourists, behind blacked out windows and a decrepit façade they deliberately hadn't bothered to change, was the hatching of a great quest; the dream of space colonisation being transformed into plausible reality.

Suddenly an alarm went off in her computer. She turned back to the screen: something was going horribly wrong. Instead of continuing to flood the planet, the water had instantly frozen into a huge glacial plateau, the perimeters of which were tidal waves snap frozen in mid-air like a Japanese ice sculpture. She'd never seen anything like it before. She checked the running figures at the bottom of the screen; they seemed normal. It just didn't add up; an abrupt plunge back to sub zero temperatures would be catastrophic. Something had to be wrong with the programming. Just then, the

sound of raised voices next door made her swing around.

The noise was coming from Jamie's office. Jamie, the kid of the unit at twenty, liked to work back late as well. Self-made, he was discovered in a science workshop Robert held annually at the schools of East L.A. Jamie had been a brilliant fourteen-year-old black kid living with his thirty-year-old junkie mother in a project apartment in Watts. Having access to the one computer at his school was the only thing he lived for. Robert rescued him and then recruited him. Jamie's job was to develop computer programs that allowed the unit to recreate models of the evolving martian atmosphere post terraforming. Despite Robert's eccentric self-devised tutoring, James had not failed them once, until perhaps now. The voices grew louder. Sarah recognised Jamie's soft tenor but the other voice was an aggressive bass she didn't know. The man was shouting now, his muffled words underscored by violence. She couldn't quite make out what he was saying, as her office was the old projection room and so was insulated, but it sounded ugly. Sarah reached into her desk and pulled out an old hammer. She stepped out into the narrow corridor, and the voices were immediately audible.

'We gave you a choice, it's your only way out!' The noise of Jamie's body slamming against the back wall vibrated through the thin partition. Instantly Sarah's faculties went on red alert. They were alone in the building; security consisted of dysfunctional burglar alarm that no one had bother fixing. Instinctively, she hunched her shoulders, her hand resting for a moment on her womb. She raised the hammer; clutching it like a weapon made her feel a little better. Sarah edged towards the door which was lightly ajar. Jamie crouched against the far wall with his nose bleeding. The man had his back to her. He was big, with broad powerful shoulders visible under a leather bomber jacket. His movements were unhurried, as if he was trained to intimidate. He picked up Jamie's trash can and threw it at the cowering boy, who flinched, terrified, the trash can missing him by inches. 'You've got two weeks, and you've got no option.' The man swung around and walked swiftly out of the office, almost slamming the door into Sarah as he left. She caught a glimpse of his face: a brutish red complexion, light blue eyes cold as ice and a scar that ran down one side of his forehead. She rushed ot Jamie's aid.

'Are you alright?'

He pushed her away, holding a sleeve up to his face to stem the blood. 'Yeah, I'll survive.'

'Who was it, Jamie?' Sarah asked.

He stood up and turned away from her, running his long elegant fingers over his desk, checking that his precious computer set-up was intact. 'Nothing I can't handle.'

'Jamie, he almost killed you!'

'Family shit, you know what I'm saying? Ain't nothing to do with the unit, okay?'

Sarah's heart went out to him; Jamie was always covering for his mother, who was constantly getting herself into financial straits through her drug habit. Fiercely loyal, Jamie bailed her out every time.

'If you need money...'

He swung around and Sarah knew she'd said the wrong thing. Jamie hated asking anyone for anything.

'If I needed money I'd be asking you, wouldn't I? Look, I'm sorry if I frightened you, but it's no big deal. It'll work itself out.'

'You sure?'

Jamie nodded, averting his eyes. He hated lying to her but he wanted to protect her. It was bad enough that she'd been seen.

'Cross my heart and hope to die.' Jamie smiled weakly and Sarah decided that although she didn't

believe him she would respect his privacy this time.

Faintly, too faintly for the human ear, a pulse was coming through on Sarah's computer. Back on the red planet, the ice was beginning to spread down past the Martian equator. Great sweeping plates of permafrost were eating up the horizon, reducing the terrain to a silent, flat, blinding white. All was chaos.