

I'd been off Earth for so long I didn't recognize the sound of gunfire.

We were walking up a gravel road from the beach at Armstrong Space Force Base, where we'd just watched, I don't know, the end of the world? People were checking phones, watches—nothing electronic was working. Even my wrist tattoo was stuck at 10:23. That's when the rocket we were watching lift off sputtered out and fell into the Pacific.

It didn't explode or anything. It just stopped. Like everything else.

Guns did seem to work, hence the merry popcorn-popping sound. "Get down, Carmen," Namir said conversationally. "We don't know who they're shooting at." Everybody was kneeling or lying on the road, below the level of the sand dunes on both sides. I joined them.

An older man in a white suit, clutching a sun hat to his head, fancy camera on a strap bumping against his chest, came running down the gravel, looking anxiously back at the gunfire.

"Card?" I wouldn't have recognized my brother if he hadn't called a couple of days earlier. He almost slipped on the gravel, but came to rest crouching next to me.

"Sister, love . . ." he was still looking back at the gunfire—"What the fuck is going on? Weren't you supposed to be taking care of all this alien crap?"

"Didn't quite work out," I said. "It's a long story. If we're alive tomorrow, I'll give you chapter and verse."

There were a couple of especially loud bangs, I guessed from bombs or grenades. "Where did Namir go?"

"Back there," his wife Elza said, jerking her thumb toward her other husband, Dustin, who pointed toward Snowbird, who pointed all four arms to the right.

I should note that we were a mixed group, not to say a menagerie: three humans from Earth, three from Mars, and one actual Martian. And now my brother, who was something in between.

Card waved at the Martian Snowbird and tried to croak "hello." He'd stayed on Mars for the required five years, and then escaped back to Earth. Never could speak Martian well, as if anyone could.

"Hello, Card. I remember you much younger."

"Fucking relativity," he said. To me: "You used to be my older sister."

"I guess we'll sort it out somehow." I was born eighty-four years ago, but figured I'd only lived thirty-seven of them. My bratty little brother was twice my age now, in a real sense. From acne to pattern baldness in one stroke.

Namir came clattering back with two automatic weapons under one arm and a holstered pistol in the other hand. He gave the pistol to Elza and a machine gun to Dustin.

That's good. All the spies had guns.

Elza did something complicated with the pistol, inspecting it. “Tell me you found a gun shop behind some dune.”

“Didn’t kill anybody.”

“But somebody’s going to be looking for them,” Dustin said.

“Not for a while.” He looked at Card. “You must be Carmen’s brother.”

Card nodded. “You must be one of the spies.”

“Namir. We have to find someplace less exposed.”

“The last place we drove by, did it look like a motor pool?” Elza said.

“I remember, yes. Sandbag wall around it.”

“So maybe there’s no one there now. Since no vehicles seem to be working.”

“We can’t just walk up with guns,” I said.

“Right. So you go first.”

“Once the shooting stops.” Actually, I hadn’t heard any for a minute or so. “What direction was it coming from?” I asked Card.

“I guess the press and VIP area. They had bleachers set up. They were gonna leave me there even though I had a pass. I paid a guy to take me to the last checkpoint, a half mile from here.”

“Glad you found us,” I said, and stood up cautiously. The motor pool was about a block away. One low building and dozens of blue NASA trucks and carts. No people obvious. “Paul, let’s go.”

He got up, and Meryl followed him, and then my brother. “I can talk to the natives,” he said. “Lived in California thirty–five years.”

“Leave the armed guard with Snowbird,” Paul said. “Martians might not be too popular right now.”

“Don’t risk anybody’s life for me,” the Martian said. “I won’t live long in any case.”

“You don’t know that,” I said lamely.

“I can’t live on human food, and only have a few days’ worth of mine here. The only renewable source is in the Martian colony in Siberia. I can’t walk there—or I could, if I had time, and it might be pleasantly cold. But it would take a long time. I can’t live off the land.”

“The power could come back any time,” Namir said. “We still know nothing about how the Others’ minds work.”

“No need to comfort me, friend. I lived long enough to swim in the sea.”

Namir stared at her for a moment, nodding, and then looked toward me. “Okay, Carmen, go up to the motor pool and nose around. If the coast is clear, give us a signal.” He considered that and shook his head, smiling. “I mean, *you* stay here with the gun, and I’ll—”

“Don’t be such a *man*,” Elza said. “Carmen, do you know how to shoot?”

“Never learned, no.”

“So you guys go up unarmed and knock on the door. None of that shooting’s anywhere near us.”

“Okay.” Three unarmed space travelers versus God knows how many auto mechanics with wrenches and battery testers.

“Don’t try anything aggressive,” Namir said. “Just give us the signal, and we’ll come up behind the sandbags.”

“Or I could scream my lungs out,” I said. “Just kidding.”

We walked up the incline and then down the paved road. The last of the morning cool had baked off, and the motor pool shimmered in the heat.

“What is it about the power?” Card asked. “I saw the rocket sputter out and crash. But what does that have to do with cars?”

He might be the only person in America who didn’t know. Walking down this road, toward us, he couldn’t have been watching the cube when it happened.

“The Others pulled the plug,” Paul said. “When they disintegrated the moon and filled nearby space with gravel, that was supposed to turn Earth into a ‘no space flight’ zone.” Only last week.

“That seemed pretty obvious. But the rocket jocks had to try anyhow.” With heavy shielding and lasers to blast their way through the gravel.

“So they turned off all the free power?” Card said. “That’s serious. How long has it been since there were any actual power-generating plants?”

“It’s even more serious than that,” I said. “Your watch and your cell won’t work. It affects batteries; anything electrical.”

“Not everything,” Meryl said. “Our brains are electromagnetic, electrochemical.”

“Smokeless powder works in guns,” Paul said, “So I guess chemical energy is okay if it’s not making electricity.”

“They didn’t explain anything,” I said. “Just that the free energy we’ve been using came at the expense of some donor world. As punishment for defying them, we’re the donors now.”

“For how long?”

“Forever would be a good guess,” Paul said. “We’ve got a lot of adjusting to do.”

Carl stopped walking and slapped his palm to his forehead. “Jesus. How many people died in the first few seconds?”

“Anyone with artificial organs,” Meryl said, “or on life support. Hell, just pacemakers. Tens of millions. Maybe hundreds?”

“People flying,” Paul said, “Unless the planes had pilots, and the pilots were able to glide in and land. Not many can do that, without computers. Even if they were near a runway.”

Card nodded. “A lot of people in cars. The LA freeways would be a moving junk pile. Everybody on autopilot, going 150.”

“Don’t cars have failsafes?” I said.

“Yeah, but they’re like the opposite of an electromagnet, engine braking. I don’t see how they could work without current flowing.” My kid brother was suddenly an engineer with a lifetime of experience.

We got to the door of the motor pool building. Paul knocked twice and pushed it open. “Hello? Anybody here?”

“We’re over here,” a voice reverberated in the gloom. “Who are you?”

“Space Force pilot,” he sort of lied. “We were down on the beach, watching the launch.”

“So were we.” Sound of footsteps coming our way. A man and a woman in blue NASA coveralls came out of the murk. “When we couldn’t raise anyone, we came back here. What was that gunfire?”

“We don’t know,” Paul said. “Came from the reviewing stand, sounds like.”

“Press Relations getting rid of witnesses,” the man said.

“Be serious, Wilbur. I’m Kathie, this is Wilbur . . .” She pointed at Paul. “You’re the famous guy. And you’re the Mars Girl.”

“When I was a girl.” I introduced Meryl.

“You went off to the aliens, the Others.” She shook her head. “My grandmother was a girl then, she watched the take-off. Brightest star in the sky. But you’re not, she’s eighty-some . . . I guess that relativity does work.”

I had to smile. “Seems to work for me.”

The man cleared his throat. “The Others are behind this? The rocket failing and the power going off?”

“As punishment,” Paul said, and explained what we’d seen. Not everybody had been glued to the cube during the launch. How long would it take for the word to get around? Word of mouth and written message, carried by hand.

Two more bursts of automatic–weapons fire. Wilbur went to the door and peered out in that direction. “Hope that’s our guys.”

“Has to be, doesn’t it?” Katie said. “But who are they shooting at?”

“Probably just shooting in the air, crowd control. But I wish we had a weapon here, just in case.”

“We have a couple,” I said, and he looked at me sharply. “We didn’t want to look dangerous, walking up here. They’re back on the road to the beach, with the rest of us.”

“Better bring ’em up.”

I started to reach for my cell; how long would that reflex survive? Went to the door and waved both arms.

The four of them came out. “Holy shit!” he said. “Is that a Martian?”

No, it’s two ostriches sharing a potato costume. Elza and Dustin trotted toward us; Namir came slowly, covering Snowbird. She was wearing a dirty white smock the size of a tablecloth, dragging along on four legs made for Martian gravity. She liked humans and Earth as abstractions, but I think the reality was getting a little hard on her.

“We heard there was a Martian on the base,” Katie said.

“They’re not dangerous,” Wilbur said.

“Heavens, no.” Snowbird might hurt you if she fell on you.

“The three people look dangerous,” she said, “though it might be the guns.”

“Soldiers,” I said, simplifying. “They were with us on the starship.” I introduced Elza and Dustin as they sidled in, and then Snowbird and Namir.

“Keep a lookout, Dustin,” Namir said. “Thank you for sheltering us. We shouldn’t be here long.” He gestured toward a long lunch table. “Let’s sit.”

Namir sat at the head of the table and began disassembling and inspecting his weapon. “If this were a military operation—”

“Which it’s not,” Paul said quietly.

“We won’t forget that. But if it were, there’s a standard hierarchy of concern: first ammunition, then water, then food. Communication is in there, irrelevant now, and mobility, which seems to be shoe leather. First ammunition. You don’t have any here?”

“No guns,” Wilbur said. “Couple of signal–flare pistols in the locker with the life rafts.”

“Water, we have plenty of,” Katie said, “our own water tank. Not much in the way of food. A snack machine, some left–over bagels.”

“Food is going to be the long–term concern, with supply lines broken down. Dustin, tell them about the farm. Fruit Farm?” Namir slapped his gun back together and traded places with Dustin.

“Yeah, the family farm, the commune where I grew up. It’s only about a couple of hundred miles to the north.”

“I thought they disowned you,” I said.

“Well, they did. But that was like seventy years ago. The conservative bunch who ran things will all have died out by now.”

“Long walk,” Paul said.

“Moving at night,” Namir said. “Still, less than ten days.”

“How far would you have to walk before you get out of the desert?” I asked.

“Twelve miles,” Wilbur said. “Actually, 11.6, going straight west on the access road just north of here. Where is this farm?”

“Near Viva Lento,” Dustin said, “Up by the Oregon border.”

“Head north on 17,” Katie said.

“Good as any. No traffic.”

“What are you two going to do?” I asked. “Strength in numbers, if you want to come with us.”

“No, I’d better head home,” she said.

Wilbur nodded. “No disrespect, Ms. Snowbird, but I don’t think I want to be traveling with a Martian.”

“I wouldn’t either,” Snowbird said. You could never tell when they were being ironic, or just logical.

“All of us ought to ransack this place for provisions,” Namir said. “Could you show me those snack machines?”

We followed Wilbur through the gloom to the snack bar alcove. There were two machines full of snacks, behind glass, which turned out to be unbreakable plastic. We toppled them over with a crash, and Wilbur found a crowbar that allowed us to break the locks and pry the backs open. Satisfying in an obscure way.

The machines weren’t operated by money, but by ration card. So Wilbur or Katie could sit there and get a candy bar every four hours. We didn’t have cards, not having yet joined the 22nd century.

While the men ransacked the machines, I went with Katie on a fruitless search for something like knapsacks to carry the booty in. In the mail room, I found a metal cart, a frame that held an empty mail bag and rolled on four sturdy casters. We took it to the water rescue lockers, where I liberated two flare pistols with two belts of four flare rockets each.

Back at the snack bar alcove, we let Katie and Wilbur stuff their pockets and two bags, then arranged the rest into piles according to shelf life, so we could put the relatively perishable things

on top. Fruit and sandwiches that had been refrigerated. A drink machine yielded ten liter bottles of water and a couple dozen less useful soft drinks and near beer.

My rolling cart would hold about a quarter of the bounty. Nobody turned up anything like knapsacks, but a storage room had a drawer full of random sizes of cloth bags. Together we could carry all of the water and most of the food. We could leave behind most of the soft drinks and near beer.

Snowbird insisted on carrying two light bags of snacks, though she couldn't eat any of it. She refused water. "I can live a week or more without it. I come from a dry planet." And she wasn't going to last a week unless they turned the power back on.

Katie and Wilbur wished us luck and headed home, facing hours of walking. Neither had family to worry about, but Katie had cats and fish to feed.

"Might as well feed the fish to the cats," Meryl said after they left. "Or fry them up."

Namir was watching them go. "Seem to be nice people. But you never know. They might be back, with others."

"Maybe we should start moving," Dustin said.

"We don't want to travel in daylight. Especially not loaded down with food and water. There will be plenty of people out there with neither, but with guns."

"So let's get some rest while we can," Elza said. "Those of us with weapons stand guard, what, two hours at a time?" We made sure all the doors were locked. The windows were silvered for insulation, so nobody could see us if it was dark inside.