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Kate moved at a methodical, cautious pace down the incline, towards the Face. “Careful,” she said, looking back at Fisk, “the surface is pretty slick.” With the smooth ground underfoot and its steep angle, they were both one misstep from catastrophe.

Fisk nodded, head down as he concentrated on the placement of each step. He snuck a split-second glance at the Face, perhaps to get his bearings. The moment his eyes left the ground, his front boot skated half a meter downslope. Fisk yelped as he fought to stop sliding, bending his knees and extending his arms as if balancing on a surfboard. He came to a halt in a low crouch.

Kate had watched the near disaster unfold. Helping him would be tricky—she’d have to move up and across the slick berm without slipping herself.

“I’m OK,” said Fisk, answering Kate’s worried look with a raised thumb and an uncertain smile. He shifted his weight enough to lift his back boot. The footing under his front boot gave out. In a panic, Fisk stood tall, bringing his feet together and thrusting his arms up like a ballerina. He jutted his hips first left, then right, as he shimmied, attempting to regain his balance. His maneuver arrested his slide but left the bulk of his body weight out over the fronts of his boots. He fell forward, tumbling past Kate the remaining seven meters down the embankment.

“Fisk!” Kate skittered down the slope while fighting to avoid taking a tumble herself. “Are you all right?” she asked as she arrived at his side.

Fisk, in a heap at the base of the embankment, pushed himself to sit. “I think so,” he said,

staring upslope in a daze. He noticed Kate's outstretched hand and, after accepting her help to his feet, brushed red dust from his Mars suit. "Guess it was slipperier than I thought." His eyes took on a distant look as he scanned his suit's self-diagnostic scrolling up his heads-up display. "Everything seems to be OK—no containment breach, at least."

While Fisk reviewed the report, Kate ventured to the opening. It was a cave, with a mouth wide enough to accommodate two people standing abreast. She activated her suit's flashlight embedded at her wrist and aimed it inside. Rugged rock walls continued for fifteen meters before fading into the darkness.

"Any sign of them?" asked Fisk, arriving at the commander's side.

"None," said Kate. The ground was too hard for bootprints, but if the two men were inside, she might have transmission line of sight to reach them. "Julian, Cheney, do you read?" Still nothing on the comms. She'd only committed to checking out the entrance. Without a sign of the two men, the risk of entering the cave outweighed the odds of finding them. They would do no more. The search was over.

"They could be incapacitated," said Fisk. He stared into the cave, his cupped hands shielding the sun's glare from his faceplate. He chuckled. "It would be kinda funny to turn around now, only to find out later they were both facedown a few meters from the entrance."

Damn Fisk and his ramblings! The odds of both men being unable to respond were close to zero, but if they headed back and Fisk turned out to be right, she would never forgive herself. She waved her light down the tunnel again—no telling how far it stretched. They needed to start back for the HAAB, but Kate couldn't shake the vision of Julian and Cheney in distress, trapped in the dark beneath a pile of rubble, praying for rescue. "We'll go in," she said, reluctance in her

voice, “but let’s be quick about it.”

Kate and Fisk proceeded into the opening. The gentle patter of their footsteps echoed from the rough walls in the thin Martian air as they followed the commander’s flashlight beam. The cave shot ahead another twenty-three meters, disappearing in a sharp bend to the right.

The rock walls mesmerized Fisk as they walked. “This cave likely formed as an outlet for snowmelt,” he said, “back when Mars had free-flowing water. It probably leads all the way to the top.” He raked a portion of the chamber with the bright beam of his suit flashlight. “These strata tell the entire story of this structure’s formation.” A section at chest height caught his attention. He trained his light on the spot and poked it with his finger. Several small chunks of reddish-brown stone tumbled to the tunnel floor.

“Let’s go, Fisk,” said Kate, exasperated with the research scientist’s latest distraction.

Fisk grabbed a piece of fallen rock the size of his fist. He squeezed, pulverizing the stone in his glove. “This rock’s fairly soft,” he said, rivers of soil trailing between his fingers. “I wonder how solid this cavern actually is.”

Kate’s face went pale. She hadn’t given much thought to the cave’s stability. Marsquakes were real. They could wind up trapped themselves.

Fisk responded to the commander’s panicked look. “I’m sure it’s perfectly safe,” he said. He clapped his gloves, batting away the dust. “It would have to be pretty stable to have remained intact for so long.”

Should they turn around? Kate dismissed the thought and instead moved faster into the cave. They’d come this far—it made little sense to end their search just yet. They’d explore a bit more before starting back.

“Barreling down this tunnel doesn’t exactly make it easy for us to find them without being discovered,” said Fisk. “I guess you’re not too concerned about bumping into Julian?”

“I *am* concerned,” said Kate. Julian seemed almost crazed that morning when he talked about the mission remaining a secret. “Right now, I’m focused on saving their lives. There’s a good chance if they get caught out in that storm, they won’t survive.”

“What do you know about him?” asked Fisk. “Julian, I mean.”

“Not much,” said Kate. “He’s an Air Force veteran. Has degrees in chemistry and materials science. I tried talking to him a few times when he first joined the team. I couldn’t get him to open up.” Translation: even then, he’d been a condescending asshole. She gave up trying to connect with him soon after that.

“Psychopaths are never keen on idle chitchat,” muttered Fisk.

“Why do you say that?” asked Kate.

“That’s serial killer one oh one,” said Fisk, “though to be fair, Jeffrey Dahmer might’ve chatted you up a bit before he excised your liver.”

“No, I mean why do you say Julian’s a psychopath?” asked Kate.

“A feeling I have,” said Fisk. “He gives me the willies. His lapdog Cheney, too. I wouldn’t want to be alone with either of them ... in a dark cave, for instance.”

Julian could be intense, but he wasn’t a psychopath. Not a true one, anyway. NASA’s rigorous psychological fitness protocol would have weeded him out early on.

Activating his flashlight again, Fisk broadened the beam and shined it on the tunnel roof. “You know who would have a field day in here is Dr. Morgan. Sedimentary rock is ideal hunting ground for micro fossils.” He shut off his light. “Maybe she and I should take a trip out here

sometime.”

“So sort of a date, then,” said Kate with a slight grin.

Fisk blushed. “Of sorts,” he said. “A scientific date, you could call it. An interplanetary geologist and an astrobiologist ... I bet we’d make some amazing finds.”

This wasn’t the first time Fisk had mentioned astrobiologist Casey Morgan. A brunette beauty with ample curves and large brown eyes, she’d turned heads all during their training on Earth, as well as their journey to Mars. Every man on the mission likely had some interest in her; Engles too. “I’m not sure about coming to the Face, but I’m sure she’d be interested in working with you. You should ask her.”

Fisk blushed again. “Perhaps when you see her next, you could suggest it”

“You don’t need my help,” said Kate. “She’s very approachable. You should try talking to her.”

“What’s that ahead?” asked Fisk.

The question at first seemed like a feeble attempt at changing the subject, but Kate’s flashlight beam had landed on something in the distance. The object came into view as they drew closer.

“A dead end,” said Fisk. A solid mass of boulders and rocks blocked their path.

“Or a cave-in,” said Kate. It wasn’t clear if the tunnel simply ended, or if fallen rock had closed off the path. “Either way, we can’t continue forward. Let’s—God, Fisk, what is it now?”

Fisk was frozen, peering down. He crouched, snatched at the ground, and returned to standing with something lying flat in his palm. The object was shiny—metallic—and cylindrical, a rod about twenty centimeters long and two centimeters in diameter. “Well, what are *you* doing

here?” he said. He brushed away dirt, revealing more of the object. Strange triangular symbols covered its surface.

Kate returned her attention to the pile of rubble. This was madness. Between Fisk’s preoccupation with his discoveries and the foolishness of entering an apparently unstable tunnel, she’d had enough. Julian and Cheney should never have left before the onset of the storm. At a minimum, they should’ve arranged to keep in contact with the HAAB. If they died because of all their bullshit secrecy, that was on them. She’d gone above and beyond to look for the two men. “Julian, Cheney, this is Commander Holman, over.” Silence. She hadn’t expected a response, not so deep within the rock. Her final call served as an end cap to their efforts. “And with that,” she said, spinning on her heels, “we are finished with this adventure.” She started back towards the cave entrance.

“Julian here.”

Kate froze. She exchanged a shocked look with Fisk. It took her a moment to respond. “Uh, Julian, this is Kate. We’ve been trying to reach you. The storm’s picked up. It’s going to arrive much sooner than we thought. Fisk and I came looking for you.”

“Where are you?”

“We’re—”

Fisk frowned and shook his head. He slashed his finger across his throat, then pointed up. His eyes were wide, insistent.

Kate heeded what she assumed was a warning not to reveal their true location. “We’re about a kilometer east of ...”—no, best not to mention the Face at all—“... two kilometers west of the HAAB. Where are you and Cheney?”

A pause, then Julian again. “Close to your location. Cheney and I are wrapping up. Don’t advance any farther west—stay where you are. We’ll come to you. ETA twenty minutes.”

“Roger that, staying put.” Kate killed the comm.

“Twenty minutes?” said Fisk, suddenly terrified. “It took us half that long to walk this far into the cave.”

Fisk was right: ten minutes to exit the cave and another ten to make it back to where Cheney’s suit issued its last ping. They needed to be at the rendezvous point before Julian; otherwise, he’d see her and Fisk coming *from* the Face. “Run!” she whispered.

6

Kate rushed with Fisk back through the cave towards the entrance, the beam from her suit light bouncing along the passageway's rough, striated walls. Their boots kicked up dust that lingered in the thin Martian air, leaving a fog behind them.

“What I don't understand is how we were able to talk to them at all,” said Fisk between pants. “We have no luck reaching them 'til we're standing under a kilometer of solid rock?”

Their contact with Julian didn't make sense, but Kate offered no guesses. She wanted to focus on getting out of the cave and back to the meeting point. There'd be plenty of time for speculation later.

Fisk said nothing else as they continued ahead. She almost wished for more of his prattle to mask the sound of her huffing within her helmet. Although moving at a faster pace, the snaking path seemed much longer than she remembered, each bend revealing only another stretch of tunnel.

At last, a dim patch of light appeared in the distance—they barreled to the exit. Kate stopped just inside the outlet and held Fisk back with an arm. She peeked her head out: no sign of Julian or Cheney. Commander Holman stepped from the entrance, followed by Fisk. Both astronauts squinted in the Martian daylight. Though much brighter than the cave, the world outside had darkened since they'd left it. Black-gray storm clouds filled the entire eastern sky, advancing on a retreating sun.

Kate studied the rise they'd descended to reach the Face. Scaling the hill would be a

challenge, but they had no other choice, nor any time to waste. “Let’s get to the top of the berm as quick as we can,” she said.

Commander Holman started for the rise but soon halted—Fisk wasn’t following. He’d walked farther along the base of the Face, stopping seven meters to the right of the cave opening. He examined the solid rock wall. “Fisk, we don’t have time!”

Fisk didn’t move to join her. Instead, he reached for a section of the cliff face. As he pulled his arm back, a sliver of black emerged, like the sliced edge of a large, ragged circle. The sliver grew

Another cave! A massive sheet of material with a print matching the cliff’s rock pattern hung from the top of the opening. The fabric hid the entrance, at least to a casual observer.

Were Julian and Cheney inside? Kate’s mind raced. The second cave likely zigzagged beneath the Face, like the one they’d left. The two shafts may have jogged close in spots, with the rock separating them thin enough to pass her comm signal. If Julian and Cheney *were* in that cave, they might be rushing for the exit, possibly seeing the silhouette of an astronaut holding back the fabric. “Drop it!” Kate shouted, the best summation of her thoughts she could rally.

Fisk complied for once—perhaps he’d thought the same. The two Mars astronauts sprinted for the berm. Kate arrived first and let her momentum carry her up the incline. Her boots slipped as she clambered on the slick slope. For every few meters forward, she skidded one or two back. Fisk had a tougher time. On each attempt at scaling the rise, he never made it more than a couple meters up the bank before sliding all the way down to its base.

Perched a few meters above the base of the berm, Kate took a moment to think. Their boots had decent treads—she’d noted as much during their practice hikes in the Nevada desert—they

just weren't getting enough traction. Mars's lower gravity was to blame On a hunch, Kate crouched, then sprang forward, leaping ahead while jumping as high as she could. She floated into the air and, with the arc of her flight, landed several meters upslope. Before her boots lost their purchase, she repeated her angled hop, touching down farther up the embankment. Fisk caught on to her technique. He managed to jump-skip up the slope behind her.

What would they find upon reaching the top? Even if Julian and Cheney had been in the second cave, the two could be at the rendezvous point already, boiling with rage at their absence.

Kate's final jump-skip delivered her over the top, and with it a view of the wide-open Martian plain. No one else was in sight. Relieved they hadn't been beaten back, she waited for Fisk. Once the research scientist reached her location, the two scrambled for the end of Cheney's trail.

Arriving at the rendezvous point, Kate and Fisk caught their breaths. They hunched over with their hands on their knees, taking in great gulps of oxygen. The commander scanned the ridge. Twenty-five minutes had elapsed since she'd spoken to Julian, but the other two astronauts had still not come into view. She reopened her comm line. "Hey, Julian, just checking on you guys. Are you almost here?"

No response. Julian and Cheney were evidently still far enough inside the Face that her comm signal couldn't reach them.

Kate monitored the ridge for any sign of the two astronauts, the task growing harder with the waning sunlight. During their scramble from the cave, she'd prayed Julian and Cheney would take their time getting back. Standing idle as the storm approached, she grew more and more annoyed by their delay.

At thirty-four minutes after her last contact with Julian, fifteen more than he'd promised, a shadowy figure floated up and over the embankment. A second followed. The two headed towards her and Fisk, starting the near-kilometer trek to their location. One silhouette moved with a labored, awkward gait and carried their right arm across the front of their suit. Kate sighed—a broken arm, or worse, would explain their delay, but a wounded astronaut was the last thing they needed in their race back to the HAAB.

As the two drew closer, the reason for the hobbled figure's shambling became apparent: a tan sack, slung over his shoulder, swung side to side behind him. Far from injured, the arm across his chest held in its hand the bag's drawstrings.

"Whaddya think's in the bag?" asked Fisk, who also watched the approaching astronauts. "Doesn't look light, that's for sure." He gaped, glassy-eyed with wild imaginings. "Maybe a golden statue of the Martian king."

"That kind of talk stops now," scolded Kate. "I don't want you accidentally tipping Julian off to our time out here."

Fisk's right hand jerked up from his side but quickly fell back, a salute apparently held in check. "You have nothing to worry about, Commander. I won't say anything that could raise suspicion."

Kate frowned. "I'd rather you didn't say anything at all."

Minutes dragged for an eternity before Julian and Cheney arrived. Both astronauts were out of breath, with beads of sweat trickling down their faces despite the temperature-controlled confines of their Mars suits. Red earth caked their gloves and knees. They'd kneeled and used their hands for whatever task they'd performed.

“We’ve been waiting,” said Kate, unable to stifle her irritation. She last spoke with Julian forty-five minutes prior, more than double the promised arrival time. She eyed the acting mission commander as he adjusted the sack on his shoulder. “And that extra weight’s going to slow us down.”

“Everything’s under control,” said Julian.

“What’s in the bag?” asked Fisk. “Spoils, er ... soils?” He blanched. “I’m an expert on dirt and rocks.”

“The bag’s contents, even the fact I’m carrying it, are both classified,” said Julian. “As far as you two are concerned, it doesn’t exist.”

Kate shot Fisk a glare that could have melted lead. The geologist sheepishly looked away.

“Commander Holman, you and Fisk need to get back here. Now.”

Miriam sounded odd, and not because of the mangled acoustics in the Mars suit helmet. Stress charged the station chief’s voice, a level of concern she hadn’t heard before. “Julian and Cheney are here.”

“Well, while you were waiting, that storm really shifted into high gear,” said Miriam. “You *needed* to start back fifteen minutes ago. As it stands, you’ll catch the leading edge. But even that’ll be better than what’s coming after.”

“Roger that,” said Kate. “Everyone activate your suit navs.” The system’s green path dashed into the distance inside her helmet’s faceplate. The other astronauts’ faces lit up in glowing green. She eyed Julian’s sack again.

“Let’s head out,” said Julian before Kate could say anything. He set off marching across the darkening plains, with Cheney in tow.

“After you,” said Kate, motioning Fisk to proceed. She would again bring up the rear.

The four astronauts traveled single file over ancient mud flats and basalt flows, the rising winds flinging aloft the loose dirt. Dust devils danced, some with columns ascending a hundred meters into the air. The towering storm front loomed a kilometer ahead, its ruddy color washing to grays in the dwindling sunlight. The glowing green path that overlaid Kate’s view of the Martian wilderness appeared to scale the wall of dust, climbing from its base halfway to the sky.

Kate swallowed hard. She’d soon find herself enveloped by the storm’s dusty fog; they all would. She fought off flashbacks of the incident on the Moon. *The mind takes cues from the breath. Panicked breaths suggest a panic situation. Keep the breath smooth and steady, and the mind will follow.* Kate heeded her old therapist’s words, brought her breathing under control. Her mind settled down.

Traumatic events haunt us when they take on their own meaning in our minds. They spin their own stories if you let them. The key to sapping their power over you is taking your own meaning from them. The crash on the Lunar surface had opened Kate’s eyes to what could go wrong during a routine landing. She’d declared the event a lesson in preparedness. That lesson had saved them yesterday, the propellant she’d held back at liftoff averting a fatal disaster while touching down.

Kate looked up. The storm front was nearly upon them. While lost in her thoughts, they’d quickly closed the gap, or the storm had. Julian seemed close enough to touch it. Even weighed down by his haul, he’d run up a good ten meters between himself and Cheney. They’d all spread far from each other. The incident on the Moon had also taught her the importance of sticking together in a zero-visibility situation. Her friend might be alive today but for lack of that insight.

“Hey, guys,” she said, “I’d like to suggest we tighten up before we enter the dust cloud.”

“There’s no need,” said Julian.

Julian replied in a flash, without an ounce of consideration. Sometimes it felt like he nixed her ideas just because they came from her. If she suggested they continue breathing, he’d probably order the opposite. “I was realizing that with our current spacing, we’re going to lose sight of each other inside the—”

“Everyone’s on their suit navs, Kate,” said Julian in his usual patronizing tone. “Getting back to the HAAB is as simple as following the green line. Or what, you’re thinking we hold hands? Like we’re in kindergarten?”

Kate didn’t press it. She wanted to avoid appearing weak in front of Julian. And they *were* all on their suit navs, though the same had been true on the Moon.

Julian encountered the gray wall first. His body faded, each step making it harder to distinguish him from the fuzzy background, until in a blink he disappeared. Cheney dissolved next, followed by Fisk.

Kate continued on. She expected to hit a mass of swirling dust, but the hard transition never came. One instant she was approaching the wall, the next, a ghostly reddish-gray fog surrounded her.

Visibility rapidly deteriorated. Fisk had a lead of only eight meters, but it may as well have been eighty. Julian was right that following the green line would get them back to the HAAB, but walking within view of one another afforded a modicum of safety. They were lone hikers in a harsh, foreign wilderness, going against at least the spirit of the Manual’s guidelines on solitary excursions. Julian probably hadn’t reconsidered her request to march in a tighter group, but they

needed to maintain contact with each other, visual or otherwise. “This is Kate, checking in,” she said on the broadcast channel. “Is everyone doing OK? Please sound off.”

“Fisk.”

“Cheney.”

“We’re all OK, Kate,” said Julian, exasperated. “If anyone runs into trouble, call out over your comm. If not, there’s no need for the chatter.”

Radio silence it is. She resumed her lonely march to the HAAB, quiet but for the wailing wind and the nav’s dispassionate call-outs of direction and distance.

After fifteen minutes of moderate calm, occasional wind gusts buffeted Commander Holman. A major blast lasting several seconds pushed her backwards. She held fast, digging in her boots. The storm was worsening. Luckily, the HAAB lay close—according to her nav, only ten minutes away.

The halo of visible ground steadily shrank as she walked, contracting to less than a meter. Lightning flashed the world in electric white. Kate listened for a boom that never arrived. Did lightning work on Mars as it did on Earth? Or had it been too far to hear the thunder?

Lightning flashed again. The green path faltered, flickered, then snapped to orange.

“GPS connection lost.”

Kate halted. The storm’s electrical interference was scrambling the signals from above. Her suit had the most recent directions to the HAAB but could only estimate her position relative to them. “Julian? Fisk?” No answer. “Cheney?” She switched comm channels. “Miriam?” Nothing from the control room.

Fighting the fear her nav was completely confused, Commander Holman trudged on. What

else could she do but put her faith in the glowing path? She leaned into strengthening gusts that threatened to topple her and crouched during squalls, making herself smaller against the wind.

With each step, the orange dot at the trail's end increased in size.

“One hundred meters.”

She was nearly back. A couple more minutes of walking would bring her home. She quickened her pace.

The orange dot expanded to a meter in diameter and slid beneath her feet, or appeared to in her helmet's augmented reality display. “You have reached your destination.”

Kate looked around. *You have got to be frickin' kidding me!* Contrary to her suit nav's cheerful declaration, the HAAB wasn't visible anywhere. She staggered on, but with each stride, the scene remained unchanged. Dread welled in her core. She'd have to shelter in place, or risk becoming hopelessly lost in the Martian wild.

She took a few more paces. The red-gray expanse of dust before her seemed to brighten a bit, growing lighter, somehow whiter. A proximity sensor chirped. Arms outstretched, Kate took one more careful step, then another. A large white plasticine panel materialized from the fog, flat with a slight curvature at the top. She'd found the HAAB!

Hands pressing the station, Kate pantomimed her way along the panels until she felt the main airlock and the controls to open it. She tapped the entry sequence on the keypad. Locks disengaged, and the door slid aside. She stepped into the chamber and quickly commanded it shut. Quiet engulfed her, deafening after thirty minutes of the storm's constant roar. She launched the pressurization cycle. Ten seconds later, the red light above the inner hatch cycled green. Kate grabbed the handle and pushed.

Commander Holman stumbled through the open door into the Spine. Exhausted, she lowered herself onto a bench in the makeshift excursion prep area. She released the seal on her helmet and removed the ovoid bubble, setting it next to her. Kate exhaled in relief. She'd made it back to the station.

"Where's Cheney?"

The question came from Fisk. The geologist curled forward on a bench facing the airlock, helmet off and forearms on thighs. His hair flailed in mad wisps. He regarded her with weary eyes.

"He's not back?" asked Kate.

"He's not," said Fisk with a shake of his head. "He should have been back before me."

Cheney wasn't the only one missing. "Where's Julian?" asked Kate.

"He took off down the Spine right when I arrived, carrying his bag of ... he took off down the Spine. I asked him about Cheney as he left. He said there was nothing to worry about, that Cheney would be the next person inside."

Kate's face went pale. "Cheney, this is Commander Holman. Do you copy?" Static answered back. "Cheney, this is Kate. Do you copy?"

"I don't think suit-to-suit transmissions travel very well beyond the HAAB's panels," said Glenn, arriving at the airlock.

"Miriam, you there?" asked Kate, her voice shaky, each breath a chore under increasing anxiety.

"Yes, Commander, I'm here."

"Cheney hasn't made it back to the HAAB. The rest of us are in. Can you try contacting

him?”

“Roger that,” said Miriam. The line went silent for thirty seconds. “I’ve hailed him several times, but no response, Commander.”

Kate’s chin quivered. Her hands balled into fists. Snatching her helmet, she stood and raised the ovoid above her head.

Glenn hooked Kate’s arm. “Hey, you can’t go back out.”

“I *have* to!” said Kate, her eyes wild. “Cheney’s still out there.”

“Glenn’s right,” said Miriam on the open comm channel. “It’s zero visibility. Winds are picking up beyond what you just came through. Comms are down with all the electrical interference from the storm, and navs are probably useless too. Anyone who goes out there now, the odds of them making it back to the HAAB are close to zero.”

“But we can’t *leave* him out there,” pleaded Kate. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “He’ll die.”

“No, he won’t,” said Glenn. “We’ve all trained for this kind of situation. He’ll hunker down. His suit will protect him from all the grit and keep him warm and hydrated. His breather pack can produce almost ten days of oxygen. We can go out looking for him when it’s safer.”

Hands still balled, Kate walked to an oblong window on the opposite side of the corridor. Red grit, illuminated by light from the Spine, swirled against the clear panel. Beyond it lay the backdrop of the black Martian night. Violent gusts pressed into the HAAB’s plasticine walls.

“Let’s get you changed out of this gear,” said Glenn gently with a hand on her shoulder.

“Some warm tea will raise your spirits.”

Enjoy a cup of warm tea while Cheney remained out in the storm? Kate glanced back at the

airlock door.

“There’s nothing more to be done right now,” he said. “All we can do is wait for a break in the weather.”

7

Commander Holman walked in a daze the entire way to her cell. Physically and mentally exhausted, she peeled off her Mars suit, and stepped into the shower. She stood amidst the steam, the water slightly too hot, with her palms flat against the panels and head hung forward. Back on Earth, where conservation was the order of the day, she would never have indulged in such a long shower. At the Mars station, each drop of water, whether flushed down toilets or scrubbed from the air, was fully reclaimed and reused. Warmed by the excess heat from the HAAB's fusion power plant, every shower had an infinite supply of hot water. She'd need that much to wash away her sins.

Wash away my sins? There's not enough water in the Universe to do that. She'd exited the Lunar tribunal with a clean service record, but nothing could reach into her mind and erase the second guessing.

The spray from the shower head went limp, then sputtered in a bubble-fueled burst. It gurgled twice before resuming its steady flow. Apparently, there was still air in the lines. She took the interruption as her signal to finish up.

Kate emerged from the shower, toweled off, and threw on a station jumpsuit. Like her Mars suit, "K. HOLMAN" appeared on a neat label stitched over her heart. The label hadn't ever struck her as odd but suddenly seemed strange—was it there to declare ownership of the item or to specify who was inside? Standing naked in the shower where she had no name tag at all, was she still K. HOLMAN?

The commander shook off the existential questions, the ones that surfaced only when she was agitated. After rubbing her short hair dry, she combed it with her fingers, pulled on a pair of boots, and headed out of her cell. She'd been singularly focused on Glenn's suggestion of a warm cup of tea, the motivation she'd used to get herself cleaned up. She strolled to the end of the tubeway where it adjoined the much larger Spine and turned right for the DFAC.

Kate's eyes darted as she entered the communal space. Palmer and Engles played a game of chess. Voss lounged on a couch, curled up with a book. She didn't bother to check who else was present, concentrating instead on reaching the drink machine. The commander grabbed a hot chamomile tea, then took a seat at an empty, two-person table. Beyond the bay window, dust swirled in the warmth cast by the room's lights.

"Mind if I join you?"

She hadn't noticed Glenn in the DFAC, or his approach. She didn't want company, just wanted to be alone with her thoughts. "I don't—"

Before she could deter him, Glenn took the seat across from her. He set his own drink down, a mug of steaming tea with the aroma of jasmine, cradling it in his hands. Kate sighed and settled in again to watching the storm.

"Did you get a chance to review the operational readiness report?" asked Glenn.

Kate's mind had drifted. His question jolted her back. "The what?"

"The operational readiness report," said Glenn. "I was wondering if you'd seen it yet."

"Oh," she said, "no, not yet. It was waiting for me on my terminal ... I didn't stop to open it." She sipped her tea—too hot.

"The door to one of the storage cells won't close all the way," said Glenn. "Do you remember

any problems with that section of the HAAB during your exterior inspection? I'm thinking a support strut might need some adjustment."

"Strut what?" Kate's mind had drifted anew.

Glenn smiled. "It's not important," he said. "How're you doing?"

The commander stared off through the window at the howling storm. "Me? I'm OK."

"You don't seem OK," said Glenn. Commander Holman didn't respond, consumed by her thoughts. "Don't worry, Kate, we'll find him."

"We shouldn't have lost him," said Kate. "That's why I brought up the rear, to make sure no one got left behind." Tears flowed. She wiped them away. "It just feels like the Moon all over again."

"This is nothing like what happened on the Moon," said Glenn.

"Really? Visibility zero, an astronaut missing?" Kate wiped away more tears. "We should have stayed put the moment we hit the storm, should've hunkered down out there. Or I don't know, a million things we could have done differently."

"But your suit navs were working," said Glenn. "At least they were at the start. If you're all just following the green line, there's no need to stay put." He sipped his tea. "I think you did the best anyone could have."

"Tell that to Cheney's family," said Kate. "After the incident on the Moon, I made a personal visit to Grace's ... Mission Specialist Phong's husband. I owed him that much. I'll never forget the vacant look on his face. Before that, losing it out here was just a hazy possibility. Her death made all that real. Losing her drove home the high stakes of our rush to lay claim to the solar system." More tears welled. "I never want to lose another teammate, never want to deliver that

kind of news again.”

“Well, our acting mission commander was the one officially responsible for getting you all back safely.” Glenn nodded towards Julian, sitting across the way at a table with Casey. “You’re here beating yourself up, but if there’s any blame to be assigned, or condolences that need to be delivered, it should be on him.”

Julian and Casey were having an animated, jovial discussion, all smiles and laughter. “Does he seem like a man who gives a shit that one of our own is lost out in this mess?” asked Kate.

Glenn regarded Julian, her second-in-command’s pursed lips hinting at the disgust he felt for the spectacle. “The acting mission commander certainly has his own priorities,” he said, disapproval in his voice. His eyes wandered back to Kate. “Once the weather clears, we’ll go out and search for him.”

“What if it doesn’t?” asked Kate. “These storms can last a month. The one back in 2032 went for almost six. His air’ll run out in ten days.”

“Hey,” said Glenn, his voice steady and reassuring, “what is it you tell me? One step at a time. Odds are this storm will end soon, in which case all your worrying will have been for nothing.”

Maybe Glenn was right. Maybe the weather would clear soon. Perhaps it was clearing as they spoke. Kate activated her wrist comm. “Hey, Miriam, any updates on the storm?”

Clacks and taps came through the open channel. “It’s still dangerous outside, but there is one new development,” said Miriam. “Latest satellite imagery shows an opening in the storm, sort of like the eye of a hurricane. The official forecast says it’ll skirt by us, but there’s a forty-one percent chance it’ll sweep over our location.”

“What’s the timeframe?” asked Kate.

More taps. “Roughly this time tomorrow. I’ll have a better idea of what we’re looking at in eighteen hours.”

“Keep me apprised.” Kate’s attention returned to Glenn. “Even if that opening doesn’t pass directly overhead, it may calm things enough for us to start a search.”

“If it’s still whiteout conditions, I’m going to recommend against it,” said Glenn.

“If it seems like our only opportunity, I may have to take it under advisement,” said Kate.

“Excuse me?”

The shout came from the center of the room, where Julian and Casey sat at their table. Casey shot to her feet, her face a ball of anger.

Julian blinked at the astrobiologist with a bewildered look. He rose, spewing an unintelligible stream of words.

Casey slapped Julian, a loud thwack on the cheek. It silenced him. “And just so there’s no confusion in the future, I find you disgusting. I wouldn’t sleep with you if you were the last man on Mars.” She snatched her jacket from the chair back and stormed out of the hall.

Julian remained frozen for several moments before landing back in his seat. He drained the last few drops of his drink, his eyes lingering on his empty glass.

“It’s gonna be a long year,” said Glenn.

8

Kate huddled with Miriam in the HAAB's cramped, windowless control room, studying the latest photo from the Mars weather satellite. The image, an expanse of curdled cloud tops, filled the three-meter-wide central monitor, bathing the darkened space in orange light.

"That area to the southwest is the Cydonia region," said Miriam, pointing at the left side of the photo. "The marker is us," she added, aiming her finger at the inverted red teardrop in the center of the clouds, "and that's the break in the storm." She referred to a small section of the Martian landscape visible through a ragged hole in the swirling dust southeast of the marker.

Peering at the image, Kate strained for a sense of the opening's relative size. "You say the break will pass over the HAAB?"

"Or close to it, according to computer projections," said Miriam. "It's almost here and moving rather quickly. Once it arrives, we're looking at maybe twenty minutes of calm."

Kate studied every feature within the roughly circular window through the storm, praying for a miraculous sighting of Cheney's tan Mars suit among the smattering of rocks. They'd received neither sign of nor signal from the lost astronaut since returning to the HAAB the day before. What would they discover when the weather lifted? A grateful Joseph Cheney, safe where he'd sheltered in place? Or possibly nothing at all, the man disappeared without a trace. *Even that wouldn't be the worst outcome*, thought Kate. Until they found Cheney, he could still be alive. The worst result lay between the two extremes: a Mars suit facedown in the dirt, its occupant motionless, like the images that continued to haunt her dreams.

“It’s thirty-five minutes to sundown,” said Miriam. “It’ll be dark when the storm whips up again.”

Commander Holman ignored the station chief, continuing to study the hole in the storm. The Manual frowned on nighttime excursions, concerned that disoriented astronauts would get lost in the black. But breaking that rule offered a chance at closure, the opportunity to end her distress over Cheney’s fate. “We don’t have much choice.”

“Now you’re sounding like Julian,” said Miriam.

Kate didn’t disagree. “This might be the only chance we get before the storm subsides,” she said. Hearing the words helped build her resolve.

“You can’t go out there alone.”

“I know,” she said, after a wan smile. The Manual was more insistent about solo excursions: it explicitly forbade them, day or night. But entering the storm, no matter the time of day, would be extremely dangerous for a two-person team. She couldn’t order another astronaut to accompany her on a high-risk trip. She wouldn’t compound their problems by endangering an additional life.

“And even if you could go, I doubt Julian will allow it,” said Miriam.

“He doesn’t have to know?” Kate’s eyes begged for understanding.

“You know that’s—”

“What if it were you out there?” asked Kate. “What if you were hurt, or your suit was on the fritz, and we had a chance to bring you in?”

“I wouldn’t want you to die trying to save me,” said Miriam.

“And I won’t die trying to save Cheney,” said Kate. “Between the break in the storm and my

suit nav, I'll be OK." Her assurances seemed not to satisfy Miriam. "I'll start a twenty-minute timer once I'm outside. If I don't find anything, I come right back in."

Miriam blinked at Kate but didn't launch a fresh protest.

"Promise me you won't tell anyone," said Kate.

"Promise me you'll turn around when the timer hits ten."

"I promise," said Kate, raising her hand as if swearing an oath. She would definitely turn around at the halfway point, if the situation warranted it. If her gut told her another five minutes of searching might be best, or perhaps ten ... she'd have to assess that in real time. "Thank you, Miriam." The commander bolted out of the control room.

Back in her cell, Kate slipped into her Mars suit's black inner thermal skin and pulled on the bulkier tan outer layer. She worked fast, skeptical Miriam would keep quiet about her plans. She couldn't have Julian stopping her.

Kate snatched her helmet and darted out of her cell. At tube's end, she poked her head into the Spine—empty. She dashed for the airlock, moving quick as she could, encumbered by her suit. She avoided glancing down adjoining tubeways as she passed, worried her eyes might meet another astronaut's.

Reaching the Spine's end, Kate praised her luck at not being caught. She opened the heavy inner airlock door and jumped at the sight of the figure standing inside the chamber, their arms crossed in disapproval. Her instincts had been right—Miriam couldn't keep quiet.

"You can't go out there by yourself." Glenn faced her in the center of the airlock, fully outfitted in his Mars suit with his helmet attached.

"You can't go," said Kate. She donned her own helmet and secured the clasps. "I can't risk

anyone else's life by asking them to come with me."

"You're not," said Glenn. "I'm coming without you asking."

"Glenn—"

"Rescuing Cheney is one thing, but doing it while breaking all the rules is no way to go about it," said Glenn. "We need you to come back alive. The odds of that are pretty shitty if you try this alone." He strode to the inner airlock door and closed it. "Now c'mon, let's get out there. Miriam said we won't have a lot of time."

"Curse you, Miriam," said Kate over a private channel to the control room.

"Good luck, Commander," said Miriam. "And remember, ten minutes, then you turn right back around. Not a second more, or I alert Julian."

Irritated, Kate muted the channel. Her whole plan was getting worse by the minute. Being saddled with Glenn was bad enough. Would Miriam actually tell Julian if she didn't start back in time? Hopefully she wouldn't have to find out. Kate stepped to the airlock's exit and punched the large red egress button. The chamber evacuated its air and slid aside its heavy door.

The two astronauts stepped from the airlock into a swirling world of twilight and dust, the bright beams of their wrist-mounted flashlights sparkling off the mineral-infused grit in the air. The reddish, compacted earth outside the HAAB fanned out for three meters before disappearing beneath the storm's fog.

Kate reopened her comm line to Miriam. "When does the break arrive?"

"You're standing in it," said Miriam. Kate stared in confusion at the roiling mess, what she'd imagined would be a clear patch of calm. "Move fast, Commander—it's only going to get worse."

Commander Holman switched to the broadcast channel. “Let’s go.”

“One sec,” said Glenn. “Set a twenty-minute timer,” he commanded his suit. He looked over at Kate. “Miriam told me about your promise.”

Frowning at the remark, Kate hoisted the emergency locator from its strap at her waist and flipped on the power. The device’s soft amber screen came alive. She tapped the rubbery buttons on its keypad, adjusting its sensitivity settings.

“With Cheney’s transponder, it shouldn’t take long for us to locate his body,” said Glenn. Mortification flashed across his face. “I mean, to find him, wherever he is.”

So Glenn believed Cheney was dead. All his affirmations about the missing astronaut being alive had been so much idle talk. Kate fought back a fresh rush of despair as she concentrated on her task, holding the tracker at arm’s length and swinging it in a broad arc from south to west. The device flashed red. She swept the scanner a second time—no change.

“Of course, that’s assuming this thing can pierce the storm’s electrical interference,” said Glenn.

Anxious to find Cheney, Kate’s previous sweeps had been quick. She scanned again, moving slower, taking more time. Halfway along the scanner’s arc, the light above its screen turned solid green. She held it steady. “Got him,” she said. “He’s five hundred meters that way.”

They headed off at a brisk pace in the direction of the transponder beacon, sticking close to each other as the remnants of twilight gave way to night. Their helmets, infused with a warm yellow, bobbed like fireflies in the darkness. Kate, in no mood for small talk, appreciated Glenn’s silence. He was probably focused on keeping up.

After nineteen minutes of slogging through the storm-churned Martian wilderness, the

countdown timer chimed. Kate disregarded it, barreling into the growing wind.

Glenn held up. "We have to start back, Commander. We'll be overdue as it is."

"We're close," said Kate. Too close to start back right then. "Another ten or twenty meters." She proceeded, unsure if Glenn followed and hesitant to find out. She stole a glance by swinging her flashlight wide to the left and turning her head, pretending to track the beam while in fact peeking to her rear. Glenn hadn't said a word but had resumed the search. He stumbled along a little over a meter behind.

Kate's heart thumped in her chest. They'd soon locate Cheney, soon resolve the mystery of what happened to their colleague. She staggered forward in the wind and dust, her flashlight beam nearly doused by the gale.

A rise emerged a few meters ahead, not black like the basalt rock that dotted the landscape but reddish, a solitary pile of Martian dirt the wind should have long ago swept away. She drew closer, the lump lightening in color to a mix of tan and red. The top of the mound took on a rounded shape, the contour of a shoulder.

Glenn and Kate scrambled to the mound, Cheney's crumpled form. They crouched beside their lost crew mate who lay on his side, entombed in windswept rusted soil. The two Mars astronauts dug into the dirt, scooping it with their gloves.

"His comm module's busted," said Glenn, nodding at a white, palm-sized dome of thin mesh at the top left of Cheney's breather pack. A large dent consumed most of the unit, and its antenna dangled from a wire that ran to the slender coil's original attachment point. "Explains why we couldn't reach him from the HAAB."

She glanced at the damaged module but didn't reply, more concerned with assessing

Cheney's state. Working together, they removed most of the surrounding dirt, enough to roll the limp astronaut onto his back. Within the churning wind and dust, Kate aimed her light beam at the man's helmet. A layer of red earth covered the ovoid. Glenn swiped the faceplate. They both froze as Cheney stared at them with an air of astonishment, thick lips gently parted, his open eyes unmoving.

Kate wanted to look away but couldn't, felt she shouldn't. Her mind flowed like molasses as her body stiffened with shock.

"Miriam, we found Cheney," Glenn mustered into his comm. "He's dead."

"I ...eed you ...o to get ...ack here, pronto," said Miriam. Her voice was choppy, the transmission having difficulty piercing the storm. "Kate broke her ...omise to ...e, and ... you're ... amount of danger."

Kate's fingers started for Cheney's face. She sent them a short distance before catching herself—the dead man's eyes couldn't be closed, inaccessible behind a shield of glass.

Glenn placed his hand on Kate's arm—she shuddered at his touch. "We need to go," he said.

"Help me move him," said Kate.

"He's dead, Kate," said Glenn. "Taking him back with us isn't going to change that."

"Help me move him anyway," she said.

"You heard Miriam," said Glenn. "We needed to start back a while ago. Carrying him will only slow us down."

"I'm not leaving him," said Kate. "Not a second time."

"We can come back for him when the storm's over," said Glenn.

Kate ignored him. She crawled to Cheney's head, his face upside down as she gazed upon

him from above. Burrowing her hands beneath his shoulders, she grabbed at his armpits and stood. She managed to lift the astronaut's torso and drag the lifeless body a meter before she had to stop. She adjusted her grip and dragged anew. Her heart filled with grief as she struggled to move her dead colleague's remains.

The body flew out of her hands.

Glenn threw Cheney over his shoulder. "I've got him," he said. Kate began to push back, but he cut her off with a shake of his head. Even allowing for his slight build, Cheney and his suit had to weigh sixty pounds in Mars's lighter gravity. Glenn seemed to handle the weight well enough on his muscular frame. "Lead us back."

Kate looked off in the direction she'd thought they'd come. She was greeted by a black wall of Martian night. The wind had grown stronger over the past five minutes, punctuated by powerful gusts that peppered them with sand. The break in the weather had moved on, giving way to the storm's full brunt. She activated her suit nav.

"Calculating route," her suit replied in its faintly artificial lilt. Seconds ticked by, many more than usual. "Unable to determine route," the system reported finally, relaying the error in red letters on her heads-up display.

"Glenn," said Kate, her voice quavering, "my suit nav can't determine the way back."

Glenn blinked at her, stunned by the news. "Lemme check mine," he said. Seconds passed. His suit's response bathed his face in red light. "No luck." He looked skyward, as if attempting to peer through the storm's blanket. "Damn planet's basically a giant ball of rusted iron." He batted at the whorls of dust dancing nearby. "All this ferromagnetic material is blocking the signals from the GPS satellites."

Without their suit navs, they couldn't get back to the HAAB. They'd be stranded in the storm, lost like Cheney. "Miriam, our suit navs aren't working," said Kate. "Miriam?" A minute ago, their connection with the station chief had been spotty. Now, there was no answer at all. Kate's stomach dropped. "Let me try my nav again."

"Go ahead if you like," said Glenn as he lowered Cheney to the ground, "but I don't think it'll come back online until the storm dies down." He dropped to one knee and settled next to the body. "Did Miriam have an estimate on how long it'll last?"

A day. A week. A month. The models hadn't existed long enough to accurately predict weather on the red planet. "Unable to determine route," the computer replied in Kate's ear. "Dammit," she said.

"You may as well have a seat," said Glenn. "I think we're gonna be here awhile."

Kate resisted the idea, but eventually joined her second-in-command on the ground, amid the wailing dust and wind. Her head hung, weighed down by their predicament. Because of her, both she and Glenn were lost out in the storm, a storm which had already taken a life in less than a day. Would that be their fate as well?

"I'm sure Miriam's trying everything she can to reach us," said Glenn.

"She's probably crapping a brick," muttered Kate, sinking further into sadness as she envisioned the panic she'd likely inflicted on the station chief.

"I wonder if she's informed our mission commander yet," said Glenn.

"*Acting* mission commander," Kate huffed. The reminder that Julian had been handed her command was the last thing she wanted to hear.

"Do you really think we'll be calling him 'acting' mission commander a year from now?"

asked Glenn.

Kate's head shot up, her icy glare lancing Glenn's innocent expression. He was so clueless sometimes about the right and wrong things to say in the moment. He'd meant no harm, but she couldn't restrain her erupting anger. "No, we won't be calling him 'acting' mission commander a year from now," she seethed. "I'm gonna get my command back long before then. *I* was the one who trained two years for the position, not him. Julian's barely qualified to pick his nose, much less lead this mission." She grabbed a handful of Martian soil and flung it into the storm. "I've already messaged the AD about it. I refuse to stand by and let thirty years of my life spiral down the drain."

Glenn raised an eyebrow. "You've been on the Mars mission since you were nine?"

"What do you think?" snapped Kate. The commander regretted her sarcasm. She took a second to bring her anger under control. "Ever since I was little, I felt I was destined for something big. When I was eight years old, my grandma and I watched the Chinese launch the first of their Kuàng mining spacecraft to the asteroid belt."

"I remember that launch," said Glenn. "The director of NASA was in a little box on the screen as the cameras followed the rocket into the sky. He was downplaying the whole thing, said there was little interesting science left to pursue with asteroids." Glenn shook his head. "They canned him the next day."

Kate nodded. "Even my grandma saw how that launch would spur all space-capable countries to stake claims across the solar system, how it would set off the second space race. She said to me then, 'For the US, there's nothing bigger now than space.' That's how I latched on to the idea."

“Of going to Mars?” asked Glenn.

“No,” said Kate, exasperated, “of becoming an astronaut. Only later, when they announced the Ares mission, did I jump at the chance to lead the first team of people here.”

Glenn leaned back, his arms angled straight behind him, palms flat on the ground. “So what comes next?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“After this mission’s over,” said Glenn. “You said you felt destined for something big—I’d say this certainly counts. What will you do with your life once you achieve your dream of thirty years, when you’re back home?”

She’d considered the question at times over the years, more frequently as the crowning achievement of her career had approached. “I plan to spend time with my children.”

Glenn laughed, a guffaw that rattled Kate’s ears as it reverberated within her helmet. His reaction dissipated quickly. “I’m sorry,” he said to the commander’s scowl. “I really thought you were joking.” His expression shifted from jovial to contrite. “It’s just that it’ll be such a big change: Kate Holman, former Mars mission commander, the newest stay-at-home mom.”

“Ben would tell you that being a mom is the most important job in the world.” One of the many arguments she and her ex-husband used to have.

“Sarah and I decided not to even think about children while I’m on active duty,” said Glenn. “We’re going to start a family when I get back from this mission.”

“Kids were never part of the plan for us either,” said Kate. “Amelia was an accident. Ben didn’t want his daughter to be an only child, so we had Ben Jr. four years later.” Her children’s faces came rushing back from the day’s video update. Ben Jr. looked miserable, asking again

when she'd be home. And Amelia had calculated the seconds until the *Gaia* capsule's splashdown. She declared it the largest number she'd ever seen. "Having children really changes your perspective. I needed this mission for me, but after it's over, I owe it to them to be around, to be a mom." Kate thought a bit and laughed.

"What's funny?" asked Glenn.

"Nothing," said Kate, shaking her head. "I realized as dangerous as this job is, the only real fear I have is my children growing up without a mother. I'm sure they worry about it too, well, at least Amelia. Ben Jr.'s too young to really understand." Their faces appeared in her mind's eye. "Such a burden for a child to carry. And with all the risks we take, such a huge chance that it might come true."

Dust eddies danced around Glenn, the storm's intensity increasing. "At least the riskiest part of this mission is over," he said. "We landed safely on Mars. Now we sit back and relax for a year ... that is, if we don't die out here in this storm."

If they didn't die? Kate grew silent, pondering the prospect she'd managed to push out of her mind, the real possibility the storm could take their lives. They *had* survived the riskiest part of the mission. What irony to die a few days later, not half a kilometer from the station.

"We'll make it back to the HAAB," said Glenn, likely noticing the consternation his words had triggered. "And for what it's worth, you deserve to be mission commander." He grinned, his annoying sign of sincerity bursting forth. "If there's anything I can do to help you get your job back from Julian, just ask."

Despite Glenn's penchant for saying the wrong thing, he did have a good heart. Kate had learned that much during the years training together for the mission. "You're a good friend," she

said.

“Thanks,” said Glenn, “but mostly I don’t want to take orders from that prick for a whole—”

A fuzzy smudge appeared on his heads-up display. He fell quiet, studying the image.

Kate scrutinized the smudge, trying to make sense of what his suit could be showing him.

The sight was strange, too faint and delicate for an image rendered on an LED screen. It was also off-center, one side stretching past his faceplate, beyond the bounds of his helmet’s display

The fuzzy smudge wasn’t inside Glenn’s helmet; it was a reflection. Kate turned: a dim, luminous white cloud hovered in the distance.

“You see it, too,” said Glenn. “I thought it was a mirage.”

“Definitely not a mirage,” she said as she stood, angling for a better view. No natural light sources existed on Mars. The glow had to be manmade. “I think it’s the HAAB’s exterior floods.”

Glenn rose to his feet. “You’re right,” he said, grinning. “Miriam just saved our asses.”

“And I’m sure we’ll never hear the end of it,” said Kate. She offered a silent thanks to the resourceful station chief. “Let’s go, before something happens to the flood lamps, too.”

“Roger that,” said Glenn, hoisting Cheney’s limp body over his shoulders. The two set off across the Martian black, dashing for the far-off glimmer of home.