

PAUL C. VINCI



THE
MARS
EXPERIMENT



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To my brother and his telescope.

Introduction

NASA was no more. In an attempt to allow space exploration to reach the next level, the organization formerly known as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration had been contracted out to private enterprise. The world's leading outer space research agency had become the property of several combined private Fortune 500 investors and a handful of dreamers. Due to a combination of funding cutbacks and global prioritizing by the United Nations, more pressing worldwide issues that demanded immediate national and international attention took precedence over mankind's extracurricular activities, and that, unfortunately, included space exploration. This reclassification, along with the diminished reputation of the space program in the eyes of the public following the self-destruction of yet another manned space shuttle, the *Mayflower*, forced the evolution of man's space exploration to be placed on Mother Necessity's quintessential back burner. This resulted in the United States government's decision to "sell" NASA off to the highest bidder in the spring of 2012. In the summer that followed, its main command center and base of operations were relocated to *La Isla Plata*, "The Silver Island," located some distance off Florida's west coast, shielded from the hurricane zone and the world. This was to both isolate the project and rebuild.

And rebuild they did! Even their name had changed. Now called the Organization to Explore and Colonize the Solar System, or OTECTSS (pronounced "o-tex"), the entire focus of the

leading space exploration agency in the world had evolved. Along with a new home and new management, a revised agenda was now in place as well. As far back as history has been recorded, mankind has always followed its natural drive to pioneer beyond humanity's own reach and discover the unknown. Having already completed a successful lunar landing, it was only natural that mankind now fixed its starry-eyed gaze beyond the moon. It was now time to take the next step in our never-ending journey forward. *Interplanetary* travel.

The first question, before such a mission could get off the ground, was “*could* man get there?” Did the human race presently possess the technology to send human beings to another planet and return them safely to Earth? Regretfully, until now the answer was “no.” By today's standards and methods of space travel, a ship would need a train of fuel tanks over 50 miles long following behind to complete the trip. If such a mission were to succeed, then a new and completely self-sustaining energy source of unlimited regenerating supply must be invented. Fortunately, for both OTECTSS and mankind, some ingenious, ahead-of-their-time masterminds, formerly employed by both NASA and the Department of Defense, found the answer to that question in two very versatile words. *Solar fusion*. They combined nuclear radioactivity—the most powerful energy-producing molecular source ever discovered—with solar regeneration—the most efficient method of recharging an energy supply invented to date—to produce the most productive and first completely self-sustaining infinite power system in the world. By adapting a nuclear fusion reactor similar to those used in naval submarines to recharge itself through solar panels, mankind found the breakthrough answer to its prayers for a successful method of power for deep-space travel. This removed the need for fuel storage completely. Solar fusion not only provided an unlimited supply of power, it also allowed the focus of the limited resources on board such a vessel to be dedicated more for the purpose of the mission, and less on the running of the ship.

The other question necessary for planning any trip to the planets was “*which* one do we go to?” When dealing with a power source recharged by solar collection, it made the most sense to choose to travel to a planet close to the sun. The planet Venus was their obvious first choice. It was in close proximity to Earth and also well within the reach of the sun’s heat. On paper and in theory, it seemed the most logical choice. However, three unsuccessful mission attempts later it was quickly revealed that there were some places in the universe that mankind did not belong. After 44 months of fruitless efforts and wasted consideration, the project was abandoned. Due to extremely high surface temperatures and the great magnitude of the sun’s gravity, Venus was classified as “unfit to colonize.” This forced mankind to look in the other direction for possible planetary expansion.

Enter the planet Mars. On November 29, 2033, OTECTSS sent a manned spacecraft, the *Samaritan*, to Mars. Because the *Samaritan* was assembled entirely in outer space and already free of the Earth’s gravity and atmosphere, its designers were able to abandon the traditional rocket shape completely and focus on a new design more suitable for the needs of the mission. Constructed from a combination of oceanic exploration vessel designs and satellite blueprints, the *Samaritan* resembled a naval submarine, but on a much larger scale. Over 400 feet in length, it was equipped with the latest available technology in remote collection systems and analysis equipment. Since the sun’s energy was weaker the farther away the ship traveled, its designers gave the *Samaritan* more solar panels and not one, but two fusion generators. Gone were the days of having to cram a limited amount of exploration gear, adequate fuel, and some astronauts into a narrow and confined shuttlecraft or rocket-style ship. No equipment was left out and no expense was spared. Finally, man could explore outer space the way it should be.

Nicknamed “The Mars Experiment,” phases I and II of the project consisted of computer simulations and test flights, all of which were successful. Phase III was now the real deal. Since

its launch some 13 months earlier, the *Samaritan* finally reached the outer rim of Martian space. All the mystery built up over the past year and throughout history was about to be revealed. Questions would finally be answered. The time had come. However, could mankind handle the answers waiting on the world called Mars? Ready or not, humanity was about to find out.

One

Christmas Eve...
Year 2034...

“OTECTSS control, this is Captain Sullivan. Do you copy?” the captain stated into his headset.

Captain Charles “Charlie” Sullivan was an eleven-year veteran of the Global Air Force, and finished at the top of his class in both aviation school and the National Academy of Aerospace Technology. He had been with OTECTSS for six years, contributing to the design of both the *Samaritan*’s cockpit and navigational instruments. He is also the leader of this mission.

“Roger, Samaritan, this is OTECTSS control,” a voice crackled over the speaker in the cockpit. “We’re picking up some static feedback, probably from a weather satellite intercepting your broadcast. Switch over to channel Alpha and await instructions.”

“Ten-four, control. We’re switching over to Alpha...now,” Sullivan stated, as he leaned over and threw a switch on the panel behind him to his left.

“A hundred percent better, Captain,” the voice from the speaker said. “Transmit your authorization codes.”

“Roger. We’re sending them now,” Sullivan advised through his headset, as he entered a series of numbers and letters on the front computer screen. “Transmission complete.”

“Ten-four, Samaritan. Stand by for verification,” the voice said.

“Standing by,” Sullivan replied, and then whispered to himself. “We’re not going anywhere.”

His copilot, Gary Mitchell, who was sitting to his right, heard his comment and chuckled.

Major Gary Mitchell, or “Mitch” to his friends, served with Sullivan in the Global Air Force and was a former officer in the South African Navy. He has been with OTECTSS for four years and is in charge of the *Samaritan*’s crew.

“Systems status check?” he asked.

“Sure,” Sullivan replied, as he picked up a clipboard and a pen. “Primary oxygen recyclators?”

“Check,” Mitchell replied.

“Primary and secondary generator power relays?” Sullivan continued.

“Check,” Mitchell repeated, glancing up at the monitor above his head.

“Fusion generator power *levels*?” Sullivan read.

“Primary, check.” Mitchell answered. “And secondary, check.”

“Artificial magnetic gravity regulators?” Sullivan said.

“Check,” Mitchell repeated for the fifth time.

“And sonar radar detection grid systems?” Sullivan concluded.

“All are up and running.” Mitchell looked over at Sullivan. “I wonder what’s taking so long.”

“Verification accepted,” the voice over the intercom said after a brief pause. “How’s the weather up there, guys? Nothing on the radar but smooth sailing from here.”

“Not a cloud in the sky,” Sullivan replied.

“That’s what we like to hear,” the voice answered.

“Although I swore I saw a flock of geese go by about an hour ago,” Mitchell joked into his headset.

“As long as you don’t start saying you see any little green men. Otherwise, we’d have a problem,” the voice laughed. “Prepare for us to download data streams.”

“Loaded and ready,” the captain informed.

“Initiating collection dish and...transmit,” the voice instructed.

“Bombs away,” Sullivan said, as he reached over and hit a button on the computer screen. The computer began to quietly hum and a bar graph appeared, slowly counting up to 100 percent by ones as the download took place.

“Do you think we’ll actually make it there this time?” Mitchell asked.

“Hard to say,” Sullivan said. “You know how these big-wigs are so afraid they’ll be sued by our families if we don’t make it back. One little temperature shift or faulty sensor and they’ll pull the plug. What is this, the fifth try?”

“I lost count,” Mitchell replied. “At least this time we made it past the last asteroid detection beacon, but I bet they’ll find something before tomorrow in the data to use as an excuse to start over and grab more of that donation money for further research.”

“Transfer complete, Samaritan,” the voice on the speaker squawked. “Follow your daily scheduled backups and we’ll be back to check in at 0630 hours for the Global News interview. Tomorrow is Mars, gentlemen. You’ve got a busy day ahead of you. Anything you guys want to pass on to your loved ones before we sign off?”

“Tell my daughter I saw Santa Claus fly by in his sleigh, making his way toward our house,” Sullivan said with a smile.

“Will do, Charlie,” the voice replied. “Merry Christmas, gentlemen. Have a good night. OTECTSS out.”

“You too. Samaritan out,” Sullivan said as he switched off the loudspeaker and let out a big sigh.

“I’m starving,” Mitchell said, as he removed his headset and stood up from his seat. “You want a snack or something from the galley?”

“Surprise me,” Sullivan answered as he switched the computer screen back to the 360-degree radar.

“You got it,” Mitchell said, as he turned and exited through the rear door of the cockpit.

Sullivan sat back in his chair for a moment, took a deep breath and looked to his left at a snapshot of his ten-year-old daughter, Sally. He took the photo down, looked at it and then closed his eyes. His mind wandered back to a time shortly before he left for Mars. He was standing on the pitcher’s mound of a baseball diamond, pitching baseballs underhand to his daughter, who was batting from home plate.

“Do you really get to go to Mars?” she asked. “My teacher said Mars has less gravity than the Earth. Does that make things weigh less there?”

“Yes,” he answered as he threw a pitch. “Mars has one-third as much gravity as we do here.”

She swung the bat but missed. “I wonder how far I could hit a baseball on Mars,” she said.

He picked up another baseball. “Well, if Mars has one-third the gravity as we do, then that means you can hit a softball how far over there?” he said as he threw another pitch.

“Three times as far?” she answered as she missed again.

“That’s right,” he said as he grabbed another baseball.

“I wanna hit a baseball on Mars some day,” she said.

He threw the ball. She swung, and this time hit it up over his head.

“Maybe someday you will,” he said, as he turned and watched the ball go into the outfield.

He opened his eyes, returned to the present, and looked at the photo again. “Merry Christmas, sweetie,” he whispered as he pinned it back to the control panel. “Back to work.”

* * *

Sitting in the recreation room, Junior Grade Lieutenants Eric Hansen and Jonathan Chen were playing cards at a table while Junior Grade Lieutenant Katharine Tyler was curled up in a chair in the corner, reading a book. The trio made up the glider

pilot squad. Each served a dual role on board *Samaritan*, however. Hansen was also the ship's navigator, Tyler was the supply quartermaster and Chen was the communications technician. They were joined by Joseph "Joe" Burns, one of the ship's mechanics and maintenance crew, who was trying to get some sleep on the couch.

"I win again," Hansen told Chen, as he placed the last card in his hand on the table. "What's the score now?"

"Three hundred and thirty-four games to two hundred and ninety-seven games," Chen replied with a sigh, as he collected all of the cards and put them back in the box.

Hansen stood up from the table, stretched, and remarked, "Don't worry, Chen. There's plenty of time for you to catch up. Besides, there's nothing wrong with second place." He gave Chen a smile and started to walk around the table toward the door.

"Don't you guys ever get tired of playing that game?" Tyler said to Chen, without looking up from her book.

"Never," Hansen said as he turned back around. "You read that book three times already. Don't you get tired of doing that?"

"True," she replied as she looked up from the page. "However, it's based on interpretation, so I look at it as if I'm reinventing my understanding of how the story unfolds each time, and why. Plus, I pick up on things I missed the first two times."

"You mean slept through," he joked as he turned back toward the door, opened it, and left.

"Why do you put up with him?" Tyler asked Chen.

"He's not always like that," Chen answered. "He just loves to get under your skin."

"He's arrogant and cocky," she continued. "If he wasn't such a good glider pilot, he'd probably end up getting his ass kicked two or three times a week in the real world."

"You sound like you're jealous," Chen remarked.

"Of what?" she asked in surprise.

“He’s not just a *good* pilot,” Chen said in Hansen’s defense. “He’s a *great* pilot. His personality is part of his style and makes him better. He’s a risk-taker.”

“He’s reckless,” she informed him.

“Why the sudden interest in Hansen’s style?” Chen asked suspiciously.

“Because she likes him,” Burns interrupted as he changed positions on the couch.

“What?” she shouted as she looked toward Burns.

Burns opened his eyes, still lying on his side on the couch with his arms folded. “Let’s analyze this,” he continued. “You are always bumping heads with him and criticizing him on everything from his gliding to his womanizing. You sound like his wife, not his squad leader. Face it, honey. You like him.”

Chen smiled and looked back at Tyler.

“In your dreams!” she exclaimed.

“Not my dreams, honey,” he said. “Yours.”

Tyler’s jaw dropped and she began to blush.

All of a sudden, an automated voice barked over the intercom system. “Alert! Alert! Object detected within proximity parameters! Object detected within proximity parameters!”

A warning alarm, similar to that of a fire truck, sounded throughout the ship, and warning lights in each area suddenly began to flash.

“Here we go again,” Burns said, as he and the others stood up and exited the room immediately.

Mitchell sat in the copilot chair of the cockpit. He announced instructions into his headset over the intercom as he monitored the ship’s systems. “Airlock securements initiated,” he stated. “Vacuums activated. Breach area contained. All hands report in.”

Tyler sat in her control seat, buckled her harness and put on her headset. “Tyler here, safe and secure,” she reported.

Hansen and Chen sat at the navigation and communication station control seats, buckled their harnesses, and reported in.

“Hansen and Chen here, safe and secure,” Hansen reported as Chen activated the ship’s internal radar sensor panels.

Nimura and Foster sealed the doors to the medical bay and secured themselves in their control seat harnesses. Dr. Phan Nimura and his assistant, Dr. Hillary Foster made up the medical staff on board. Together, they cared for the crew members' well-being, as well as prepared them for the health hazards that could occur on a mission such as this one.

"Medical bay sealed. Nimura and Foster secure," Foster reported into her headset, as Nimura took longer to secure his control seat harness.

"Did it lock?" she asked him.

"Yes," Nimura replied, finally locking the bar into place.

"Put on your headset," she reminded him. He complied.

"Fusion rooms sealed," Burns reported, as he and Miller—the other, more senior member of the mechanical maintenance team—scurried to their control seats and belted themselves in. "Burns safe and secure."

"Miller safe and secure," Miller followed.

"Laboratory evacuated. Science crew away and secure," Barrett reported, as the harnesses of all three members of the science team snapped into place at once.

Dr. Julian Barrett, a famous geologist and archaeologist with perhaps "too much" experience in both of his related fields for such a mission, led the science team on board. Nicknamed the "rock doctor" by the crew, he was probably more excited to actually retrieve a sample of Martian geology than to be one of the first humans to reach the planet.

The second member of the science team was Dr. Michelle Walker, Barrett's assistant, who came with the highest recommendation from Harvard University in chemistry, and a resume to match. Never satisfied with failure, it was her drive to succeed that made her stand above and beyond the other candidates in her field during the selection process and receive a position on the *Samaritan's* science crew.

The final member of the science team was Professor Felix Santiago, head of the astronomy department at San Antonio University and award winner for his detailed research on the study of the solar system.

Together, the three-person science team covered a well-rounded scope of expertise in the fields necessary to explore and decipher the secrets the planet Mars holds about its origin, history, and future.

“Roger, crew,” Mitchell advised. “Airlocks are secured. Outer areas evacuated. All hands accounted for. Stand by for all clear.”

He paused for a few seconds. “And...clear.”

The alarm silenced and the warning lights stopped flashing.

“Not bad, crew. Reaction interval was seventy-two seconds from initial to completion. Not a record, but more than acceptable. We’ve got a big day tomorrow, so everyone get your rest. We came this far, and tomorrow all the hard work will finally pay off. So far, we have the green light. Have a good night, everyone. Tomorrow, we make history.”

He removed his harness and headset, then turned toward Sullivan. “I’ll go tuck ’em in.”

Sullivan grabbed Mitchell’s arm. “No,” he said. “Take the rest of the night off. That’s an order. I’ll do it.” He raised his harness, hung up his headset, stood up and exited the cockpit.

Mitchell sat back in his seat and raised his arms behind his head. “OK now, I could really get used to this.”

* * *

Hansen unhooked and raised his harness.

“Bet it was the lab rats that took too long again,” he said, as he stood up from his seat and started for the exit.

“See what I mean,” Tyler said to Chen, as she unhooked her harness and removed her headset.

Chen unhooked his harness, sat back, shook his head, and smiled.

Hansen started to open the door, then turned back and looked at Chen. “That was a waste of time,” he remarked. “I don’t see why we do these drills every day anyway.”

Captain Sullivan, who was standing in the doorway unnoticed, responded to Hansen’s comment.

“We do these drills, Lieutenant, in case an undetectable particle penetrates our ship.”

Hansen turned around, saw the captain and stood at attention.

“Sir,” he said. “Sorry, sir.”

Tyler and Chen also stood silently at attention. Tyler smirked with satisfaction that the captain heard Hansen’s earlier remark.

“At ease,” Sullivan said as he slowly began to circle the three pilots as they stood in a row, facing forward. “We have to be prepared for anything on this ship, at any time. We have a chance to make history tomorrow. To do that, we need to take all of the necessary precautions to make sure we do not fail. If that means doing disaster drills, then so be it. This is not like we are out to sea or lost in the air, and can just send out a SOS and wait to be rescued. If we fail *out here*, we are stuck out here. If we fail out here, the stakes are a lot higher. We are risking our lives, doing what nobody has done before. We knew the risks from day one. Hundreds of people would kill to be where we are, doing what we are doing. We are leading the way for man’s future out here, and my job here is to see that we succeed. So, Lieutenant Hansen, we do these drills for a reason. It may not seem like much to you, but trust me. I have seen first hand what happens to a human body when a rupture the size of a pinhole occurs in a pressurized environment, and I am not about to let a lack of preparedness be the reason that happens again. Is that clear?” he asked, as he stopped and looked up at them.

“Yes, sir,” they all said at once.

“Call it a night. Tomorrow we go to Mars,” Sullivan instructed as he turned and left the room.

Hansen sat down and let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Nice going!” Tyler said, as she walked over and retrieved her book.

“What’s your problem?” Hansen asked as he turned his head and looked Tyler’s way.

“Don’t you remember that Sullivan was on the Gauntlet when it was hit by the asteroid?” Tyler asked Hansen. “He watched his two friends implode from depressurization right before his eyes, and could do nothing to help them.”

“Take it easy, Tyler,” Hansen replied. “You’re overreacting. I didn’t think he was gonna be behind the door when I opened it, OK?”

“That’s your problem,” she remarked. “You don’t think. Good night, Chen.” She opened the door, exited the room and closed the door behind her.

“What’s wrong with her?” Hansen asked Chen as he put on his jacket.

“I don’t know, man,” Chen answered. “She just doesn’t like you, I guess.”

“Well,” Hansen responded. “The feeling is mutual.”

Hansen and Chen left the room and retired for the night.

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