



**The First Expedition**  
by Steve Jordan

His boots were already beginning to take on the characteristic reddish-orange of Martian soil, and after only two weeks on Mars. Despite the high-tech coatings and finishes. Despite the airlock washes. “Sticky,” was what Ames had called Martian sand. “Downright sticky. Imagine what it will be like after a year.”

After only two weeks, Commander Matt Cartier could well believe it.

As he trudged through Martian regolith, he knew the only reason he was not seeing clouds of dust billowing at his feet, was because today’s feeble wind was blowing it all behind him. That had been the plan, after all... to approach from downwind, to avoid undue contamination of the site. He had even landed the jumper one hundred meters away, to avoid his jets kicking up too much dust on approach. Matt wanted his initial contact of the site to be as minimally disturbing as possible.

*“Matt, what’s that to your left?”*

“Hm?” Matt glanced left, in response to the voice from his helmet com. The entire crew was certainly monitoring his suit camera, as he was the first one here.

*“No, about fifty degrees left of you.”*

Matt adjusted his gaze, and his eyes finally picked out the shape, uncharacteristically un-Mars-like, that had caught Polly's attention. He altered his direction of travel and approached the object, slowing as he neared it, and still careful not to kick up too much dust. Once he was upon it, he stopped and knelt down to get a better look.

"Foil," he announced needlessly (they could all see it as clear as he could, now). "Looks like it was blown from the site, and wedged under the rock. Seems to have been cut from a larger piece."

"Okay," Polly replied. "*Florian says to leave it for now.*"

"Fine," Matt said, and stood up. Sliding sideways away from the spot, he returned to his original path and continued on. He was just reaching a low ridge that hid most of the site from view, and as he approached, the site would be revealed to him slowly. Almost as if Fate was trying to be gentle with him.

The capsule, of course, stood four stories above the ground, so it was visible all the way back to the jumper. From a distance, it looked normal. But even from here, it hinted at something that was amiss, as it sat just slightly off-level on the edge of the horizon.

"Before someone asks," Matt said, "yes, the capsule does seem to be tilting a few degrees off-center."

"*Didn't catch that from the aerial photos,*" came Ernestine's voice. Matt knew from experience that photos taken from space rarely provided anything but very raw information. What did a photo of Everest from a hundred miles straight up tell you about the beauty of the top of the world? So the fact that the aerials hadn't even revealed the capsule's off-true position wasn't surprising.

Matt finally reached the ridge, and could now see the far edge of the site at the edge of the horizon. As he continued to the apex, the ridge revealed more and more of the site, strewn across the shallow valley before him.

Matt's face was dour, sad. He did not need to see his faint reflection inside his helmet's visor... he was one of those people who was always acutely aware of his own facial expression from moment to moment. And as the rest of the crew was still en-route in the bus, they could not see his expression, either. He was momentarily alone, and if he were crying, grinning, or giggling like a loon at the signs of death around him, no one would have known. Still, he maintained his dour face as he surveyed the area. It seemed the least he could do to pay his respects.

He heard the telltale click from his helmet com. If he had been laughing like a loon, he would have stopped then. "*Matt? How does it look to you?*" Matt wasn't sure what the question meant—they could see through his camera as well as he could see. Maybe they were looking for something more subjective. He decided to oblige them.

"Tragic," he replied finally. "It looks tragic."

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"They should have turned back at the Moon." That was the phrase most often used when people talked about the historic First Expedition to Mars.

It had been a mission mounted for all the wrong reasons, and at about the worst time imaginable: The first third of the twenty-first century was simply not prepared to send people so

far away, not with the technology available, and not with the intensive daily demands on personnel, budgets, attention. But America was on a surge of national pride at the time, and hell-bent on proving their superiority over the Chinese and their recent Moon landing. So the National Aeronautics and Space Agency fooled themselves into thinking that their own energy, life support and computer technology was up to such a monumental task as a trip to Mars, and the Administration rushed them through a project. Someone had come up with the idea of a slingshot trajectory around the Moon, to gain velocity and shorten the trip. Six scientists and engineers, three men and three women, were chosen from America and various European countries that had helped provide money or technology for the project. The expedition, aboard Athena 1, blasted off on a Sunday afternoon, and garnered one of the largest audiences for any television program (sixth after the last 5 World Cup matches).

But even larger audiences watched during the reports of the unexpected hull breach, two days out. The breach itself, caused by a random meteor strike, was not immediately life-threatening, but it had managed to puncture some of their liquid supply tanks, including a water tank. Just like that, they had already lost most of their safety margin of supplies, and they hadn't even reached the Moon. Still, NASA made the decision to continue with the mission, and the astronauts apparently agreed with the decision. Three days later, they flawlessly accomplished their slingshot maneuver, their point of no return, and were off to Mars.

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*"Any sign of bodies yet?"*

"Trust me," Matt replied, "when I find them, you'll know."

*"Matt," Polly's voice came back, "we just reached the jumper. We'll park here and come out to meet you."*

"Understood." That would mean a few more minutes alone, he considered. A few more minutes of solitude. He turned back to look in the direction of the bus. The Ground Transportation Vehicle, an articulated contraption that resembled the misbegotten offspring of a giant ant and a pillbox, was massive enough to carry the entire 10-member crew for weeks, and a smaller complement for months of extended exploration. Presently, the bus held four of the crew. Matt would have come in with them, but he had flown the jumper in order to obtain a few closer aerial shots before they arrived. As he watched, the warning beacons above the airlock began to flash, which meant two of his fellow crewmembers were about to exit the bus.

Matt turned back to the debris field. He knew his suit camera and sensors were dutifully recording stereoscopic visual, full spectrographic and micro-pulse radar of everything around him, so he didn't need to touch anything. He reflected that historians probably would have wished they could have sealed the entire area under glass for posterity. A shame the Martian winds would have already changed all this a thousand times over, after 80 years.

At least it wasn't crash debris... crash-landing was probably the one thing that the First Expedition hadn't managed to do on their way here. But certainly everything else had managed to go wrong. The debris reflected this. The odd collection of fabrics, jury-rigged apparati, loose screws and nuts, cut and broken piping, and other miscellaneous hardware, all indicated that the crew had spent their time desperately trying to keep everything they had working, and having little success. And the amount of just plain trash strewn about suggested that they had had little time or inclination to be worried about niceties like neatness.

Matt saw all of this, as he surveyed the detritus around him. He remained silent as he moved about, doing his best to allow his cameras and sensors to cover every inch of ground.

“Looks like scenario three to me.” That was Polly’s voice, and as Matt had expected, her first words upon reaching the site had been professional and business-like. “Jeopardized survival mode.”

Matt would have called it a four, a much more critical survival situation. But he didn’t feel like arguing with Polly about it, especially when he was standing in the middle of it.

“Three, huh?” That was Pete. “What do you think, Matt?”

Well, since he asked... “Four.”

No one immediately responded. Good. They could argue about it later. That meant Matt could keep surveying, and be left to himself.

To reflect on how glad he was that San wasn’t here to see this.

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The decision to press on turned out to be only the first set of errors, mistakes and bad luck for Athena 1. Nineteen days out, a radiation shield buckled, which they were never able to completely restore. Forty-seven days out, Major Park broke his wrist while exercising. Sixty days out, they discovered that the first meteor strike had also punctured a fuel line, creating a leak of fuel between the ship’s inner and outer hulls... now there was no way to confirm they had enough fuel to land. The day after, an oxygen generator malfunctioned. And ninety-six days out, their radio guidance software broke down, preventing regular contact with Earth.

When Athena finally reached Mars, NASA quickly lost what sporadic contact they’d had during re-entry. Three days went by, with no word from the expedition. NASA and the E.U. had been actively working on an emergency supply rocket to send after them, despite another national budget crisis, and contracting disputes that had been kicked off by Athena 1’s poor performance. In hindsight, everyone involved should have been more concerned about a rocket rushed to launch that fast, by a company that had done such a bad job with their first rocket. And once it was ready, they didn’t know if there was anyone to send it to.

Finally word came: A poor-quality one-way broadcast from the Commander of the First Expedition, much of it lost in transmission. They thought the Commander had given them a list of their needs, but no one on Earth could make it out. Finally deciding that their hastily-assembled supplies rocket would have to be adequate, NASA launched Athena 2 after them.

Athena 2 reached a height of 2 kilometers, whereupon it promptly exploded.

The impact of that failure was crushing. A new rocket, fully supplied, would take another two to three months to be prepared... assuming NASA and its contractors knew why Athena 2 had blown up, and could correct the flaw that soon. The U.S. Congress demanded investigations, and held up funding for Athena 3 until answers were provided. The E.U. states refused to supply more funds or supplies to NASA without the same information. Two months went by. Signals from Athena 1 stopped coming. Three months. Four.

The First Expedition’s fate was, by then, sealed.

A shocked, horrified, mollified world took one last, long look at the red planet in the sky. They wondered aloud why they had sent them in the first place. Then they went back to their other daily crises.

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Matt stared at the tattered mess that was the greenhouse, attached to the side of Athena 1, from the foot of the ladder into the capsule. He did not want to get any closer. From there, he could clearly see the rows of planters, hydroponics and aeroponics racks, designed to feed the crew and provide needed oxygen. He could also see, through the flaps of torn greenhouse skin that fluttered in the sparse wind, that the planters were devoid of plants. They would have frozen and crumbled under the Martian wind's onslaught long ago. He could not see all of the greenhouse floor, but he hoped that dead plants were all that were there.

They actually believed that flimsy plastic skin would keep Mars out. They thought this tiny greenhouse would provide enough food... it barely constituted enough growth potential for emergency reserves, much less enough daily subsistence for six people. Matt knew from his historical studies that early-twenty-first century scientists hadn't managed to figure out how the complex cooperatives of plants, animals and insects worked in the wild, and for Athena 1, they used the best work-arounds they could think of. But like the first Biosphere experiments, their best guesses turned out to be far from workable. Starvation would have been the inevitable result... assuming the cold, the radiation or the lack of oxygen didn't get them first.

Which brought Matt's attention back to the ladder before him. He glanced over his shoulder at the others, picking gingerly through the debris around the site. Pete was kneeling and examining some loose debris, and Lainie was setting up automatic cameras to document everything. Polly was standing not too far from him, facing him. He could not see her face through the mirrored visor, but he suspected she was watching him, waiting to see what he would do. Waiting for him to climb the ladder. Because, as professional and businesslike Polly is, he knew she didn't want to do it. This was his job. He was the group's designated Chief Explorer.

It was his job, therefore, to be first inside the tomb.

Without a word, Matt started climbing.

Upon reaching the hatch, he started to reach for the airlock controls, but paused. He looked close at the edge of the hatch. "The seals are completely eroded," he announced. It probably isn't even slightly airtight in there, he realized.

"We figured they would be," Polly replied needlessly.

"Is the handle frozen?" Pete asked. Was he rushing him? Matt grasped the airlock handle, gave a tug. It swiveled down fairly easily, although he felt a grainy resistance from the mechanism... that sticky Martian dust. Bracing himself physically (because he was already mentally braced), he pulled the airlock door open. There was nothing inside the airlock chamber, other than some blown-in soil. The inner door was closed, but Matt was sure he could see signs of the same seal erosion. All the same, he closed the outer door before he opened the inner door.

He entered, and closed the inner door behind him.

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Fully eighty years had passed since the fateful First Expedition, as it was later referred to. In that time, the United States, and the world, had undergone incredible changes. Worldwide crashes in economic, physical, ecological and social systems had led to an imminent collapse of civilization in the last half of the twenty-first century, and the final, grudging acceptance of humankind that they had stupidly led themselves down the road to ruin.

But instead of descending into total chaos, populations rallied to right the wrong behaviors and salvage Mankind, if possible. The resultant period, often referred to as the Age of Obligation by historians and sociologists, saw a worldwide change in political, economic, social and ecological systems, based more closely on the myth of the “modern savage,” living lightly off the land, and basing his lifestyle on sound practical and ecological decisions.

Failing and abandoned cities were dismantled, tools were co-opted, and used to build the new cities of Man. In eighty years time, the very landscape of the planet was transformed into a cleaner, cleverer place, and its self-appointed shepherds were finally tending their families, lands and herds properly. Scientific efforts recovered, then prospered, especially in the areas pertaining to ecology, agriculture, energy generation and mechanical efficiency. And soon, Man could again look to the stars, and consider exploring them.

And so they remembered the First Expedition. And they knew they had one last debt to pay.

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Matt stood silently regarding the two people he found in the staging area, just inside the airlock. He did not want to think of them as bodies. Clearly, they hadn’t thought of themselves that way. They sat on the floor opposite the airlock, side by side, in full space suits minus their helmets. The cold, and the lack of atmosphere or Martian dust inside the capsule, had kept their bodies from decomposing... still, the skin on their faces was black, drawn, leathery, effectively mummified, and unrecognizable.

They were also holding hands.

Matt stepped closer and knelt before them, in order to see the insignias on their suits. One tag read, “Penry.” The other read, “McCoy.” Matt stood up, and looked around to satisfy himself that there was no atmosphere here to compromise. Then he returned to the airlock door. He opened the inner and outer door, so his com would carry outside. Pete, Polly and Lainie were standing below, obviously waiting for him to come out.

“I’ve found Commander Penry and Wanda McCoy.”

Pete and Lainie turned to each other, as if they could see the other’s faces through their mirrored visors. Polly simply asked, “*Impression?*”

“They went peacefully.”

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Matt had been a North American Peacekeeper when the call went out for personnel to head a second expedition to Mars. He was also an avid outdoorsman and explorer at heart... which meant he was continually frustrated by the knowledge that there was literally nowhere on Earth he could go that hadn’t been touched by human hands. And as much as he loved hiking through mountain trails, backpacking through pristine forests, or kayaking in lush river valleys... the desire to go somewhere truly new, to be truly *first*, was overpowering.

Even if it meant leaving the planet to do so.

San had not been sympathetic. She begged him not to go. She tried reasoning with him first: “Mars has nothing we need.” Then she tried practicality: “It’s a waste of valuable money and resources that can be applied to reclamation projects here... that’s much more important, isn’t it?” And finally, when all that didn’t work on him, she reminded him about the First

Expedition, how alone and helpless they were... how they died, alone and helpless... how easy it would be for Matt to die, alone and helpless...

Matt knew what she was really saying. But, as one of his subordinates in the Peacekeeper Corps, it would not have been proper for her to say it outright. And if San was nothing else, she was proper. It was one of the reasons he loved her... something he wished he could say to her, but likewise could not. And as much as he wanted to go to Mars... the thought of leaving her behind was agony.

Still, he'd quit his post and signed up. He'd gone to Mars. He'd been the first human to stand on the top of Olympus Mons. He'd already seen more of Mars, in the week since basecamp was fully assembled and operational, than the rest of the crew combined. And when they got the go-ahead, he had been the first to see Mars' other pioneers.

The first humans to die on Mars.

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Polly and Pete joined Matt in the staging room, and the three of them regarded the figures seated before them.

"Was there any record that the two of them..?" Pete asked.

"Not that I'm aware of," Polly replied. "Of course, there was a reason they sent three men and three women on the trip. They clearly intended that they could take advantage of the situation, if they desired to do so."

"Would've loved to see the psych tests they put them through to determine that," Pete muttered.

Polly shot him an admonishing glance. "Anyway, this is hardly evidence of a relationship. Comrades, slowly expiring together, a last gesture of friendship..."

"Or forgiveness," Matt heard himself say. Pete and Polly looked at him, but instead of elaborating, Matt turned and walked to the ladder that led to the next level. Pete, who had taken out a handheld camera, began sweeping the room, the camera light seemingly giving more life to the room as it danced from wall to wall.

Climbing the ladder from the staging level to the main living level was difficult, in the suits. But without working seals, Athena 1 could not be pressurized. So Matt picked his way carefully up the ladder, set himself, and used one hand to open the sealed hatch above his head. He detected a minor amount of resistance from the hatch, but he realized that it didn't feel like the result of embedded sand, like the outer hatch. Bracing himself, he gave an extra effort and slid it aside.

When the hatch was about halfway opened, Matt could see a gloved hand extending over the hatchway. Had the hand been attached to a living arm, it would have pitched downward into the hatch like something in a bad horror movie, probably scaring any unexpected visitor within an inch of their lives. But this hand simply remained over the hatch, stiffly defying gravity a few inches from Matt's helmet.

Pete had been watching when he opened the hatch. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Fraid so," Matt replied. "One of the crew." He slowly climbed the next two rungs, until he could see the inside of the living level, and twisted about to take it all in. Huddled together beside the hatch were three of the crew, in their indoor thermals, gloves and boots.

They were lying on their sides, one against the other, like three books tumbled over on a shelf. The arm extending over the hatch belonged to the closest of them, and it had clearly fallen there when the person had finally lost consciousness, or been pushed over by the others. Matt gingerly pushed the extended arm aside, enough to allow him to climb in the rest of the way. Then he removed a portable lantern from his gear, switched it on, and set it on the floor a meter away from the hatch.

Once the lantern provided some light, he turned and examined the bodies more closely. The two on the ends were male, the one between them female. For Pete and Polly's benefit, he read the insignias aloud: "Park, Melrose and Ducane."

"Just the three?" Polly asked, and started for the ladder.

"Yes, just the three."

"Where is the other woman, then? Arez? You don't see her?"

"No," Matt replied. He stepped to the sleeping compartments, each of which had privacy doors, and slid each door aside. After he had checked all six, he said, "She's not on this level."

Polly had climbed into the level while Matt checked the rooms, and Pete had just thrust his head up from the ladder. He swept his camera about, and stopped at the three bodies. "Why piled up in the middle of the room?" he asked aloud.

"Probably huddling together for warmth," Polly ventured. "I'm sure the outer areas of the ship probably felt colder as the ship lost power."

"So they went together, too," Pete mused. He eyed the closeness of the three figures critically, and started to comment.

Polly simply said, "Don't."

"I was simply going to comment on their chivalry," Pete defended himself.

Before Polly could reply further, Matt cut them both off. "Clearly they all knew what was happening, and reached a point where they could not stave off the inevitable. So they accepted it, and let death come." He was standing by one of the control consoles, its energy long depleted, so its wide non-glare surface was black as night. "No last surprises." He ran a gloved hand along the dark console, as if he was more likely to get data out of it this way than with any of their equipment. Then he paused. "Arez," he said. "She was the writer of the group, wasn't she?"

"Huh?"

"Arez?" Matt repeated. "Didn't they say she liked to write?"

"I think so," Polly said.

Matt nodded, and looked around the living area. His eyes finally rested on the ladder that led to the supplies and flight command decks above. Without another word, he walked to the ladder, and started climbing.

"You think Arez is up there?" Pete asked.

"Writers like their solitude," Matt replied. "If you were a writer at your last moment of life, where would you be?"



Matt started up the ladder and opened the hatch to the supplies area. He barely spared a glance there, but instead kept climbing to the flight deck hatch. The flight deck was a place that the crew would have no need of, until literally the day they planned to leave Mars. It was designed to hold just the pilot and copilot, with no room for comforts or amenities. It was heavily shielded, so it was soundproof. It was a totally uninviting cubbyhole.

It also had the only ports to the outside. Their arrangement allowed anyone seated in the pilot's chair an almost panoramic view of the sky, and a bit of Mars' horizon for good measure.

Where else would a writer want to be?

Matt opened the hatch, which hinged downward, and carefully let it swing aside. This time, nothing hung over the hatch, or fell out of it... not even anything so melodramatic as a solitary slip of paper. But as he stepped up one rung, he could already see a figure in the pilot's chair.

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Matt was an explorer at heart. He loved Earth. So, before he left, he had spent as much time as he could in enjoying its many pleasures. He had gone off on hikes along his favorite local trails, through lush forests of pines and sequoias. He had swum in his favorite lake, not far from the city, and in the river that meandered through it, many times. Often he sat along the bank of that river, enjoying the sun on his face, the cool breeze, the birds winging by, the butterflies alighting on wildflowers around him.

He was taking a catalog of all the things he loved that he would be leaving behind. The things he looked forward to returning to.

He thought about San a lot, too. He could not tell her how he felt about her, but he silently catalogued all the things he loved about her, too. Maybe when he returned, when the mission was over, when he was no longer a Peacekeeper, he could tell her how he really felt.

He desperately wished she could go to Mars with him. He wanted to share the joys of discovery with her, wished she could see the beauty of Mars as he did, not as a pale shadow of Earth, but as its own world, wild, exciting, inviting, demanding, and *new*. But she would not go, even if she could. To her, Earth was all. Nothing could outdo her incredible beauty and diversity, and so, no other planet had the slightest attraction to her. Still, maybe if he could have made her see through his eyes, if only for a moment...

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Matt looked up at the Martian sky, from his position next to the lifeless body of Specialist Natalia Arez, and imagined himself seeing it as she had... the last thing she would ever see. Arez was seated at the pilot's station, the console pushed back and out of the way, and her face was directed upward. Straight at the stars.

Then he directed his gaze down at her lap. As he'd expected, a computer, not much larger than the palm of her hand, rested there. She had laid it down in her lap and removed her hands from it, then folded her hands peacefully in her lap just below it. She had no qualms about someone finding it, taking it, reading from it...

Carefully, Matt reached over and lifted the handheld computer from her lap. He examined the old technology first, turning the device over in his hand. Did she turn it off when she was through? Did it turn itself off after so many minutes of disuse? Has it been cold enough

to preserve the machine, as the rest of the crew had been freeze-dried? If so, the battery could still be alive in there...

"Matt?" Polly interrupted his thoughts. "Is Arez up there?"

"Yes, she is," Matt replied. "Resting in peace, like the others. And she left us something."

"You found something?" Pete asked. "What?"

"An old handheld computer," Matt replied as he started back down the ladder and out of the flight deck.

"Hm," Polly considered. "You think we may be able to get something out of that?"

"Well," Pete said, "depending on the model, there may be solid-state memory that we can remove and plug into our own systems." He looked up as Matt started out of the supplies deck and into the living area. "Does it look like we may be able to do that, Matt?"

"Could be," Matt replied as he gained the floor and turned to them. He held the computer up again. "And on the other hand, maybe we won't have to."

Matt thumbed what he thought was the "on" switch. The tiny screen instantly came to life, bathing Matt's helmet and the chest of his suit in blue-white light. For a split-second, Matt saw an image that filled the screen. It was of a rolling green meadow under a vivid blue sky... a spring day out of a dream, impossibly perfect, incredibly inviting, especially from a place like Mars.

Then, as fast as it had appeared, it vanished, to be replaced by a white background and simple text.

"Jeez, it works!" Pete breathed. He and Polly crowded close by Matt. "What does it say?"

Matt obligingly held it up, so the three of them could read it together.

"Tom and Wanda aren't answering the intercom any more. That means I'm the last. And I won't be much longer.

"At home, I know people are arguing about us. We were not ready. We should have waited. We should have heeded the signs. *'We should have turned back at the Moon.'* Yes, we heard that one, too. Don't think we didn't repeat it once or twice ourselves.

"But for the record, NASA didn't make us come. *We* decided to continue on. Because we knew we could make it. And even though we were sure, before we even arrived, that we would not make it back... we have never regretted our decision.

"We are Human Beings, from the Earth, the third planet from the Sun. We are now on the fourth planet from the Sun... the only other planet in the Solar System to see human beings standing on it. And though we didn't go far beyond our camp... just being here is reward enough. Just reaching here is reward enough.

"We could have turned back at the Moon. But we continued on. We are Man, and that is what we do.

"I've left a beautiful world behind me to come here. Mars does not compare to Earth. But it is not a fair comparison to make. Mars is its own world, with its own features, its own foibles, and its own beauty. Those who come here in the future will see this, and know: Mars is Mars. See it for what it is, and enjoy it while it lasts.

"This message is dedicated to those who follow us."

When Pete and Polly indicated that they had finished reading the message, Matt turned the computer off. He carefully slipped it into his forearm pocket and zipped it closed. The three astronauts stood in silence for a minute, inside the dead space ship and among its entombed occupants.

Finally, Polly said, "Time to go. Ernestine can start analyzing the recording, and the computer, when we get back to camp. Then we'll make plans for a more detailed sweep. Florian would like—"

"Don't really need one," Matt said.

Polly turned back to face him, and Matt replied to her unspoken question. "We know what happened. We now know how they died. Any other details are pointless."

"But we—"

"I say we close it up," Matt cut her off. "Let someone else worry about examining every atom of their deaths. We're here to explore Mars."

He tapped on the arm pocket containing Arez' computer. "Let's enjoy it while it lasts."

Polly regarded him silently, while Pete looked at both of them. Finally she said, "Come on. We have other things to do. Let's take our leave of the First Expedition." They filed slowly down the ladder to the staging area and, taking one last look around, opened the unsealing airlock and climbed out of the capsule, one by one.

Matt was the last one out. He closed the inner and outer airlock doors behind him.

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