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KNEE DEEP IN THE DEAD

A horror novella based on id software's DOOM

3rd Edition

Special thanks to Steven Johnson, for inspiring me to keep improving.

After Action Report for Operation: Phobia

Sgt. Tom H. Matthews, UAC-Mars1 Military Police

Filed Nov. 4th, 2599

Date of Execution:

Oct. 29th, 2599

Sponsors:

Union Aerospace Corporation
United States Marine Corps
United States Air Force

Classification:

For Official Use Only

Scenario:

Other (threat unknown)

Location:

UAC-Phobos Research Installation

Participants:

UAC-Mars1 Military Police
UAC-Mars1 Science Team

Number of Participants:

Space Marines 18
Science Officers 2

Operation Overview

Radio contact lost with UAC-Phobos Research Installation on Oct. 18th, following reports of unspecified equipment failure believed extremely hazardous. Incident occurred shortly before unexplained Deimos phenomenon. Phobos-bound security reinforcements failed to establish contact with Mars Base upon arrival, and have not returned since deployed on Oct. 19th.

Purpose of operation:

- 1- Reestablish radio contact between UAC-Mars1 and UAC-Phobos.
- 2- Avert or contain possible radioactive or biohazardous outbreak in UAC-Phobos and assist in evacuation of UAC employees if necessary.
- 3- Determine what happened to Deimos and missing security reinforcements.
- 4- Provide a swift resolution to stabilize dwindling morale of UAC-Mars1 staff.

Team of local employees assembled for military sweep of Phobos installation. All participants equipped with UAC all-purpose envirosuits, and instructed to keep helmets secured for remainder of mission, or until team's science officers ascertained no dangerous environmental conditions existed inside UAC-Phobos. All military participants fully armed with standard security tasers to prevent or contain possible mass panic on Phobos, six additionally outfitted with shotguns and stun rounds. Phobia Team's shuttle launched at 07:00 after final equipment check.

Aerial scan of UAC-Phobos at 08:00 revealed massive collateral damage at north side of the facility: two structures caved and shattered, later determined the result of strategically placed C4 charges from Phobos construction crew's stockpile; Phobos Labs and computer station utterly destroyed. Command Control unresponsive to hailing frequency.

At 09:00 Phobia Team searched installation's interior for survivors, but every block proved completely deserted. Undamaged half of facility contained evidence of firefights, and other things of disturbing nature difficult to describe (see photographs). All mainframes permanently offline, data irretrievable. All comm. systems sabotaged and inoperable. Entire facility appeared to have been through a small war. No environmental hazards detected, but helmets remained secured due to major oxygen leaks in several sectors.

Nuclear plant and toxin refinery, though similarly abandoned and scarred with gunfire, otherwise appeared in perfect working order with all automated systems functioning properly. S.O.'s detected no radioactive leakage, but still considered it possible risk in light of previous series of unexplained phenomena, and manually shut down nuclear reactor to prevent further incidents.

Personal Digital Assistant later discovered in air traffic control tower, hand-written note secured to its backside with marine dog tags. Message transcribed on account of illegible handwriting. Reads as follows:

This is my last attempt to get my message off this God-forsaken rock. All I can do now is hope that someone finds this and delivers it to Mars Base. It's the only explanation for what happened here. I have a rough journey to make, and the more I think about where it leads the harder my courage tries to scramble away. I don't have a choice now. The mission log will explain everything.

Pray for me.

PDA also contains several documents and other media stolen from Phobos Labs database, with attachments to each scattered throughout abovementioned mission log, likely intended as supporting evidence. Transcript of log follows operation overview. Mars Base psychologists not sure what to make of it: document reads like schizophrenic delusions, describing scenes depicted in Phobia Team's photographs with unsettling accuracy. Chief administrators confirm dog tags and PDA belong to U.S. Marine recently shipped to Mars Base from UAC-Earth HQ. Body of marine in question remains unaccounted for.

Phobia Team returned to Mars Base at 07:00 on Nov. 3rd with photographs of Phobos installation and list of known dead; all employees MIA presumed deceased. Second team will assemble at later date to recover any and all salvageable UAC property from ruins.

Transcript of Mission Log

1

I hate space travel. I've been sitting in a titanium ice chest for the last two hours with no TV and no radio, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder with seven of my shift buddies, marinating in a thick body odor that burns my eyes. If I don't keep myself distracted I'll pass out, either from the smell or my starving gut. So I'm finally using my PDA as a personal log. Had it since I arrived two months ago and never touched it except to check for memos from Captain Berenger or updates from Max about Poker Night. Always wanted to take a stab at journalism.

Feel like a sardine in here. On the outside the ship looks huge. Standard transport shuttle, about fifty-by-thirty feet of bulky titanium hull, six stiff legs and six big lights fore and aft. When docked, it looks like a clunky wind-up tick the size of a small house. But inside it's as cramped as an armored personnel carrier, only so cold your fingertips go numb. Passengers sit with their backs to the walls in seats that I'd bet good money are made of concrete. They strapped me in so tight I can hardly turn my head, and scratching my ass is out of the question. Any other marine would sit back and call it cozy. Color me disillusioned.

Space marine, as hip as it sounds, is roughly similar to calling someone a rent-a-cop. On Earth we belong to the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, even the National Guard; on Mars we're all lumped together as space marines, which places us just above the gum Captain Berenger scrapes off his boot in the evening. Mars Patrol officers tend to be hot shot kids who haven't even finished their initial tours; the few that have any real combat experience are the kinds of soldiers that get swept under the rug before they stain the military's reputation.

Next to Berenger, I'm the most experienced marine on this flight. Rowllins served in the war, but he never talks about it, and if anybody asks he just goes into a silent string of prayers, stroking the cross dangling around his neck. Right now he's sitting upright with his eyes closed, either sleeping or meditating, I can't tell which. Mad Max has tenure, too, but as a Chair Force helicopter pilot. I hope so, anyway: she's flying this hunk of shit tonight.

The others are talking among themselves or nodding off -- despite Max's heavy metal playlist blasting out of the shuttle speakers -- and every one of them is from my shift. Kinney's got his jibber-jabber going on, like always. He's been talking with McGee about the fucking Lakers game since we suited up for this trip. McGee's a lot like Kinney except that he's white, talks with a drawl, and occasionally knows when to keep his mouth shut. Army boys lounging on the reserves, probably spent more time peeling potatoes than toughening up in boot camp. They're next to me and Rowllins.

Petro, Butch, and Trague sit across from us in a beefy, smelly line, all three of them leaning back with their eyes half-shut like sunbathers on the beach, discussing tomorrow night's poker game in

two- to three-word sentences spoken at thirty second intervals. Only saw about three months of action before they got discharged for abusing POWs — nothing violent, but embarrassing enough that their superiors had them transferred before the press could reach them. After a year or so they get to go back, once the heat has died down. Lucky them.

Berenger is on their side, dwarfing them all with his ego alone. There's a lot of rumors why he's here: beating too many new recruits, couldn't cut it as a drill instructor, hoping to be on the front lines of earth's first inter-galactic war. Any or all of them could be true.

Bunch of degenerates on this ship as a whole, made worse during their stay on this planet because there's nothing for soldiers to do up here except arrest wise-ass hackers, play cards, or go six-wheeling in a stolen Mars rover. Apart from Berenger, they're all pretty good guys. Gave me a real warm welcome my first day. Excited as hell to be in space, the whole lot of them. They're here because they wanted to be, to live the sci-fi geek's biggest dream and reap the best pay and benefits they'll ever get. Nobody sent them to the Red Planet to disappear forever.

< excerpt from audio log >

BERENGER: Barrett, stay tuned to Phobos frequency. If they send any more transmissions, I wanna hear 'em.

MAX: Yes, Sir. FYI, we'll be passing into radio blackout with UAC Mars once Phobos reaches the other side o' the planet.

BERENGER: Roger that. And turn off that goddamned noise!

[Heavy metal music abruptly stops.]

KINNEY: 'Least she ain't playin' country no more.

MCGEE: She only plays that when she's homesick.

MAX: *HAWW*-Haww-haw.

KINNEY: Hey moonshiner, you ever get homesick again, you can always blow on *my* jug.

[Kinney and McGee laugh.]

MAX: Kinney's breakin' up. Sarge, check his headset, wouldja?

[Loud thud of Kinney's head being bucked against the side of the shuttle.]

KINNEY: OW! *Motherfucker--!*

MAX: Loud n' clear now. Thanks, Sarge.

Everyone calls me Sarge. It's the rank my beloved country relieved me of prior to shitting me down the galaxy's toilet.

We should already be in the air, but Max is fixing another problem on the shuttle. Nothing works on this planet. They constantly renovate everything to make Mars Base more efficient, but every time they "fix" one thing they screw up another. I guess the admins have their heads so far up their asses they keep forgetting everybody's sharing resources here. They'll take something offline for repair and neglect to send a memo, so everyone gets to find out the hard way when their phones, computer network, or toilets aren't working. Wall and ceiling panels occasionally collapse on passers-by, power surges screw with the lights and fry important machinery, and too many halls and rooms are cluttered with misplaced barrels of shit from the nuclear plant that I don't want to think about.

It must be the same for Phobos, because that's why we're sitting here in the first place. "Contact with UAC-Deimos Installation lost. Phobos S.S.O. requires additional military support ASAP until situation resolved." Support my ass. It'll be a miracle if this heap leaves the ground.

To be honest, I hope it never does. They mess with weird shit on those moons. Bet that's why Rowlin is more quiet than usual. Hell, Carlyle went up there two weeks ago, came back babbling and went on a shooting spree before he turned the barrel on himself. But Berenger is a six-foot-two pillar of Aryan granite, and if he says we're going to Phobos, that's where we're going. My protests already landed me in detention once.

After liftoff, it'll be a couple hours before we reach our destination -- Phobos is on the other side of the planet right now, so we just float within radio distance of Mars Base and wait for the moon to come to us. I should probably get some sleep, but if the landing is as rough as before I'm liable to tumble into shellshock again. I was awake last time, so it wasn't too bad. Just sat for fifteen minutes with every muscle stiff as wood, staring straight ahead like a frightened rookie, fists clenched and asshole puckered; instantly broke into a sweat when the turbulence settled, waited for the rear door to flop open and let in the hot desert wind and cackle of machine guns. Instead, warp engines hummed to life to remind me I was traveling across the cosmos and not the Middle East, and my muscles sighed and deflated all at once. No telling what I'll do, though, if I'm suddenly jarred awake thinking I'm back in Pakistan.

Space marine. In a way, I am that virgin recruit all over again. Transferred from a sick and dying planet to a long dead one. Brushed off Earth's surface like dandruff.

Max is back in the cockpit. All systems go, she says. We're Phobos-bound in T-minus one minute.

2

We got another transmission from Phobos a half hour after launch. Reception was so bad we couldn't understand any of it, and the guy shouting on the other end seemed to be aware of the problem and really angry about it.

"---leas-----fo---dsake---Ik-----nee-----y are, we d-----ow what to d-----somth-----f the gatew-----sus Ch-----reverywh-----"

The transmission died, and there wasn't a peep the rest of the trip. We've been just as quiet. Max asked Mars Base if they heard the message and got a negative, likely because the radios on Mars aren't worth a shit. They keep promising to upgrade to a better system.

We're drifting over the south end of Phobos Base, directly over the beached junior aircraft carrier they call the hangar — cargo ships rarely have to visit, and only stick around long enough for pickups and deliveries, so there's only room for one shuttle to land. I guess pilots park on whatever resembles a blinking white "H" and dump everything onto the flight deck for the lab boys to collect later (including new recruits). But all shuttles need clearance to land, so we're waiting for Command Control to pick up the phone. The facility's every function is either managed or monitored by Command Control, just like Mars Base. Nobody can so much as send an email or take a piss without the supervisors knowing about it.

"Command Control, this is Mars Shuttle Hippolyta. Reinforcements have arrived. Request permission to land. Acknowledge."

A shuttle arrives, it signals air traffic control asking Command Control for permission to land, air traffic control patches it through to Command Control, who gives air traffic control the green light, who clears the shuttle. It's asinine, but I'm told all it takes is Mad Max's hello and the radio guys respond like trained dogs — she may look like a boy, but she's got pipes deep and smooth like Lauren Bacall's that get most fellas stiff after three words.

We did a last-minute equipment check before securing our helmets: standard UAC magnetic boots to keep us from floating off the moon's surface (fun thought); Special Ops grappling cables in case of emergencies; two portable first aid kits, and one medical stimpack for each of us; a light arsenal of 9mm Beretta pistols and stockless Winchester Defenders from Mars Patrol's inventory — the only weapons distributed on the entire planet because they're not potent enough to risk a hull breach.

I'd like to know why we brought live ammo instead of stun rounds if all we're supposed to do is help Phobos Security with a little crowd control. Berenger hates when anybody questions him, so I didn't say anything. Last time I questioned him I spent three nights in solitary. Berenger hasn't trusted me from the beginning — not since he read my dossier and found out why my last superior officer is currently in Alaska with a body cast — so he's harder on me than the rest.

Max has been at the radio for about twenty minutes and still no response. Now my stomach's all knotted up, and I'm pretty sure most of us are beginning to wonder if there's more to our visit than Berenger let on about in the briefing. Be no surprise at this point. Nobody tells the grunts jack shit. Nobody tells us what goes on in the "Anomaly" labs on Phobos and Deimos. Nobody was straight with us about what happened to Janssen or Carlyle. Rowllins is fingering his cross again. Something must be up if Kinney's been quiet for more than ten seconds. Then again, it's probably just shellshock creeping up on me, making me paranoid. Hell, the jackass admins

probably never shipped them any guns in the first place.

Berenger just gave the word to park the shuttle and secure all helmets. Looks like we're going to ring the doorbell.

3

When I first arrived on Mars, except for the cloudless khaki sky, it was like early morning in the desert. Red atmospheric haze hanging in the air, endless wasteland pocketed with scars insisting the landscape once flourished with life, gusts of red dust from hurricanes that always seemed to be brewing nearby. Phobos has no wind, and no color, and it doesn't bullshit anyone: nothing ever flourished here. It's a horrifying little rock.

Mad Max — the most carefree, cool-headed, rough-and-tumble bitch I ever met — is scared shitless of Phobos. Ever since Janssen was relocated here, only to die a week later in a work-related accident nobody would disclose any details about, she refused to even get out of the shuttle on her deliveries. We figure she saw what happened to Janssen, but she won't say. Max is my best friend on the Red Planet — in two months we've shared every personal detail about ourselves that we wouldn't share with our own mothers. She claims to trust me more than anybody on Mars. Yet whenever I ask her why she hates Phobos, she clams up and avoids me, just like Rowllins thinking back on the war.

So after a quick radio test, when Berenger ordered everyone to gear up and get out, and made it clear that he meant everyone, Max responded like a deer standing in the headlights of a speeding 4x4. Making Berenger repeat himself is like an offense to God Almighty. He grabbed her arm, dragged her out of her seat, and just about hurled her skinny ass out the door. Fact is he didn't trust her not to take off without us, on account of the Janssen incident. He said specifically, "She makes another unscheduled return trip to Mars without her passengers, I'll drop-kick her back to Earth without a suit."

I've been tasked with guarding the ship in Max's place while the rest of the team sweeps the facility for threats. I'm packing my sidearm and nothing else, and I got a hunch it's not just because we only brought eight shotguns. Berenger has probably been looking for a shit job to give me for months, but all jobs on Mars are shit jobs.

"Your envirosuit's got four days of air, Sarge. If you run out, just hold your breath 'til we get back."

Kinney and McGee didn't even try to hide their laughs, the little pricks. Rowllins at least gave me a sympathetic smile and a pat on the arm. Max said nothing as she marched off with the team, throwing this puppy-dog look over her shoulder that I wasn't sure how to interpret. Probably directed at the shuttle.

Like an aircraft carrier, the Phobos Base hangar is managed from a building perched on one side

of the deck (I think navy boys call it an “island”), except this one is stout, donut-shaped, and its roof is cluttered with a dozen radar antennae, a hundred-foot control tower, and a Plexiglas dome in the center. The island is basically Phobos Base’s head, the flight deck its bib, the heavy airlock doors on the building’s face its mouth.

The doors closed behind them ten minutes ago. I been sitting here ever since, admiring the scenery.

From this perspective, the facility lacks Mars Base's sleek space-station look: Phobos Base is a cluster of nine titanium-reinforced buildings sprawled in a jagged line across the center of a mile-wide crater, like the pathetic remains of a space hulk after an emergency crash-landing. Control towers, radar dishes, solar panels, and other extensions are literally scattered across the top of the base; cargo elevators, cranes, and maintenance catwalks stitch the patchwork facility together. The northernmost structures are conjoined like Siamese twins: the larger one, which I'm pretty sure is Phobos Labs, has two gigantic solar panels planted in the roof; the other is half its size and buried partway in the side of a cliff like it's trying to hide in shame. I assume it's the Anomaly I've been hearing about for two months.

This shit-hole hovers so close to its daddy that the sky is claustrophobic. I swear I've seen something like it in a bad dream where I'm standing alone in a lifeless void, looking up and seeing nothing but a world-sized bloodshot eye looming directly overhead, all the breath leaving my chest as I wait for it to land and crush me at any moment.

God, I can't wait to leave already. It's way too quiet here.

4

I'm kicking back on the shuttle's roof, listening to the team's chatter and gazing out across the gorgeous Phobos landscape, or what little I can see of it over the lip of the crater. And if it's anything like the rest of the moon's surface, I can already tell I'm not missing anything. An eternity of dull gray hills, pock-marked with craters of all sizes. I had my fill of gray at Mars Base, so my eyes are aching from boredom. Fortunately I noticed a handful of Martian debris floating off in the distance that's far less oppressive than the ugly sky, and somewhat interesting to stare at while waiting for somebody to say something.

< excerpt from audio log >

ROWLINS: Two people manning the control tower at any given time, right?

KINNEY: That what it says in the manual?

ROWLINS: I thought it was policy or something. There should be somebody here at all times, right?

MAX: I dunno. Shuttlecraft don't land more than once a month. But there should always be somebody manning the radio in Command Control, no exceptions.

MCGEE: Don't forget who's running this circus. I could round up a team o' shit-flinging chimps to call the shots here, they'd still have their act together better than these fuckin' idiots.

BERENGER: Can it, McGee.

KINNEY: Hahaha! Waitaminnit, chimps? Where do Petro an' Trog enlist?

PETRO: Shut up, Kinney.

ROWLINS: How many staff members here, Cap'n?

BERENGER: About four hundred employees from all Mars Base branches, divvied up between Phobos and Deimos. I'm not sure how they split 'em up per station.

ROWLINS: I don't suppose they would all take their lunch breaks at once?

KINNEY: Hey, I thought they was understaffed. We the cavalry, right?

BUTCH: Yeah, I thought we was backup?

MAX: God, I can't think with you assholes blabberin'!

MCGEE: Max is so hot when she's angry. Keep talkin', baby.

KINNEY: Hahahahaha!

BERENGER: Enough chatter! Barrett, sift through those desks for security cards so we don't have to force open every door in this hole.

MAX: Yessir.

TRAGUE: Nobody in the bathrooms, Cap'n.

BERENGER: Everyone regroup. Rec room. Now. Sarge, report your status every five minutes so I know you're awake out there.

Talk is mostly minimal, except for Berenger barking orders and the occasional burst of bullshit. Lately it's been quiet. Last thing I heard, the team was heading into the next junction and splitting into two groups — Berenger, Trague, Rowlins, and McGee to the nuclear plant to check for leaks; Max, Kinney, Petro, and Butch to Command Control to find the security chief.

Still as a goddamned graveyard. My eyes keep returning to those odd, roundish bits of Martian debris in the distance just to keep my mind off the quiet. I don't even know if it is debris, and

there's no way to tell how big they are because they're so far away. The way they're just drifting along, must be asteroids. They say Phobos is going to break up into pieces eventually, and the same must be happening to Mars. I've noticed more since last time I was staring out there. Did a head count of nineteen rust-red floaters. UAC-Earth is probably watching them now with their fancy telescopes.

< excerpt from audio log >

MAX: Assholes...

MCGEE: What's up, Max?

MAX: They don't even have rovin' patrols. No fuckin' organization up here.

MCGEE: Don't go bustin' any mad scientist heads without me, now. I mean it.

MAX: No wonder they got so many problems up here.

BERENGER: Keep the line clear.

MAX: Yessir.

PETRO: Yessir.

KINNEY: Petro, you say anything in English other than "Yessir"?

PETRO: Shut up, Kinney.

KINNEY: And "Shut up, Kinney"?

BERENGER: Kinney, you better zip it up if you wanna be on that shuttle when it returns to Mars.

MCGEE: Hope Sarge ain't too lonely out there.

Max's voice was rough when she spoke, like her vocal chords had tightened up. She can't be nearly as unnerved as me, though: sitting out in this void, alone. Truth is I wouldn't mind a little company right now, other than this PDA and these damn floating rocks. I count twenty-two now. Guess they come out gradually, like the stars at nightfall.

5

It's been quiet for a long time. Hours. Maybe a day. I can't tell now.

Except for the voices. The voices never shut up.

Two hours searching the nuclear plant and Command Control. Not a god damned soul. Nobody knew what to do, so the radio was silent except for the meaningless "uh's" and broken phrases typical of people scared out of their wits, and Berenger's order to advance to Phobos Labs. Berenger was the only one keeping his cool — I could hear in the other marines' voices that something wasn't right. Rowlins whispered prayers under his breath again. Kinney wasn't joking anymore. Never a good sign when Kinney takes a situation seriously.

Not really anything I could do, being so far from the group. Almost didn't realize I was locked in a squatting position on the shuttle's roof, like my body was ready to leap into action without me.

Rowlins's prayers grew louder and his voice trembled like someone standing in an Earthquake. He recited one psalm after another, hardly stopping for breath.

I finally remembered my vocal chords. "Berenger, what's wrong with Rowlins?"

Rowlins didn't respond to anyone, not even Berenger, but it didn't matter when we heard the gagging and wrenching — McGee puking his guts out and trying to spew obscenities at the same time. Trague mumbling like he forgot how to form words. Eventually McGee found the breath between dry-heaves to scream like a wolverine caught in a bear trap.

< excerpt from audio log >

MAX: Captain, what's goin' on over there?

KINNEY: Quiet...

TRAGUE: F-Face...what happened to his...?

MCGEE: Jee-zuss-Fuck...

TRAGUE: What happened t...?

MCGEE: Trog, over here...There's more of 'em over here...Jesus...

BERENGER: Toughen up, Marine. Get a hold o' your gut and cut them down. Surgical tools in the case over there.

MAX: McGee, what's going on over there? What'd you find—?

KINNEY: Quiet! Listen!

Silence again, except for Rowlins's sermon. McGee struggling to hold back another episode. Max's trembling breath. My own heartbeat.

A long, horrible scream from the belly of the animal kingdom.

Gunshots. Endless gunshots. Kinney and Petro shouting every curse word they ever knew. Butch snarling in agony and primal fury while Max shouted, "Man down! Man down!" Under fire. Somebody was shooting back.

Cartilage tearing and popping. Another scream, this time in Trague's voice — long and guttural, the kind that ravages the larynx. More gunfire, Berenger shouting the order to fall back, other sounds impossible to describe that my memory is still struggling to comprehend. Kinney started laughing and hooting like a maniac.

< excerpt from audio log >

KINNEY: Got you, motherfucker! Got you, motherf—! Where you goin'?

PETRO: Goddamned eyes! Their goddamned eyes!

KINNEY: Where you goin', huh? Can't hide from me, you little bitch! Can't hide from me!

MAX: Don't—! Kinney, Petro, wait! Wait! Don't leave us here!

BERENGER: Kinney! Fall back! That's an order!

KINNEY: We got 'im, Petro! Got this motherfucker onna run! We got 'im!

MAX: Kinney! Captain, Butch is goin' into shock!

BERENGER: Kinney, fall back now! They're trying to cut us off! Fall back!

MCGEE: There was nothin' there!

MAX: Captain, they hit an artery!

MCGEE: Where they comin' from? There was nothin' there!

BERENGER: Sarge, keep that goddamn shuttle in one piece! Stay at your post!

I lost track of the time. Hour after hour they swung back and forth — inconsolable blubbering and raving; frenzied screaming and shooting — back and forth, back and forth. Berenger shouted orders that nobody seemed to hear or care about. And through it all to the very end, Trague's screams came back again and again, like his worst nightmare had him in its hands and wouldn't let him go. Nobody knew where he was.

They'd scattered, scrambling through the hallways, babbling, crying, cursing, and finally regrouping only to scatter again. Virgin recruits, first skirmish, whole unit slaughtered, too confused to call for help. Petro kept talking about the eyes. He screamed about the eyes when the dogs got him. That was the last thing I heard for a long time. Rowlin's wasn't praying anymore,

and Berenger was quiet.

Phobos was quiet. Dead quiet.

Periodically the radio would emit a weird sound, but never anything identifiable; too distant from my team's headsets to register clearly, but some managed to put strangely specific images in my head. A team of chefs carving watermelons with dull knives. Someone recovering from a grueling workout. A blowtorch exhausting its fuel supply. Feeding time in a kennel. All popping up to break the stillness at random intervals from sixty seconds to a half hour — random enough to jolt me every time. I'd freeze and strain my ears until the silence returned, sometimes for so long my muscles started to cramp. Then, for a while, everything was calm again. No sounds at all.

It must've been shock that kept me from speaking, or the fear that so much as opening my mouth would cause another catastrophe. Phobos Base seemed to wait for a cue; off in the distance, the Anomaly stared at me, daring me to say something, like it would do any good.

They won't respond. They're dead. They're dead and I'm next.

Claustrophobia pushed shell-shock aside. Three days plus of oxygen in my suit and I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe, or speak, or think.

I sat hoping and praying to hear anybody say anything to slow my spinning head when I heard the first voice — faint and distorted, its language meaningless like when people talk in dreams. Only said maybe two words, neither of which I could make any sense of, then it clammed up.

Ten minutes later it started talking again with a partner, both equally warped in pitch and vibration, speaking only two to four unintelligible words at a time. At this point I knew my mind had gone right out the window. Odd that I took this new-found schizophrenia so well. I just thought, Okay. I'm crazy. Guess that's it, then. After two or three hours there must've been half a dozen chattering away in demented baby-talk, and they got louder and clearer every time they spoke up.

Stranded on a lifeless rock with no pilot for the shuttle and no contact with the rest of humanity, alone except for the chorus of ghosts prattling endlessly in my ears — hissing the words, making my head throb and ache. I wanted them to go away so bad my eyes welled up. I wanted to hear my teammates, to hear Max, or Rowlin, or even that asshole Berenger. Somebody has to be okay, I thought. I can't be the only one left.

I took a deep breath to brush the wrinkles out of my throat. Waited a few seconds for my spit to come back.

"Status report," I said.

The voices stopped. The entire facility went silent again.

"Somebody gimme a status report," I said. "Captain, come in."

I waited fifteen minutes for a response, staring out at the fleet of reddish floaters in the distance that seemed to multiply every time I blinked, now totaling over a hundred.

One floater moved like a startled fly while the voices murmured.

I leapt from the shuttle and scrambled inside the hangar, sealing the airlock doors behind me.

The air traffic control tower is the highest vantage point in Phobos Base, standing a hundred feet above the roof of the island. From here, I have a depressingly clear view of the moon's faceless horizon in every direction. Migrating inside turned out to be a questionable move, though. If I had stayed downstairs I would never have known that those "asteroids" are floating less than a quarter-mile over the moon's surface. And if I had stayed outside, I might have actually gone crazy and never realized that these ghostly voices are coming from my radio headset.

I wish I *was* crazy. Fear sweeps over a sound mind in full force.

6

I can't stay here. There's nowhere to run if I get cornered. I have to move. Get to Command Control and find better protection. Might find easier access to the ventilation ducts in the residential sector. Curl up in a corner and wait for a rescue shuttle. I feel naked out in the open.

They know I'm here. They know and they're coming for me.

7

Someone screamed on the radio a minute ago. Might have been Kinney, or maybe Rowlins. My ears are still ringing.

Before I left, I managed to find a layout of Phobos Base in the hangar security office. Only useful thing to find in the entire building. I searched every loading dock and every storage room; except for a few empty crates and three cases of UAC nutri-bars, they were all completely bare like no one had used the facility in decades. Nutri-bars aren't much of a dinner, but my hunger got vicious the moment I saw them. Started to feel a little better. Not by much.

This whole base was designed by a lunatic. The rooms and hallways are more spacious than I expected, and nearly all the walls stained khaki — a welcome change from the dull white-and-gray of Mars Base — but the architecture is all wrong, like the designer thought a practical space station would be too boring and opted for abstract art instead. Beneath the huge dome on the center of the island's roof was an outdoor area with a big pool of churning brown fluid (probably reactor coolant to keep the hangar's nuclear capacitor from melting itself) and the whole building wrapped around this area like my hand around a beer can, forming a single semicircular path.

There's no way to enter the base from this end without taking an extensive tour of the hangar first. It's about as practical as a goddamn funhouse. I can imagine the accidents, crate-toting workers tripping over scurrying launch control operators and vice-versa.

Since the residential sector is adjacent to the hangar it was easy enough to find, though the door to that sector was inoperable and I had to rat-crawl through a maintenance tunnel in the floor to get to the other side. The floor plan showed the whole area was laid out like a prison, only without the symmetry. A three-block labyrinth of cold, snaking hallways lined with cramped apartments, all branching out from a thirty-by-thirty-foot lobby.

The voices got chatty again when I got there. They hadn't been very talkative for a while, but now it seemed something had caught their interest. Then they stopped.

From the lobby entrance the right side of the room was furnished with three sofas, two arcade cabinets, and a potted tropical plant wedged in one corner. On the left side a television monitor was mounted on the wall at head-level, its shattered screen gouting sparks every few minutes. The shadows hung thick on the walls because only half the ceiling lights were functioning properly; the rest kept flickering weakly.

Blackness swallowed each of the three corridors, so I could only see a few meters in. According to the overhead map, the hall ahead of me led to the west employee apartment blocks; the hall to my left led to the south blocks; and the rightmost hall cut through the north block to the rec room, lockers, mess hall, and the rest of the facility (unless the other sector doors weren't working, either). I drew my sidearm, picked the middle path and stepped into the shadows, hoping the cover of darkness would work to my advantage if my team's murderers happened through the area. Unless they had the dogs with them.

I should've had that light on before I left the lobby, to save myself the shock. Thirty feet in, a power surge swept through Phobos Base and briefly sent all the electronics on the fritz. Every light in the residential block flickered once and gave me a clear, split-second view of the hallway. It was long enough.

I don't know why I hadn't recognized the rotten stench in the air until that very moment when my feet turned to cement. Something inside my gut started screaming uncontrollably and drove my heart into my throat until I couldn't breathe. My eyes were playing tricks on me. They had to be.

I flicked on my Maglite. The shadows retreated some fifteen feet down the corridor and revealed three more apartment doors on either side, two bashed in with a battering ram. Buckshot scratches scarred the dull gray walls, and all the way to the edge of the Maglite's beam everything had been carelessly painted with dark red splashes, the floor smeared with giant, bloody strokes that still gleamed wet.

My gut twisted, begging that I get out of there. The voices had been quiet for too long. Something small and flesh-colored lay just outside the beam's reach, right in the middle of the corridor. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I considered moving closer to see what it was. My gut won out and I turned back toward the lobby.

Pure survival instinct saved my life. He'd snuck up behind me like my own shadow, and I barely recognized his UAC-issue security vest before my rational mind froze at the sight of the pistol barrel a mere inch from pressing into my eye; the colorless, smirking mouth behind it, chin wet with cannibalized blood; the emerald fire blazing in the back of two gaping eye sockets. I snapped into autopilot, my arms locking around his wrist, twisting his arm into a pretzel and shattering his face against the wall. I slammed my pistol's butt across the back of his head and he instantly dropped to the floor, his neck probably broken, skull fractured. Petro's panicked cries echoed in my memory and didn't stop until I'd fired every round into the sonofabitch's back and those eyes had extinguished.

My memory is foggy here. I retreated to the couches, covering my nose and mouth to keep my bile down, hands still trembling, knees struggling to keep me upright. I had my eyes on the lobby entrance while I backed toward the right-side hall, the stink of sweat and lead fumes and fresh blood blending and stirring in my nostrils. I don't know why I was watching the door. Paranoia setting in — that damn devil-speak, not sure whether it was on my headset or outside the lobby entrance. Eardrums throbbed from the gunshots. I know I heard footsteps. My memory was still trying to push the image of that hallway aside so I could focus. That fleshy thing on the floor. That smirking nightmare that'd nearly taken me. I didn't want to see another one so soon, not while my mind still struggled with the first.

Someone came in, pistol drawn, sights set on my last known position. Sharp green blaze in empty, bloody eye sockets like high-beams late at night. I opened fire. Two rounds hit him square in the upper chest, but as he stumbled to the floor two more former humans took his place. I high-tailed it through the north apartment block, firing blindly over my shoulder. I don't know if I hit anything.

I remember running, but none of the scenery comes together right. It's all in fragments. Everywhere I turned, I heard that damned devil-speech around the next corner or in an adjacent room. I had no idea where I was going, and those things just kept coming. For each that I shot down, two or three more showed up, screaming gibberish and guns blazing. In my panic I'd used all my spare mags. Running around unarmed and too waist-deep in Fight-or-Flight to think straight. I found myself at a side-entrance to the mess hall, no idea how I got there. Ducked inside and snuck into the kitchen.

Every ceiling lamp dangled in broken pieces and let out an occasional crackling spark, so the only light in the kitchen came from the dull green glow of the mess hall door's "unlocked" light. I could see just well enough to keep from crashing into the countertops and find where the butcher's knives were stored. With the largest blade in hand I knelt behind the furthest counter, breathing as quietly as I could and hoping my eyes would adjust to the darkness before somebody came looking for me.

That's when I heard her.

"...Is anybody there...?"

Had the voices been chattering at the time I would never have picked it up: a weak, trembling voice on my team's frequency, whispering like the whole base would fall apart if she spoke any louder.

My heart was pounding in my throat. I whispered back, "Max, that you?"

The demons murmured. Nothing else.

"Max, come in," I said, a bit louder. "Is that you? Are you okay?"

A long pause. Then an exhausted sob. "No..."

I tried to ask her what happened and got a fit of strangled weeping in response. A trembling virgin recruit in Pakistan, mind and body numb to everything. Morale shaken out like a loose bolt. Wishing she could go home. Broken like glass from her first taste of death.

Max lost her little brother in the war. He'd died screaming in her arms. She's no virgin. She knows Death real well.

"Max," I said, "talk to me. Please."

"I don't know...I don't know anything...I don't know..."

"Where are you? Can you tell me that at least?"

She held her breath, went quiet for a long time. More whispers from the demons. A brief sound on Max's end like a heavy metal table dragging on the floor.

A frightened sob.

"Max," I said, "you read me?"

"No..."

"Max, tell me where you are and—"

"It's here, oh Jesus, it's here...I c-can't...!"

The dragging again, then nothing. That's the last I've heard on the radio for an hour and a half.

I found an easy entryway to the ventilation ducts above the kitchen stove, so I've spent most of that time sneaking around, dodging the cameras and watching the zombie-things from the safety of the air vents. They're not human, I know it. They look human; they look like Mars Patrol officers, and some of them look like the guys that stepped off the shuttle with me my first day on Mars. I don't know how to describe it. They just don't move right. Their mannerisms aren't natural, like puppets on strings. They move like they're doing impressions of human beings.

My priorities have changed. I can't wait for a rescue shuttle. Max can't afford to wait, so I'm not waiting either. Stopped a while ago to rest my limbs before I make the long crawl to Command Control. There has to be a working radio there.

8

Some of the air ducts lead into the maintenance tunnel networks that span the ceiling and underbelly of the facility. Because of this I managed to get the drop on an unwary zombie patrol a while ago. I've got a shotgun now, and an armored security vest. I may survive this clusterfuck yet.

I only saw the one at first. He didn't hear me when I crept out of the open maintenance hatch. He didn't know I was there until he felt the butcher knife in his neck. Squirmed like an angry fish, but he didn't make a peep and went limp pretty quick. His shotgun's clatter gave me away to his patrol buddy around the corner and down the next hall, who came running like a good marine, hissing in devil-speak. I was waiting for him when he came into view. The shotgun's barrel touched his forehead.

I recognized McGee's face a split-second before it disintegrated.

Slowly but surely I'm coming to terms with these things lumbering about. I don't freeze in place or go into a panic when I see them anymore. Now what really unsettles and confuses me are the more subtle oddities.

The dogs, for one. I haven't seen them yet, but their snarls keep playing over and over in my memory with the screams of my teammates. There aren't any animals on Mars, so I don't understand why any would reside on either of the moons. And I'm scared to find out if they've somehow been twisted into monsters just like the Mars Patrol officers.

The vest I procured, for another: it's branded as UAC-Deimos property. That one I just can't figure out. What the hell is Deimos personnel doing on Phobos? How the hell did they get here without a shuttle?

I tried contacting Max again, but still can't get a peep out of her. The demon voices aren't talking back, either.

9

I can't get any sleep. Nightmares keep yanking me out of it.

I dreamed of a bloody sky descending slowly toward me, grinding mountains and buildings into

gravel and covering the planet surface with cascades of rubble. The sky rained...things. I can't describe them. Thinking back on them makes me shudder with adolescent terror. But they were alive and converging on me just like that great red eye overhead. The avalanches buried me, and the sky pressed on, forcing the breath out of my lungs until I couldn't scream anymore. I was on Earth. I was alone.

Moving through the vents must be the source of these claustrophobic dreams. I feel like a caver trapped inside the bowels of a cold, titanium planet. The ducts are tight as a casket: I can only fit through by lying on my stomach, keeping my arms outstretched like a diver and my head turned at an angle. I inch my way through by pushing with my toes, and I don't stop until I reach the next junction.

I've been slithering like this for...I have no idea how long. I've lost track of the time. I know for sure it's been at least two days since I lost contact with my team. The junctions give me enough room to sit up and rest, but it feels like a mile or so between each one, and I'm still not halfway to Command Control. Having to relieve myself on the go hasn't made things any more pleasant. I'm zipped up in a UAC envirosuit, wading in my own filth. If I slap my helmet down right now the smell will probably smother me.

My map isn't as useful as I'd hoped. I think I might be lost. The very thought makes me want to scream, but I can't so much as let my stomach growl because the zombie patrols lumbering past every few minutes are sure to hear it. I'm canned pork if they sniff me out.

The voices still talk occasionally, but they've been mostly quiet all day.

10

Sabotaged the security systems beyond repair and blinded the enemy to my whereabouts. Safest course of action in light of that unnamable thing I saw.

What in the holy hell were these maniacs doing up here?

Using the air ducts to travel spared me hours of walking in circles. The crazy architect that designed Phobos Base really let himself go with Command Control: the floor plan made me think of the path a confused lab rat would take through a maze, right down to every wrong turn, but because that sector's ducts were in the ceiling I bypassed all of it. The few rooms to be found in those dizzy corridors were cluttered with computer stations elevated ten to fifteen feet off the floor and only accessible via security lifts. God knows why. Maybe to keep the workers from tripping over each other like they do in the hangar.

Every corridor branched out from the central hub — an extra large computer station elevated like the others and encased in a twenty-foot cylindrical tower. Plexiglas panes comprised the tower's upper walls so the control freak supervisors could watch who came and went at all times.

The air vents led to a small three-way junction directly above the hub, with a single vent in its base that allowed me to drop into the place. Only one zombie marine had been stationed there, and I cut him down as he turned around — nailed him right under the left arm where his security vest couldn't protect him. Nobody seemed to hear the shots because nobody came to his aid. I should count my blessings from now on.

All along the station's walls, supercomputers clicked and whirred, grinding out useless data; fax machines and printers stood like crumbling headstones, all of them devastated with blunt force or buckshot; television sets that once displayed Earth's news channels or pay-per-view events flickered silently, eerie reddish jellyfish arms snaking across every screen. In the middle of the room stood four computer consoles as wide as executive desks, with two chairs and four security monitors assigned to each.

Against the eastern wall sat the radio I'd been desperate to find for so many hours — smashed open and crudely dissected, its wires and innards broken and scattered all across the station's floor. I stared in shock for a long time like they were my own guts, my step faltering as I approached, one hand outstretched with the hope that it was all an illusion. The microphone remained so mockingly intact I lost my temper and slapped it off the desk. I collapsed in the radio operator's chair, holding my head while my eyes fogged up. Would've started crying right then if I hadn't looked down at the carpet.

Dark red splashes stained the floor beneath my left foot and formed a crooked trail leading off further left, which my eyes slowly followed until they came to a sudden halt at the trail's origin, crammed behind a broken fax machine where I couldn't see it previously from the middle of the room.

He looked like a broken doll, sprawled in a K that bordered on humorous, head twisted and arched back, the skull split open and hollowed out. I slipped out of the chair with my mouth opened wide in a silent scream.

I blinked and it was gone. Nothing there but dried red stains.

A few rooms away, somewhere to the north, dogs began to howl. I froze and listened with ice trickling down my face, listening for the sounds of galloping paws and clinking dog tags. I still wasn't sure if there was a mangled Science Officer sprawled five feet away or not. I kept looking at that spot and seeing nothing.

Then I heard that frantic breath on my headset again. It sounded like a woman's voice.

"Max," I said, "if you can hear me, listen close. I'm coming to find you. Wherever you are, stay put. Stay invisible. If you can hear me, please acknowledge. Don't tell me where you are. They're listening. Just...let me know you're alive out there."

I stood for a long time, listening, waiting. Something squirmed inside my chest. Couldn't swallow for some reason.

“...acknowledged...”

Finally I heard that crackly voice somewhere on the other end. My lips pulled back all the way to my ears and I nearly laughed out loud.

“Okay. I’ll find you, Max. I promise. Now ditch your headset.”

Haven’t heard from her since.

The Phobos Labs cameras fed Command Control nothing but static. The other sectors didn’t have much more to show besides empty rooms and deserted corridors. One camera in the residential sector stood watch over the lobby where I’d been attacked, staring down the western corridor. My skin crawled: I’d had the damn thing on my back the entire time. A squad of fully armed zombie marines was sweeping through that area, checking every apartment. They didn’t know where I was.

The bottom-right monitor of each console was linked with a spidery-legged roving security bot like the ones on Mars, controlled remotely by a video game joystick. The flip of a switch would toggle the monitor between the primary system and the bots’ system. Three bots showed only snow; the fourth, a blue screen with the word “STANDBY” in white letters.

“Sarge, that you?”

A haggard voice on my team’s frequency nearly catapulted my heart from my chest. It was Berenger. And apart from sounding like he’d just run the Marathon, he spoke with his same old macho demeanor like it was just another day on the battlefield. I acknowledged with more enthusiasm than I care to admit.

“Petro’s here,” he said. “He’s in bad shape. We’re holed up in the nuclear plant with plenty of ammo, but we can’t stay here forever. He needs to get to the infirmary. I could use some bourbon, myself.”

“I hear that,” I laughed.

Something snarled on the other end, and a shotgun blast replied.

Berenger had sealed the nuclear plant’s main doors so the only way in was through the refinery’s maintenance tunnels. He wanted a rendezvous at the refinery’s eastern quadrant. I noticed a trace of exhilaration in his voice. Veteran’s High.

“You’ll have to move fast,” he said. “I can’t. Not while dragging this sack o’ hamburger.”

Even now, in spite of how much I hate him, knowing Berenger is alive fortifies my weary nerves and my quivering stomach. His brand of crazy can guarantee my survival. He could probably plow a path to the hangar all by himself. He could probably figure out how to fly the shuttle back to Mars, even without Max.

But Max is alive. She's alive and she's all alone with a broken spirit. She trusts me, and I'm not about to betray that trust. I'll be damned if I'm gonna abandon her to fend for herself in this shithole. I explained this much to Berenger even though my defiance pisses him off more than anything. I expected him to explode in a hurricane of curses, but he kept quiet for a long time. When it seemed like we had nothing to argue about I began to sign off, recommending we keep the line clear until we regrouped.

He wasn't the same man when he spoke again. His voice was soft. Shaken.

"You've seen them," he said. "Haven't you? You've seen the men. How they've changed."

I said nothing. It was answer enough for him.

"Possessed," he went on. "They crawl inside their heads and strangle their minds 'til everything they once were shrivels into nothing. They got to her. They'll get to you. You can't trust her, Sarge. She's gone. She's one of them."

She's our only ticket off of this rock. I almost blurted it out right then — almost slapped a demon price tag around her neck — but somehow I managed to bite my tongue.

Berenger knew about the radio. The sonofabitch. He knew damn well about the radio, the sonofabitch. He'd severed the Phobos modem, too. Saw to it that we could never call for help. We had no right, he said. We had no right to call for reinforcements like these dumb fuckers did. To spread this disease to the Mars colony. To Earth. Somehow I didn't care. My rage boiled over and I tore into his ass until I couldn't breathe. Can't remember anything I said, but I know if we'd stood face-to-face just then I would've shot him.

He waited patiently for me to simmer down, then calmly said, "This is our mess, Soldier. Get your ass to the refinery. That's an order."

"I'm not leaving anybody behind, Cap'n," I said. "I'm resuming my sweep of the facility. I'm gonna find her whether she's alive or dead. You can court-martial me later."

Berenger didn't say anything. Military discipline took a back seat to survival at that point, and I think he knew it. His closing words were in a drawn-out whisper. "There are worse things than the dead, Sarge."

The line went quiet after that. Elsewhere, the dogs started up again. My hand found the security bot's joystick.

The bot appeared to be in working order, discarded on a mass grave of broken electronics junk: motherboards, computer towers, laptops, a few PDAs. One leg was buried in the junk, but after a little coaxing I shimmied him loose and he tumbled down the pile onto the floor. Then it took about ten minutes figuring out how to make him move where I wanted him to.

Driving the bot into the hallway I found Phobos Labs wasn't laid out much better than Command Control, though at least every turn led me somewhere instead of in circles. Most of the lights had broken here, too, just like everywhere else, but I could see well enough that Phobos Labs didn't take to the khaki color scheme, favoring rooms of olive green tiles connected by marble white corridors. Many of the once polished walls were flecked with shotgun pellets and gore, the floor in a few areas smeared with blood and shit and other vileness. A severed finger, an eyeball...and the shadows...

Maybe it wasn't the shadows. I don't know. Something moved in there, but my bot's camera feed wasn't so good, like someone had drop-kicked it a few times too many. I'm certain I saw shapes on the prowl. Human silhouettes moving against a blue-gray backdrop, their eyes the only detail — small, yellowish specks of light, like dying stars. They saw the bot exploring the halls, but only froze in place and stared like startled alley cats until it went out of sight. Christ, my hands are shaking just from thinking back on it, and that isn't the worst of it.

Many of the offices, their doors bashed in just like the residential block, served as makeshift storerooms for looted crates of equipment and more junk piles. Phobos security's entire stock of shotguns, pistols, and ammunition were stockpiled in at least two, which I've marked on my map with a note to pilfer them in the near future. Construction materials cluttered a few others — jackhammers, crane repair tools, explosive charges, and the like — used to expand the installation when the S.S.O.'s called for it. If I'm really lucky, I'll find some UAC prototype weapons in one of those rooms, like the M397 gatling gun they sent up two weeks ago, or the BFG 9000 I've been hearing rumors about. I would give ten years off my life for one of those right now.

I couldn't access most of the labs or the Central Processing plant, because all the sector doors were either sealed or inoperable. After an hour of scouting the area, looking for Max, and waiting for someone to open the doors for me, I found a cargo elevator just in time to catch someone on his way down. I veered the bot behind an empty crate that had been shoved against the corridor wall, which turned out too small to hide the little bastard behind.

The elevator door folded into the ceiling and two technicians stepped out, faces and jumpsuits smeared with blood, empty eye sockets glowing an evil green. They walked right past the bot, lumbering awkwardly but with a purpose. Heavy metal clanking, and the elevator door began to collapse into place again.

A sign above the door read "Phobos Anomaly".

Something compelled me to maneuver the bot through those doors as fast as I could push it. I'd done it before I'd realized it.

According to my map, that sector was diminutive compared to the others, little more than a residential block in length. And, unlike its brothers, its layout was perfectly straightforward: a circular security checkpoint; a long, broad corridor; two parallel data storage rooms; another long, broad corridor; a massive magnetically sealed door; a warehouse-sized laboratory.

My stomach knotted and twisted. Apart from their code names, the Anomalies were never spoken of on Mars except among the admins, and nobody but the admins knew what went on in either. Top secret military shit. Maybe something that'd solve world hunger or bring an end to war. Maybe something that'd annihilate the human race. It was something big, whatever it was.

Metallic rattling as the elevator reached the top. On the little security screen I watched a rusty brown cargo door straining to lift itself with a groan. The elevator opened its maw nice and wide, revealing

My God.

Somehow my fingers moved on their own, driving the security bot forward through the nightmare, completely unnoticed by the S.O.'s shambling about their business, rummaging through crate after crate.

Thirty of them, probably more, grinning and drooling like demon kindergarteners as they threw random electronic appliances and tools over their shoulders. One leapt to his feet screeching with joy when he found what he was looking for, scampered down the long black corridor to the lab entrance at the end, tripping over his own feet in his excitement.

Painted. The marble gray walls were painted, floor to ceiling, in human expulsions and coagulated blood. Prints of scrambling hands and feet desperate for escape or writhing in agony; some more deliberate, forming demonic sigils and letters from a language I'd never seen before.

A form sat slouched against one wall, stripped of its clothes, limply-hanging head shattered from a bullet wound. I didn't stop to look. I drove on down the corridor.

My bot passed the record rooms, throwing only a quick glance into the one on its left. Overturned file cabinets inside, papers scattered across the floor, some drifting into the hallway from the breath of the threshold vent. More bodies, piled like logs, stripped of their clothes and their skin. A Mars Patrol officer knelt over one, hard at work like carving a Christmas turkey.

From behind the bot another S.O. screeched happily and darted after the first, passing in front of the camera in a blur. Nobody noticed the security bot scuttling around their feet, even when they tripped over it in their hurry...or maybe they just had more important things on their minds.

Only three feet from the magnetic door. It began to draw itself upward, a great steel curtain rising to reveal the horror show's finale. The two S.O.'s squirmed underneath like rats impatient to get to a food source. My heart kicked the inside of my throat again and again. I wondered if the enemy could hear it on the radio. The doorway was clear now.

More S.O.'s and technicians hard at work. They'd torn up every maintenance cover and now crawled in and out of the tunnels like worms in a dead man, doing God-knows-what to the machinery inside. There may have been dozens of incredible things going on in that lab, but I only cared about what stood before the camera twelve feet ahead.

A short flight of catwalk steps. A platform branching into two small control stations set twenty feet apart. Between them, a great black whirlpool of nothingness, pulsing and swirling as though it were alive, tunneling leagues and leagues through the abyss as twisted arms of mist lashed out angrily at a world that confused and repulsed them.

A titan form stood before it, towering over my tiny bot. The camera jittered and suddenly rose several feet into the air — high above the head of the tallest human being — stopping with a jerk at a pair of eyes searing with green fire that quickly began to melt the lens. I saw man and goat coexisting in the same sneering face. I felt a legion of frozen spiders burrow out of my stomach and swarm over every inch of my skin, an unnatural cold so shocking I cried out.

The thing gazed at me. It gazed into the camera, through the monitor, and saw me.

In the next instant, the picture turned to static.

Anguished howls tore through the computer station. The eerie red jellyfish lines took shape and two dozen monitors screamed at me with alien voices and pale, twisted faces that once belonged to humans, eyes clawed out, mouths starved and shriveled into vicious slits, flesh scarred and bubbling from volcanic heat — screaming and scowling, clawing with filthy nails, trying to get at me through the screens, seeing me through the screens.

I would've run, but my wooden limbs wouldn't respond. I wanted to run. My heart tried to burst out of my chest to escape. Streaming tears blinded me.

Static. The monitors were lifeless. Ears ringing from the screams, if they'd even been real. If it weren't for the explosion, I would've collapsed in a faint.

Clouds of smoke and powdered glass filled the room as one of the Plexiglas panels exploded with a grenade burst and a volley of shotgun fire. Sulfur swept through the hub and flooded my nostrils, scalding my lungs, pitching me into a violent coughing fit. I flew back up the air vent just in time to dodge a second burst, two feet from where I'd been standing. Didn't sound or smell like grenades.

Some horrible thing below hissed and screeched in a way I can't even begin to describe. The adrenaline floodgates burst open. I crawled faster than I thought physically possible. I crawled until my muscles sobbed and my conscious mind gave up. Fatigue washed over me and plunged my head into a barrel of ether.

Another nightmare brought me back, cold and trembling.

When my limbs built the courage to move again I doubled back to the residential block and staged a guerilla assault on another zombie patrol. With the enemy focused on that sector I had all the time in the world to creep back to Command Control and disembowel the security system. No more need for the vents — I'm a ghost now. Hopefully the same can be said for Berenger, and for Max. Hang in there just a little longer, baby.

I think I know where she's holed up. Seen just about everywhere else. And I'll be damned if I don't find out what the UAC has been experimenting with up here, or what the demons are doing up there in the Anomaly. I'm sneaking off to the security barracks to stock up on rations and grab a clean envirosuit. Then it's off to Phobos Labs. The databases in Central Processing should have plenty of answers for me.

11

God damn this rock.

I seen some bad shit since I arrived here, but I felt like it'd toughened me up. I felt like knowing Berenger and Max were alive fortified my morale. Guerilla assault on two more zombie patrols sent five more of the fuckers to hell and they gotta be running out of guys soon, right? Felt like a nice workout. A nice kicker-upper. Saw some bad shit, but now I can handle anything, right?

They've turned Phobos Labs into a feeding trough.

God damn this rock. God damn the Red Planet. The UAC. The Corps.

Berenger was right. I knew he was right the moment I rounded that corner. Worse than the dead. Worse than dogs.

It used to be a lounge where the S.O.'s could kick back on their breaks. Furnished just like the residential lobby, two couches on the right side, a wall-mounted TV on the left with its screen smashed. Maybe didn't normally house the stench of spilled bowels, or have filth staining the walls or piled in the corners like a cat's litter box.

Towards the back wall they hung, bound at their scabby, welted wrists. Only the arms, shoulders, and most of the head remained of the left-most, the skull hollowed and oozing. The middle, a single arm dangling, severed at the elbow and scarred with teeth-marks; the rest of him lay in the middle of the floor, quartered like a fried chicken. The right-most had no lower half, his entrails dangling and curled on the carpet below, head bowed with his eyes closed as if in prayer.

It was feeding time when I came by. Three things crouched around the remains of the middle victim, looking up at me with disinterest. I don't know what to call them besides things. Shit-brown, textured like charred bread and parading a bastardized human shape. A different one gnawed at the ribs of the right-most hanger, a giant British Bulldog standing on its hind legs, great gorilla arms instead of forepaws, skin raw and pink like an open wound.

No faces among them. Just teeth. Just jaws and teeth, chomping and slurping obscenely. Tiny specks for eyes, gleaming like dying stars. Animal eyes.

The bulldog finally noticed my scent, turned toward me and let out a Rottweiler snarl. My shotgun went off all on its own and popped the first brown thing's head like a zit. Pumped the

empty casing out as the other two sprung up and pierced my eardrums with their screeches, their jaws open wide enough to swallow baseballs. Unloaded the next shot into the second one before he was on his feet. Caught the third in the back as he tried to run. I think his neck snapped when he hit the wall.

Bulldog kept advancing even after I'd sprayed its left lobe across the room. I stumbled backward pumping shell after shell until nothing remained of its face and it finally collapsed. I might've kept the motion going for a few clicks before bloodlust and panic subsided.

My throat's on fire. Lost count of how many times I've thrown up today. No matter how many times I do, my stomach festers. Almost forgot to reload.

After heaping the things' remains in the corner I took out my trusty kitchen knife and began to cut the men down, starting with the left-most. They all had Corps tattoos. Probably like my team, dumb kids on the reserves expecting a cozy job in space and a nice fat paycheck. It would destroy their mothers to see them like I found them. Figured the least I could do was lay them out proper, search the labs for a few sheets to cover them with.

The right-most victim had the most meat left on him, and probably the most weight, so I saved him for last. His face was intact, unlike the other two. He could still get an open casket funeral. I reached for his bindings, knife at the ready. Took a firm grip on his right wrist.

Been curled up in the air vents for a while, crying like a baby. I can't sleep anymore. Nobody could ever sleep again. Nobody could ever close their eyes again. I should take a screwdriver to my eyes and ears. Only way I'll ever escape it. His eyes opened. The second I touched him his eyes popped open and looked right at me. Bulging out of their sockets, filled with panic and anguish. He started screaming. He twisted and thrashed to get away from me, his intestines whipping like a beheaded snake. Endless falsetto screaming.

I drew my sidearm and ended it quick.

12

It's funny. A couple days ago I'd just about lost my mind over these demons prowling the halls of Phobos Labs. I've just finished reviewing my mission log and it gave me a good chuckle. And I'm steadily growing accustomed to the hellish décor.

I found more feeding areas; more strung-up bodies, a few crucified on the walls with industrial bolt drivers. And lots more of the shit-imps and the bulldogs. My kill count just breached a dozen, and I'm having a ball. I enjoy killing these things. Popping zombies has its kicks, but I really enjoy killing the demons. I enjoy their agonized howls. I relish the way they writhe and gurgle.

They die easy. Even the zombie marines, or whatever controls them, are sloppy and inexperienced. They know how to torture the helpless. They're not used to combat. They have no

heads for strategy or organization. I found out the imps can somehow throw fire like percussion grenades, but they always aim at me and never ahead, and I've seen about half of them abandon their comrades at the first sign of trouble. They recruited the humans as their muscle, and maybe to seize a better understanding of the facility and its technology. Or maybe it's the other way around, and the demons are just pets. I give a shit. They're all going to die either way.

I'm in the infirmary now, catching my breath and taking advantage of the late Doctor Hollenshead's bourbon stash to help me recover from another crude funeral.

The place was a horror show when I found it, with bodies strewn carelessly on the floor. Five in total, skinned and partially dismembered, a couple chewed up real good like dog bones. One of the four beds was occupied by another victim, still twitching either in reflex or shock, lidless eyes bulging up at the ceiling. Mercy shots all around. It's become my standard procedure for any victims I find.

Something bumped the furthest bed and moved it a couple inches with a loud grating whine. A shuddering form sat curled up in the far corner of the room, leaning against the wall, weeping silently. I ordered him to identify himself.

The weeping paused, and he responded with my name in a quivering voice filled with disbelief. Rowlins's voice.

I lowered my weapon and rushed to his side. His chalk-pale skin was slick with sweat, his cheeks caked with dried blood. Someone took all his gear, save his envirosuit. Someone had also taken his eyes.

He touched my face and wept openly, praising his lord and savior over and over.

"Walked right into their den," he stuttered. "They'd laid ambushes...Trague didn't see them coming. Seven or eight, maybe more. They poured out of the rooms and just...carried him off... We all panicked and separated... They weren't... They weren't men... They weren't human, they..."

Rowlins covered his face and took a few minutes to suppress an oncoming fit of wailing. His limbs trembled like those of an old man in his final moments.

"I'd nearly lost my faith," he went on. "Oh, Christ...!"

I told him it was okay, that he was safe with me. He didn't hear a thing I said.

"Oh, Christ... The things he made me see... He made me watch... He had the men tortured slowly, eaten alive piece by piece, the... the women flayed and violated... he made me watch, and then he took my eyes so I could see nothing but those sights forever..."

"Who's 'he'?" I said.

Rowlins suddenly went stiff and held his breath. He sat for a moment in silent, reverent terror before he spoke again.

“The one who showed me. He commands the creatures from the other side, just beyond the gateway...A great baron of Hell’s hordes possessing terrible powers...His hands...He t-took me to Deimos...He showed me...”

Rowlins’s voice built to the verge of screaming and his hands locked onto my shoulders.

“He showed me,” he said again and again, as if I understood what he meant. “He showed me! He showed me!”

I tried to calm him down, but he still didn’t hear. Finally he let go and fell against the wall, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around his face, rocking and wailing like a four-year-old boy. He was inconsolable for a long time, but he found some consolation knowing Berenger and Max had survived. He’d thought we’d all suffered the same fate as the others.

His headset was gone so he hadn’t heard anything and didn’t know where anyone was. He’d heard panicked screams a few hours ago and assumed they were Trague’s. When I asked, he wouldn’t tell me about Deimos or the gateway he’d mentioned. Just fell into another fit of shivering and prayer.

I’d lingered too long. Taking up my shotgun I stood again and told Rowlins it was time for me to move on, promising to return for him on the way back.

“Can you spare your sidearm?” he asked. “I got no ammo and if they f-find me...”

“You can’t see to shoot,” I said. “Stay invisible for just a little longer. We’ll look after you, I promise.”

He shook his head, begging me. “Please, I got no ammo.”

The terror and desperation creeping into his voice filled me with a profound sense of pity. I knelt beside him, drew my sidearm and nursed it into his hand. His fingers tightened around the handle. His face twisted into an anguished grimace and he started crying again, stroking the pistol lovingly as if it were a kitten. He blessed me twice between his sobs.

Then he put the barrel in his mouth and squeezed the trigger.

I’ve covered him up on the furthest bed with his dog tags resting on his chest. If a rescue team ever comes, they’ll be sure to find him.

Christ. That might not be for another week or more, going by the book. Assuming the admins knew something about this mess before they shipped us up here. What if my suspicions are wrong and Mars Base doesn’t have a clue what’s happened? What if they think we’re still just

having radio trouble? How long before they send another team to check on us then? Two weeks? A month?

I'm heading out now. Next stop, Central Processing. And who knows what else.

13

Inter-dimensional space travel. That's what they were playing with in the Anomalies over the past year. Teleportation.

Whatever they want to call it, they weren't telling UAC-Earth everything, only that they were throwing shit into one end and watching it pop out the other, sending random things back and forth between the two moons and giggling like children about it. I learned about it all from S.S.O. Hall's private files. Every record of every little thing that happens in the Anomaly is wired straight to the PC in his office. I managed to hack in by linking my PDA to the mainframe in Central Processing.

Both Anomalies house something called a "slipgate" which opens and closes artificially stabilized black holes at the flip of a lever. The project's original purpose was to find a new way to dispose of radioactive waste and other hazardous materials, until they discovered that if the slipgates use a matching frequency to create two black holes simultaneously, they conjoin to form a tunnel through space like the signal between two full-duplex radios. It was supposed to revolutionize space travel as we know it. Allow humankind to tear ass across the stars in the blink of an eye. They'd planned to launch slipgate satellites so next-gen scientists could make good use of them in other galaxies.

I guess passing through a subspace tear is like when you take a shortcut through a seedy alley to get to work early. Except what these guys found was beyond a fucking seedy alley.

They told the Mars Base admins that Janssen died in an accident while "assisting" with an experiment in Phobos Anomaly. They told UAC-Earth they'd been having minor technical difficulties, but everything was peachy otherwise. They lied to everyone, especially to us. They lied about sending Janssen through the teleporter. They probably would've lied about Carlyle if they'd known his side-effect would be delayed.

Among the records were digital video archives, but most of them showed the same shit. Powering up the slipgate's capacitors, setting the frequency, energizing the core, creating the hole, tossing in a crate full of beef jerky, chatting on the phone with Deimos Base for six hours and taking notes. The process of opening the space tunnel was incredible — the slipgate creates a small star and collapses it in less than a second — but even that got boring after seeing it a hundred times.

I opened a video file dated around the time Janssen went up to Phobos and didn't come back. They had him suited up with his helmet secured, standing at the foot of the platform steps,

looking pretty pumped about the whole thing. Probably hopping on something. I'd be high, too, I guess.

Once the machine opened its swirling black maw, he wouldn't move. His legs went stiff and he gave the camera this funny look like he was having second thoughts. That is, if he had a choice in the matter. Maybe he was begging the S.O.'s not to make him step through it. Maybe they promised him something, like a million bucks or getting his big brother out of prison. After a bit of encouragement from the nearby engineers he climbed the steps and stopped a mere foot away from the gateway, its misty tendrils coiling around him and caressing his envirosuit like a hungry lover. Then it swallowed him.

He came out the other end screaming and clawed his eyes out. He died of shock in the infirmary a few minutes later.

After the shooting spree that resulted from Carlyle's trip through the hole, the eggheads on Phobos and Deimos finally decided there was something terribly wrong with their newfound galactic shortcut. The Deimos guys modified one of their security bots and sent it through to Phobos, hoping to document everything it saw during the trip. The video came out all scrambled to hell, and even with a team of techies on it round the clock they couldn't make it any clearer. I watched it a little while ago. Looks an awful lot like the red static I saw in Command Control and a number of the TV's in Phobos Labs, but — and the eggheads were equally puzzled by this — despite the portals' instantaneous transporting effect, the video is clocked at over three hours.

Well, funny things started happening after that experiment, some which I consider awfully terrifying. Apparently Berenger did, too — enough that he saw fit to leave them out of our briefing.

According to Hall's email correspondence with Deimos's chief eggheads, technical problems swarmed Phobos's brother base two days after the probe went through the gateways. Electronics went on the fritz all over the installation, mostly insignificant crap like monitors frizzing out, radio transmissions cutting off abruptly, and lights flickering for no reason. One email made mention of odd red lines on the televisions that chilled my blood.

The malfunctions reached the Anomaly and got worse. I found a radio transmission from a shaken Deimos security officer who claimed something had come out of the gateway. He wouldn't say what. The slipgate had activated itself and something came out, grabbed one of the engineers and dragged him through the portal. They'd pulled the plug and sealed off Deimos Anomaly, but heard all sorts of activity going on in there for the next twelve hours — footsteps, banging, whispering. Eventually all was quiet, and they unsealed the lab to find everything exactly as they'd left it. After that, Deimos didn't send out any messages for a while, so everyone figured things were back to normal.

One morning Phobos called Deimos to arrange the next probe experiment and nobody picked up. They weren't even getting a return signal, like Deimos's radio was off the hook. That's when they got the call from UAC-Mars. They couldn't get through to Deimos, either: the entire moon

had vanished from the sky.

So Hall got nervous and requested additional padding for his security department until UAC-Phobos could figure out what exactly happened to its brother. The admins complied. So did Mars Patrol. And Berenger.

Goddamn radio problems, he said.

Two important things have happened today. First, the realization that I'm operating on a time limit without a watch. When the clock reaches zero, the slipgate will swallow Phobos whole. And if there's any truth in what Rowllins told me, I don't want to be around when it happens.

The second important thing occurred right after the first, when someone pressed a pistol to the back of my head. I pivoted and locked my arms around my attacker's wrists, pointing the pistol to the floor. In one motion I could've wrapped my left arm around the asshole's neck and snapped it before the first round fired.

I found myself face-to-face with a pale and filthy Maxine Barrett, dried tears clinging to her cheeks, blood splattered on her face and neck. Her eyes were bloodshot and gleaming wet. And blank. Nobody was home.

I said her name.

Something clicked inside her head. She recognized me, and the color slowly returned to her face. Her hand surrendered the pistol. She wrapped her arms around my neck and started bawling.

The mainframe's chamber has become our safe zone for the time being. I've boosted the security clearance level for every door in the base so they'll only open with the S.S.O.'s access card (I found it on his corpse). Now the only way to get within ten feet of us is through a plethora of thick, magnetically sealed doors that the enemy can't open. They'll only find me when I let them from now on.

Max hadn't eaten anything all day. I offered her two nutri-bars, and she snatched them out of my hand, nearly ate them wrapper and all. It helped calm her down, but she still couldn't find the strength to speak, so I let her rest while my PDA downloaded everything on the Anomalies it could fit in its belly. I can always sift through it on the trip home.

She's curled up next to me with her head on my shoulder, sawing logs while I type. It'll be another hour before the download is complete. I hope we still have time to make it to the shuttle.

14

Tried to get some sleep before we headed out, but that same dream came to shake me out of it. When I woke, it took my brain a few minutes to register Berenger's voice on the radio.

I reported the security system as disabled and Max as shaken but intact, and agreed that the three of us would rendezvous at the nuclear plant's entrance. I assumed our next destination would be the hangar, where the Mars shuttle sat waiting, but I said nothing of this for fear that the demons would hear and instantly converge on us (edit: in hindsight they probably know, because where else would we go?). As with Max, I recommended Berenger ditch his headset when he signed off.

Max was still huddled in the corner where she'd been sleeping. Her limbs had turned to wood, and when I offered my hand to help her to her feet she scooted away, staring up at me with the trembling eyes of a toddler lost in the dark. Her face was marble gray — the mere suggestion of leaving our haven, of returning to those black halls of snarling death, petrified her.

"I saw..." she said, and trailed off, never breaking eye contact.

I assured her everything would be fine. She refused to budge, even when I grabbed her arm and tried to drag her with me.

"Max, we gotta go."

"I saw," she repeated like a broken record. "I saw it appear...outta nowhere. A red cloud. Then it burst into flames and...this horrible, smiling face... It swam through the air like a shark with a tail of fire. He never saw it coming. It snuck up behind him and..."

Max paused a minute and seemed ready to heave. She finally looked away and regained her composure, staring blankly at the wall.

"Max," I said, "we gotta get movin' before they figure out a way to get to us!"

"It dove in," she went on. "Dove into him like a swimmer into water. Like it wasn't solid at all. It dove into his soul. His eyes b-burst and spurted...He grabbed his head, held it like he was trying to crush it in his hands. Trying to make it stop...He collapsed and started seizing and I ran...I ran...I abandoned him..."

After another long pause her eyes met mine again. And they weren't the eyes of a child. For a brief moment, she was Mad Max again. Cool, collected.

"We can't meet with Captain," she said flatly. "I watched him die."

I slid to my knees and sat in cold silence for several minutes. The devil voices played over and over in my memory. Voices that hadn't made a peep in a long time. Voices that used to belong to Kinney and McGee and the rest of my team. Has Berenger been one of them all along?

Max didn't talk anymore, just sat huddled against the wall, watching me. Reverted to her tattered state.

Our plan has changed. According to my map, Command Control has a maintenance airlock in the

west block, same side of the installation as the nuclear plant. We can secure helmets and moonwalk to the hangar in safety. Max is still shaken up, but I imagine once she's in that cockpit she'll be her old self again (at least long enough to get us the fuck out of here).

We made a pit stop at one of the demons' makeshift storage caches. No spare ammo, but we found plenty of food and water, and a medic's satchel. It'll take us about an hour to reach the airlock, but after that we're home free.

15

Our progress has been slower than I'd hoped. It's been an hour and a half and we haven't made it to the airlock yet. We only just reached Command Control a few minutes ago.

To make sure nothing tails us I've had to reseal every junction door we pass through, but what's been slowing us up is the moment of tension that fills our limbs with concrete every time I break out that security card. Locking down the base trapped some of Hell's finest in certain hallways. We're stupid with terror wondering what'll be behind the next door.

Thoughts keep running through my head of the old Japanese game show reruns I watched as a kid, where the contestant frantically navigated a giant maze of doors in search of the exit. The maze was inhabited by a bunch of guys hunting the contestant. Neither party knew the location of the other until they came face-to-face. Capture meant getting tossed out of the maze into a pool of thick mud. They didn't string up the losers and snack on their live flesh.

We approached the next door in the usual way. Took positions on either side of the doorway with our eyes locked together, holding our breath 'til our lungs felt like bursting. Struggled for several minutes to bring my hand all the way up to the card-swiper.

A beep and a loud metallic click. Max swallowed. The door whisked open and we presented arms.

Five confused and pissed bulldogs stampeded like a gnawing, drooling flesh-train. Shock stunted our reflexes and we didn't even open fire until the first one had already crossed the threshold. If they hadn't been stupid enough to trip over each others' corpses we'd have been chewed to pieces. The last one plowed into me as it died and collapsed on my leg, nearly fractured the bone.

Max checked me out and found nothing serious beyond a few bruises. She kept surprisingly cool despite the state I found her in.

My suit smells like shit again.

We stopped at the next relatively clean junction for rest and rations. Neither of us is hungry, though.

16

He's watching us. Somehow he's watching without the cameras. And I know it's him for sure because I can feel his presence by some god-awful means, call it psychic or spiritual or whatever. Somehow he can reach out and touch your soul, and your insides feel so tainted you can't move.

I'd barely raised my access card to the swiper when I shuddered and dropped it on the floor: the ice spiders had come back to march goosebump trails across my skin and crystallize my blood until my muscles froze with it. Max stood in place and didn't breathe. I couldn't turn my head to look at her, so I didn't know if she felt the same horrible presence or if she was just watching me in terror and confusion. The image on that security monitor swarmed my memory — eyes of fire in a goat's sneer.

The swiper suddenly beeped all on its own. Electronic locks disengaged on either end of the corridor with heavy clicks, then both doors vanished into the ceiling with an agonized whine. Two more locks released and another pair of doors vanished, then two beyond that, then two beyond that, each set vanishing in rapid succession. In a few moments it was over — the hallway yawned both ways like the throat of a great worm, and somewhere far behind us its stomach growled.

Max swallowed hard and pressed herself into the corner like she could squeeze through it and hide inside the wall. She stared with bulging, tearful eyes down the corridor behind me, but when I whirled around I found it deserted. Nothing was following us. Nothing that I could see.

I grabbed her wrist and started running. Christ they sounded so close. We never found out just how close because we never stopped or looked back.

Lost track of the time. Been hiding in this office too long. Whatever was following us — if anything ever was following us — we lost it. But now we don't know where we are. The map is twisted somehow. Every time I refer to it the hallways look different. It leads us in circles. In the last ten minutes we came to six dead-ends.

Jesus, I think we might've doubled back. I can't tell. All these goddamn hallways look the same.

17

We never made it to that airlock. We came close. Right when I knew it was just around the next corner we were cutting through a small employee lounge with a window view of the nuclear plant a quarter of a mile away.

We weren't halfway through the room. The whole base suddenly shook in place, swept my feet right out from under me. A bright flash in the same instant, then the window warped and

imploded. Everything in the room that wasn't bolted down got sucked out into space.

I managed to slap my helmet down moments before I was sucked out. Max must've had a firm grip on something because I came out alone.

The gravity on Phobos is almost zilch. Explosive decompression launched a couch clear of the moon's surface; if I hadn't had the grappling gun I would've followed, and almost did anyway thanks to a brief panic attack that turned my fingers to pudding. I stopped with a nasty jerk that nearly broke me in two.

After what felt like an hour of struggling I reeled myself onto one of the maintenance platforms lining Command Control's western wall, but was barely on my feet again when buckshot pellets whizzed past my head from the roof of the nuclear plant a hundred meters away -- too far for any sort of accuracy. I didn't actually see the shooters until thirty seconds of frantic scrambling later, when I reached the CC roof and spotted three Mars Patrol officers, helmets down, jogging across the catwalk between the two sectors. They all had shotguns. I had nothing and was sitting out in the open like a chump, the nearest cover fifty yards away: the Command Control antenna platform, a garden of nodes and power boxes the size of small cars.

Pistol fire erupted from the hole that had spat me into space, courtesy of Mad Max: one gunman's head exploded in a cloud of blood, brains, and helmet fragments. The other two hit the deck, firing wildly back at her and hitting nothing but the side of the base. It was the break I needed to run my ass off and take a defensible position amidst the junk on the roof's antenna platform. I'd lost my guns during my short flight, but I've had enough practice getting the drop on these guys.

They didn't even hear me. I waited until the first one passed, then leapt out and locked one arm around the second zombie's head, grabbed his shotgun with my other hand and wrenched it out of his grip. The first zombie had no idea what was going on and took a silent zero-gravity shotgun blast to the back, nearly tore him clean in two.

An elbow slammed into my solar plexus and crushed the wind out of me. The second zombie was stronger than I expected: he slammed me against the side of the platform again and again, wrenching my arm to get his weapon back, nearly snapping it clean off at the elbow. Somehow I got free and drove that hard wooden stock into his face so hard his visor cracked and his helmet disengaged, revealing green demon-eyes burning in a furious Aryan face that once belonged to Captain Berenger.

The zombies aren't as dead as I thought. They still need to breathe. Berenger's specter opened his mouth to scream and a cloud of blood bubbles flooded out instead. His legs buckled and he started gasping like a fish out of water. Didn't watch for very long before I chambered the next round and indulged myself.

Took a few minutes to catch my breath and spotted another figure fifty meters out, approaching cautiously with pistol at the ready. I could tell it was Max because it didn't move in that peculiar way the zombies do. When she saw I was still in one piece she clung to me like a koala bear and

even smiled a little. Almost needed a crowbar to pry her off. I'm beginning to hope she keeps it up once we're back on Earth.

Berenger had an impressive cache piled on the nuclear plant's roof: UAC rangefinder, empty RPG-7 and two spare rockets, half-dozen C4 charges complete with radio detonator, and two cases of 12-gauge ammunition. Motherfucker had been tracking our movements through the base's windows, probably with a little help from his goat-faced commander. We've relocated the hoard to the antenna platform. Hopefully the zombie patrols won't get any more use out of it, that launcher in particular.

I downloaded the contents of Berenger's PDA before I disposed of the bodies. He'd been recording an audio log of our radio chatter since our arrival. Might be useful when we return to Mars Base.

Neither of us have felt the presence since we came outside, like it has no influence beyond Phobos Base's hull. Must be why Max has improved so much: she's beginning to smile like she used to, and she's getting talkative again. We've been discussing what we'll do when we get back, whether the UAC will reward us with cash in exchange for keeping our mouths shut, and whether we'd have time for a quickie in the shuttle on the way home.

< excerpt from audio log >

MAX: I could go for a shower right now.

SARGE: Sounds good. Been awhile since I had someone scrub my back.

MAX: Last fourth of July.

SARGE: Really? That long?

MAX: Yep. You were drunk.

SARGE: Oh don't even. You were drunk off your ass before you even got to my door.

MAX: I wasn't that drunk. I only had a few--

SARGE: You thought my closet was the john. Nearly pissed in my boots.

I'm finding it easier to breathe, myself. Whatever these monsters are, they've tainted the technology by existing here. And whatever their origin, they must also need air to breathe because not one of them followed us outside. We're completely free out here. We could camp on the roof if we had to. Got plenty of air.

The floaters seem closer than they did yesterday.

I don't think I believe in God anymore. I mean, my experiences here on Phobos already ensured that, but until now I might've reconsidered at some point. This measly little hike has turned into a fucking disaster.

We're never getting back. It dawned on us when we saw the shuttle, or what was left of it.

The scene slowly came into view after an hour's walk across the base, and somehow even before we got close enough to see the landing pad a cold dread began to wash over us — the sinking feeling that any promise of escape was too good to be true, like what most folks in Hell must feel like on a slow day moments before an extra-big pitchfork spears them in the ass.

The shuttle was torn inside-out. The hull split wide open in the shape of a blackened flower well in bloom. Everything else — dashboard controls, engine parts, those damned uncomfortable seats — lay scattered across the landing pad like burnt rice thrown at a wedding. C4 charges, or maybe a well-placed rocket.

We both broke down when we saw it, collapsing in each other's arms. We sat there for a long time, saying nothing. Nothing to say out loud that wasn't already blaring loud and clear in both our heads. At the far end of the crater, Phobos Anomaly sat, mocking us.

"I don't wanna die here," Max said.

She doesn't know about what happened to Deimos; what may soon happen to us. I don't have the heart to tell her.

Now I'm back in the hangar, this time with company. I sealed off the launch control room from the rest of the facility (here's hoping the door stays shut) and promoted the control tower to our base of operations. Max and I have been going over Phobos Base's blueprints for the last few hours, trying to find a way to get word of this catastrophe to Mars. I've had a few ideas brewing in my head, so we aren't throwing in the towel just yet.

Max is beginning to worry me, though. She's gone into a relapse and suffers from daymares: she'll be near-comatose one minute, then suddenly jump with a gasp or stare in terror at things I can't see, and I'm finding it more and more difficult to bring her out of it. I've already had to slap her wits back into place once or twice. When I look at her I can see her physically teetering on the edge of a total breakdown. She's too restless to sleep and her hope is all but gone. I want to believe she'll make it through this all right.

I want to believe I'll make it through this all right. I have to believe there's still a chance. Command Control's radio is dead, but its wires and antennae are still in one piece. I have to believe I can contact Mars Base. I can't lose my head now. I have to believe.

19

One of my ideas is a sure winner! We build a portable radio, jack it into Command Control's systems and use the long-distance frequency to call for help. I can install the thing directly onto the antenna platform, which means the whole job can be done from the rooftop, totally clear of the hostiles infesting the facility.

Max refuses to leave the tower, so she's sitting this operation out once our radio is completed. I'd rather we stick together, but she feels safe in the tower and I don't know what to do with her anymore. I think she'll be fine, though. Mars Base should be hearing from us pretty soon.

20

ggod hel mw plese here' no wa out th's no w there 't gout I cnn n ou gosd god god hheslp imlosin iom imlosin im losing my mmm ,m

hs hans his hands his h

21

no way out. god please help me. please help me. there no way out. i cantg et out. i cant get out.

god there sno way out. im trapped. i cant get out. theyre verywhere. theyre inside outside. what are they god. what are they the things outside. look so much like rocks just like rocks floating but they have eyes god and teeth. so many teeth. why do wanto eat me god.

god please answer me im so alone. shes gone. cam eback inside and he was there smiling at me smiling that goat face. his hands god. hs hands were burning. she sat at his feet like a dog an ate a dead man. she ate his dead flesh and stared at me with crazy eyes. she was his the whole time, lied to me about berenger, kept us separated so they could kill us easier. so they could get the shuttle. it was too much god. i shot her. i was dizzy fainting and i only had time to kill one and the devil was right there smiling and i shot my friend instead. i was angry. please forgive me god I was so angry. im so alone. im losing my mind. i don wabt los my mind.

his hands make me see things god. he showed me. he showed me.

im scared god. please answer me.

Saw it again. Same dream inside the realm of blood. There's no horizon there. The whole realm is a sphere of molten chaos and the landscape lines the inner-wall of the sphere. The ground is fleshy and raw, and boiling rivers of blood and magma flow endlessly in every direction. Dead twisted trees and spikes of black rock thrust obscenely upward out of the fleshy ground and make it bleed. Rock formations float in the air like space debris, but never drift, some the size of Mt. Everest, some no bigger than basketballs. Rock spires tower overhead with demonic castles at their peaks built from infernal red bricks and bile green marble. Thick red mist swirling in the sphere's belly almost gives the impression of a sky except I see more spires and buildings piercing through from the other hemisphere. Some spires are so tall that the castles on top meet at the center with their roofs inches from locking with each other.

Dream so vivid it frightens me. I smell things in it. Sulfur and charcoal. I taste flesh and sweat in the air. I hear the disembodied whispers of broken human beings.

Something carries me to a great roofless temple atop a mountain of human skulls. Incredible sight I can hardly describe. Great green pillars a mile high. Scores of humanoid things amassed in the great hall. A hundred form a circle at the center, half of them man-goat gods. Titan creatures, the smallest standing ten feet tall. The rest, bulldogs and shit-imps, keep at a distance out of fear and reverence, many clinging to the walls and pillars to watch. I stand among them, so close I can smell and feel them, but I don't move or make a sound because I'm terrified they'll notice me.

The demigods snarl and argue like in a senate hearing, passing a large skull back and forth to designate the speaker, but often snatching it from one another like children or speaking out of turn. I don't understand them. It's all animal sounds, grunts and howls and hisses. Whatever the discussion is, they can't seem to agree.

One of the goat-gods bellows long and loud, silences the lot and frightens off some of the spectators. He has the floor, but not the skull. The goat-god who does shakes it at him angrily. They exchange snarls and brays. The first grabs the second's throat, digs his claws through his jaw. The head comes clean off with a crackle and pop. He presents the trophy to the spectators with a victorious howl as it burns in his hands. He's got the skull now, doesn't he?

I recognize the infernal eyes. He's the Devil of Phobos. The Great Hell Baron.

He sneers and holds another object. Sleek, metallic, alien to that realm of flesh and stone and fire. The other creatures are curious and amazed. They've never seen anything like it before.

The Baron brays and bellows like a drill instructor, his eyes flaring into green starbursts. When he finishes, he tosses the object on the floor at the center of the ring, and the congregation erupts into another argument. I expect more heads to roll, but the bloody goat-god stands tall and proud, monolith-like, and never speaks again. Thousands of demon voices fill my ears until my skull

begins to crack. The sea of writhing, clawing bodies covering the temple walls sends tremors across my skin. For a moment I can't tell if it's a dream or not.

I'm torn away from this "civilized" scene and subjected to countless others so vile and soul-curdling that I wake up screaming. I never remember any of them. I refuse to.

The barrel goes in my mouth but I can't squeeze the trigger. Something stops me.

23

I don't know how many days since I last touched this PDA. I don't remember writing some of these entries, and that disturbs me a little bit. I lost my head for a while, but the therapeutic effects of keeping this mission log helped me find it again. Now it's time I drained the abscess.

At least the previous entries give me an excuse to skip certain events. Forcing most of this out through trembling hands, disjointed memory, and a half-dozen beers, so bear with me. A lot of it is jumbled, buried in the darkness by some merciful defense mechanism.

Also understand that I loved Max with all my heart. She was the only real friend I had on Mars. Better she died at my hands than at theirs. Although maybe they already killed her. She could never have escaped Phobos. Even if she'd made it back to Earth, she would still be trapped here. If that makes any sense.

I don't know how long I was blacked out, but the nightmare described in the last entry tormented me a number of times. I must've screamed a lot in my sleep so I have no idea how I was still alive.

A thick, rotten stench choked me to waking. My arms were extended over my head and my wrists hurt. My envirosuit was gone. There was no floor beneath my feet.

I didn't want to open my eyes. They did it all on their own.

Jesus. Jesus, hanging

I was surrounded. Twenty of them. Just like the feeding area, wrists bound, guts spilled, heads bowed as if in prayer. A meat locker. Used to be an office. Blood spattered and flecked on the walls. No furniture save a small table near the door, bloody chainsaw resting on top.

I screamed and I wept.

Beyond the door dogs began to howl. One of them was close. Panic swept over me. My bindings were hung on a hook in the ceiling. I grabbed the hook and tried to pull myself high enough to slip them off.

An ugly pink snout poked through the open doorway and sniffed the foul air. I froze.

The bulldog lumbered in, dribbling on the floor, sniffing in my direction. It was looking right at me. It let out a low growl like an ancient motorboat and rushed forward with its jaws hanging open wide, batting the other meat aside with its huge head. When it got close I drove my right foot into its face and knocked it off its feet. Stunned it long enough for me to climb to the ceiling and free myself, but I landed right next to the thing when I came back down. It nearly took my hand off.

We both stood at the same time, and it charged again. It was stupid, thank god. I sidestepped and sent the bastard headfirst into the wall as I ran for the door. By the time it recovered I had the chainsaw in my hand, alive and growling.

We must've been at it an hour, an ultra-violent matador show, both of us slipping on the bloody floor and stumbling into the hanging bodies. It was too stupid to feel pain, attacking no matter how bad I shredded it. Too stupid to learn not to charge me. Blood loss and head injuries finally did it in, and I was sure every demon in Phobos Base had heard us.

I may have blacked out again for a while.

No one came to check on me, and I didn't want to wait for more bulldogs to sniff me out. Had time to saw the fucker's head off for good measure, though.

It occurred to me that the Hell Baron's sour presence was strangely absent from the base, which could only mean that he was preoccupied somewhere in his own realm. He couldn't have known I was free.

They'd dragged me back to Phobos Labs, the heart of the demon infestation. Now I was alone and unarmed amidst a small army of torture-obsessed psychopaths. They were crawling all over the labs, like the Hell Baron had called reinforcements to keep things in order. I was grateful that most of the lights were out. For the better part of a day I kept to the shadows, moved swiftly and silently through the hallways, hugged the darkness or balled up behind a crate when a zombie patrol or scavenging technician lumbered past, brushing so close it's a miracle they didn't hear my heart pounding. All they had to do was glance in my direction at the wrong moment, or pause in mid-stride long enough to feel my breath on their necks, and it would all be over. I would drown in a sea of teeth and nails.

I was nearly caught when I rounded the corner and almost stumbled over a shit-imp sitting in the middle of the next corridor. It hunched over a stinking pile of giblets that used to be a human being, munching contentedly on a fistful of meat. I crept right up behind it, and just when it seemed to pick up my scent I threw my arms around its head and snapped its neck. Dragged the corpse into the shadows behind a nearby cluster of leaky barrels and waited for another patrol to pass before moving on.

I checked three or four of the demons' makeshift storerooms and eventually found an ammo cache. By a stroke of luck it had my confiscated envirosuit and my PDA. It was here that I curled

up behind a stack of empty crates and started crying.

I hid for a long time, losing my mind, listening to the snarls and devil-speak in the halls outside. Must've written those log entries then. I don't remember a lot of that period beyond sobbing, hoping no one found me, and wanting to murder every living thing on Phobos.

I remember the third one eventually overpowering the first two. My civilized human mind stepped out of the room and quietly closed the door behind him. I suited up, grabbed a satchel, loaded up with all the guns and ammo I could carry, and began a swift, merciless combat sweep of the labs, starting with a zombie marine I casually shot as he strolled into the storeroom. He carried a boxed M397 gatling gun ammo belt.

It's coming back only in bits and pieces. Seemed like they hadn't expected it. Most of them didn't get a shot off. Lots of the shit-imps ran, but none of them got away this time. I flushed those fucking labs out. Every single piece of vermin, human-looking or otherwise. Chased to exhaustion, driven into the corner, executed. Hunted and exterminated.

Except in the Anomaly. Childish terror halted me every time I tried to step toward the elevator. I knew what would happen when I saw the sonofabitch again. The dizziness, the flesh-tingling horror of standing in his presence. He'd overpower me again, disembowel me on the spot.

Motherfucker had to die. Everything good and right in the cosmos demanded it; sang it in my ears.

In one of the ammo storerooms I found the M397 gatling gun sitting on top of a pile of mining equipment, accompanied by an angelic choir that rang in my ears. With the cannon strapped onto my back and a satchel of C4 at my hip, I stepped back outside and took a quarter-hour hike to the Anomaly.

The floaters were still there, fifty of them flying directly over Phobos Anomaly in hungry buzzard circles. Many still drifted idly like before, some several hundred feet away, some within rock-throwing distance, a hundred or more scattered across the sky along the length of the base. All were entranced and oblivious to the world around them like monks in a monastery. Living limpet mines waiting for something to disturb them. My stomach trembled and twitched, and as my eyes locked onto one sleeping only thirty feet to my left I started to remember what fear was.

It turned and gazed at me with a single, searing green eye. A short burst from the cannon splattered the monster like a rotten tomato, its remains descending slowly to the bottom of the crater. So far the rest hadn't noticed me. Thankfully sound doesn't travel in a vacuum.

My satchel had twelve C4 charges, a cluster potent enough to punch a small crater in the moon's surface. I rigged them all to a custom palm-sized detonator and placed them on the weakest points along the Anomaly's hull. Sweat stung my eyes as I watched the circle of floaters overhead swirl aimlessly in a grotesque spiral. My prayers came in hoarse whispers. Worked as quickly as I could. Needed two hands to carry the cannon and had to put it down to place each charge.

One floater must've noticed. Came up from behind, and if I hadn't glanced up when I did it would've bitten my head off. I panicked and tumbled, drew my sidearm and put a single bullet right in the thing's eye, sent it swerving wildly away like a drunken bee. I placed the last charge and hightailed it back inside before the rest of the floaters got curious. They didn't try to follow this time.

Beauty is hard to achieve in a firearm, but that cannon was it. Caress the trigger and it screams like a hundred jackhammers and everything in front of it ceases to exist. Thirty-odd zombie technicians cut to ribbons in less than a minute. Christ I never saw such carnage. Their blood vaporized in the air. Nothing left of the targets but perforated scraps. A few targets cleaved clean in two. Spit ran down the corners of my mouth as I marched down that long hallway and finished off the rest in Phobos Anomaly's lab.

Not a single one panicked or even noticed me. They fell to pieces like fashion shop mannequins, too immersed in their work to realize they were dying. Big enough job to expend the cannon's reserve by the time I finished, so I chucked it and used my sidearm to put the few twitching survivors to bed.

I was right about one thing: they understood the technology. Understood enough to add certain modifications to the slipgate, though I'll be damned if I could tell what modifications at a glance. Maybe that was how they swallowed Deimos and all the fresh victims inhabiting it. Whatever they were doing, they'd almost finished when I came in and put an end to their little project.

The ice spiders swarmed over my flesh again, and they were taking no prisoners. Frigid pain shot through my entire body and forced a strangled scream out of my gut.

He burst through the portal faster than I expected, before I'd secured my grappling wire to the nearest safety rail. His eyes found me and stared deep into my soul, burning red like naval flares. His demonic stigmata blazed with such intensity the white flames on his hands swept up to his elbows. Black smoke puffed from his nostrils. He let out an enraged howl and stampeded toward me. His claws were inches from my eyes when I found my detonator. I prayed with all my heart that he needed air to breathe and hit the switch.

I went deaf for a moment as the entire base shook in its foundation, throwing the Hell Baron off-balance. Blinding white poured into the room.

The roof vanished. Everything in Phobos Anomaly — tools, crates, corpses — rained into the sky toward that great bloodshot eyeball above. My feet left the ground, but only for a minute. Magnetic boots and grappling line kept me safely anchored. Behind me the lab's giant door went into emergency lockdown and sealed itself shut.

At the last instant the Hell Baron had dug his claws and hooves into the metal of the floor instead of my face: he knelt as if in furious prayer, holding on for dear life. I planted my boot in his ugly face again and again, but he didn't let go no matter how badly I bloodied him. A full minute following the blast, the storm finally died as the last traces of oxygen fled the room.

The devil stood slowly upright again, but the flames in his bleeding hands had gone out. I watched as his raw pink skin flushed a bruised red and swelled to almost twice its mass, his face wincing and contorting like it couldn't decide between unbridled rage and staggering pain.

He took a single agonized step toward me, parted his teeth to unleash another howl, and a cloud of liquid red flooded from his mouth and nostrils as the vacuum of space tore his lungs inside-out. Those mighty cloven legs failed him. He slumped to the floor, heaving and gasping. His claws kept reaching hopelessly for me, wishing they could lock around my throat and take me to Hell with them. Got you, motherfucker. I got you. That soul-tainting presence left Phobos with the goat-god's final strangled gasp.

The abyss still yawned on the slipgate platform, its misty claws pawing weakly at the empty air as if feeling for its fallen master. A flick of the power switch and the void swallowed itself with an anguished moan. I stood in the dead silence of space, staring blankly at the machine for a long time. Wanted to see if it would kick on again by itself. Never did.

I realized how badly I wanted a drink and moon-walked back to the airlock doors. Disposed of the few leftovers roaming the other sectors along the way to the bar.

It's quiet here now. I'm alone on Phobos, wading knee deep in the dead and slipping slowly into madness. Six months of food and water to live off of while waiting for Mars Base to get curious and send a shuttle. Figured I won't be much good to them if I'm crazy by the time it gets here. Good to release all my crazy in a harmless, written form like this one.

But I won't be truly safe until that teleporter has been blown to scrap. I'm going to find more C4 charges later, to finish the job. Got a few other matters I want to take care of first.

Never did use that radio. Got attacked by the floaters while installing it. Been no sign of them since I sealed the gateway, so I think it's safe to go out again, but I'm still a little apprehensive. All in good time.

God I'm tired.

24

I "buried" Max today nex to Rowlins andt he others. Lined them up in the infirmary, those I could fin. No sign of Trague or Petro. Be gettin gdrunk for them all tonight, bodies r no bodies.

Couldn get through to Mars Base asgfter all so I'm cleaning out th liqer stock in the res sector while I wait from to call. Fuckin base is seems more cramped than usal. Halls so nrrrow.

Rest in piece, marines. Good bncha fellas, all of em. Crazy to get t space. Nobody sent up here to disappear.

To be forgot about.

25

Goddamn nightmares again. I wish they'd go away. That same awful realm. That same scene in the great temple with the meeting and the skull.

But it ends different. My wrists are bound and when the meeting is over I'm carried through room after room of an infernal mental hospital filled with maimed, broken shells of people.

Max is there, huddled in the corner, crying like a little girl. She looks up at me and says something in a language I can't understand. Her face is distorted like it's made of wet clay and her eyes are missing.

They hang me in a locker with twenty other bodies just like in the labs. It's silent for a long time. Then they all look at me at once and start screaming and wailing and wriggling like worms on hooks.

I can't sleep anymore. The pills don't work.

It's always that same nightmare in that same realm whose name I think I know but don't dare speak. It's the same meeting between the demon barons. That same metal object that shocked them all into silence, but isn't alien to me anymore. The Devil of Phobos was holding a UAC employee's PDA.

I can't stay here. How long do I have to stay here before they send someone? They must know something's wrong by now.

26

I can't write my hands shaken so bad. I know what they want Not the people I thought it was about the people, the souls. It was the technology They wanted the technology to study, not people to torture. The gateway, it was all about the gateway. Confined to that damned sphere for eons where they belonged a place never meant to be found The UAC goddamn them, they gave them a way to travel. They gave them gateways and starships and weapons and cybernetics They gave them Deimos base. They gave them Deimos's gateway. I blow Phobos gateway and they still have a spare They don't need two. Theyll escape and theyl be more horrible than anyone can fathom

I can' write I can't see through th tears I'm never going back home. I'm never going to see Earth. Doesn't matter. Mor important things but I'm too scared Dreams showed me but being there will

be different I don't thin I'll survive but I have to try I have to. No one else can go I hav to
destroy both now. I hav to destroy both or theres no point. Set everythin to blow few minutes
after I cross. Never open again This log make sure they'll never build again jesus chris I don't
wan tto go

Nothing else matters. Maybe find a way back. Maybe.

From: A.Romero@UACHQ.org

To: T.Matthews@UAC-Mars

Subject: Digested your report

Excellent work, first and foremost. Glad to see your people handled this situation so swiftly. I'm glad I listened to you when you suggested doubling the staff on Mars Base.

It's an atrocity is all I can say. I don't understand it. Adrian couldn't stomach the photographs, and he's seen some weird stuff in his day. Not much in those audio logs apart from people screaming and other racket. Sounds like that whole Mars Patrol team got hopped up on something nasty and went on a Charles Manson murder spree, but we haven't ruled out the possibility of terrorist insurgents, like that incident at UAC-Europe ten years ago. Send me the autopsy reports as soon as you get them. And keep quiet about those mutant remains until we learn what they're all about. Side-effects of the teleportation process? God I hope not.

We haven't sifted through all the data on this PDA yet. Some of our people think this space marine was a paranoid schizophrenic, but I'm still waiting for his psych profile to come in. Take a Mars buggy up there on your next trip and scout the rest of the moon's surface. Maybe he went for a moonwalk and never came back.

God knows what happened to Deimos. Our astronomers can't find any trace of it. Must have been flung clear of the gravitational pull. We're sending the shuttles tomorrow morning. Deimos Base has enough food and water to last the rest of the year, so the employees should be fine, but the sooner they're rescued the better. I'm sorry to hear the Phobos slipgate was lost. We still have high hopes for the project down here on Earth. Hopefully Deimos Anomaly is still intact.

Our techies couldn't fix the corrupted probe video, but they're bright boys and I'm sure they'll figure something out. We'll keep your people informed of any developments. Thanks again for all your efforts.

- Romero

P.S.: Can you send me a list of UAC-Phobos's virus definitions when you find the time? Since we ran the video file all our monitors have gone to a weird red static and they won't show shit else.

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