

INVADERS

In the not too distant future, humans have reached Mars.

In a bold experiment to bring life to the dead planet, one scientist makes a startling discovery that will change the lives of the entire human race.

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Chapter 1 - Attack

When Jack Verne awoke, the only thing he could see was a single red warning light blinking in the top left of his helmet's holographic display.

WARNI NG : LOW OXYGEN

Don't panic.

Don't waste your supply.

Calm down.

You've been trained for situations like this. Just think!

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Jack thought back to how he got himself into this deadly situation; he prayed it might give him some idea on how to escape...

It had been a simple routine inspection of the climate controllers. One of the sensor circuits had malfunctioned and was not transmitting data back to Alpha base. Without accurate data, the incredible attempt to create a habitable atmosphere on Mars would prove impossible. Grateful for any opportunity to explore the planet, Jack volunteered to don a spacesuit and check out the malfunction himself.

Jack Lucas Verne was one of eight specially trained scientists chosen for the Mars experiment. Selected from over three thousand hopeful candidates, he had proved himself to be in top physical and mental condition; attributes that are required when you undertake a fifty million mile journey to an inhospitable planet.

As he approached the controller, Jack began to feel a strange sense of unease although everything appeared as normal. He took a moment to study the device. It was like a slim, reflective metal tower about six metres tall. Just over head height, various thick appendages jutted out like twisted arms and, at the very top, an array of tubes, coils and clusters of spheres were all tightly packed like petals on a flower. Because of their strange shape, each climate controller was jokingly referred to as a 'climate cactus'. On nearing the faulty one, Jack spotted that its side panelling had appeared to have been ripped open. He cautiously stepped towards where the metal sides had been peeled back and groaned with dismay when he saw the damage to the intricate circuitry inside. Each cactus contained about thirty million pounds of hardware and Jack could see clearly that this was way beyond repair. What could have done this? A faulty circuit setting off an explosion from the fusion battery? There was certainly no evidence of any explosion. Perhaps the marks near the edges might reveal something... Four deep grooves at the edge of the torn metal looked strange. It was almost as if they were caused by claws... Ridiculous! Mars is a dead planet. And no creature on Earth would have the strength to rip through three centimetres of reinforced titanium metal.

But you are not on Earth, Jack reminded himself. This is Mars. A largely undiscovered world. What if-

Movement out of the corner of Jack's eye made him spin round. The low gravity made him stumble and he fell to the rocky floor. This action quite possibly saved his life as a huge creature – jet black and covered with wicked spikes – flew

past his head, narrowly missing him, leaping through the very spot where Jack once stood.

Heart thumping loudly in his ears, Jack stumbled to his feet and studied the creature. It was over two metres tall with a shimmering black carapace, similar in appearance to a large beetle but with muscular arms and legs. The shell of the creature was covered with pointed barbs that reflected the pale, Martian sunlight. The creature's head was low; shadowed eyes seeking out where its prey had disappeared to. On spotting Jack, the monster reared up to its full height, spread out its four deadly clawed arms and screeched a piercing cry into the crimson sky. When it finished, its alien gaze turned back to Jack and began to advance towards him.

Jack scrambled to his feet, half running and stumbling due to the lower gravity. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the creature was giving chase, its four arms gripping the ground and propelling it forward at a tremendous pace - scuttling across the rocky surface – gaining on Jack every second.

There seemed to be no escape! Any moment this giant beetle would have grabbed him and... There! A crack in the rocks. It looked just big enough for him to squeeze through. If he could just reach it, he might be safe enough to send an emergency distress signal back to base. Drawing every last scrap of fear-fuelled energy, Jack leapt forward, arms outstretched, willing himself to reach the rocks...

Too late.

A sudden, violent blow to his waist sent him wildly spinning across the gravelly surface. The whole world

became a blur of red rocks, dark sky and then... A blinding, white light flashed through Jack's brain as his helmet struck the cave entrance. The last thing he saw was the creature's looming silhouette blocking out the sun...

Chapter 2 – Dying planet

Low oxygen. Fifty million miles from Earth. Attacked by a ferocious alien bug. No signal on the communicator.

Jack began to feel waves of panic build up inside of him. After taking three slow, deep breaths he regained his composure and then assessed his current situation.

The beetle-beast had gone. Where? No idea. But it could be returning soon.

Secondly, he appeared to be in a cave. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could make out what looked like passages into deeper darkness. Mars was once thought to have a supply of water many millions of years ago. Could this have once been some kind of underground river?

Finally, and most importantly, the dwindling air supply. According to the indicator on his helmet display, he had less than twenty minutes of air left. If he could just find his way back to the outside, he might be able to send a distress call to base and someone might find him before lack of oxygen slowly suffocated him.

Jack studied the ground. Logically there must be some evidence of how he arrived there. The cave floor was covered in strange tracks scattered in all directions but the majority seemed to coming to and from a wide passage to his left. Since most of the tracks seemed to go that way, Jack guessed it held a higher chance of an exit to the surface. To risk getting lost in these tunnels was not an option. Pulling himself up against the rocky wall, Jack began to edge towards the passage.

Treading carefully to minimise the sound of his footfalls, Jack slowly crept onwards. The tunnel appeared to be going up a gentle incline and the level of light was increasing. Was he approaching the surface? Heart-aching hope surged in his chest as he became aware of a faint orange glow around a bend in the distance. Quickening his pace, fully aware that the oxygen level warning light was blinking furiously, Jack stumbled around the corner, his hand already reaching for his communicator...

... and then stopped to a juddering halt at the sight before him.

He was in a vast, underground cavern. Suspended high above, amidst pointed stalactites, were dozens of glowing orbs each giving off a pale, amber light. But it the sight below was what caused him to slump to his knees in despair.

Hundreds – *thousands!* – of the bug beasts were scurrying around and at the sound of Jack's sudden arrival – they all stopped as one and turned to face him.

Chapter 3 – Invaders

Paralysed with terror, Jack watched with growing horror as the horde surged towards him. He could never outrun them and already the stale air from his tank was being recycled. Death by suffocation or ripped apart by monstrous insects? Jack closed his eyes and awaited for the inevitable.

Any moment now. Jack's mind was filled with nightmare visions of what would happen.

Any moment now.

Any moment now...

Jack opened his eyes. The swarm of creatures had stopped some several metres away. Motionless. All watching him. Then, without any warning, they parted, creating a clear path for a small creature to approach.

It was no taller than a metre - nothing at all like the bug beasts. It reminded Jack of storybook pictures of pixies and fairies that he remembered as a small boy. It looked like a small child but with impossibly thin limbs. The skin of the creature was translucent and gave off a ghostly glow. Enveloping the creature was a gossamer thin material that flowed as if in a swift moving stream. But it was the face that mesmerised Jack: oval with two large, dark eyes that seemed to transfix him with their piercing gaze.

Why?

The voice filled Jack's head with such clarity that it startled him.

Why? Why have you done this?

The creature was speaking to him through his mind! A telepath! Thousands of questions tumbled through his mind

but already stars were beginning to fill his darkening vision: the first signs of suffocation.

It is dying. What does it want? Why? Alien!

Hard to breathe... painful...

Hold the creature down.

Suddenly Jack's world exploded! A blinding flash of light and a sense of warmth filled his body. He felt invigorated, alive, energised! He sat up and the bug beasts that had held him, stepped back to form a line behind the strange elfin creature.

Why?

The voice again. It was faintly feminine, clear and this time, insistent. Jack felt compelled to speak. "I... I don't know what you mean?"

Interloper! Intruder! Invader!

"I'm sorry! I don't understand," replied Jack.

You come from the blue planet. Your kind has invaded. You poison our skies. You bring death!

It began to dawn on Jack what was happening. Each climate cactus was designed to make the Martian atmosphere tolerable for Earth life forms. Over a period of years, they would alter the composition of the air, allowing scientists to bring genetically modified, oxygen-producing plants to Mars; bringing life to a dead planet.

However, this planet was far from dead. If there had been any evidence of life on Mars, the experiment would never have taken place. Humans had polluted the Martian air without realising they were killing an alien race. The first discovery of an extraterrestrial species and humans were ignorantly destroying them.

“I’m so sorry. We didn’t know!” Jack felt an incredible feeling of shame build up inside him. “We thought the planet was uninhabited... We...”

Looking around the cavern, Jack could now see past his initial fear of the creatures. Many were sluggishly moving; dozens were lying still, their antennae barely moving; some were curled into tight balls, motionless.

He is telling the truth. Let me give him the knowledge of Eutari.

The elfin creature glided towards Jack. Its hand open, revealing a pulsating sphere of sparkling light. Jack felt no sense of fear as it approached, only a sense of wonder and amazement. He reached his hand forward and suddenly heard the sound of a thousand voices speaking as one.

We are Eutari.

Our existence is one of harmony and peace.

We are few in number, mere billions now, but once we spanned the stars.

Your species has intrigued us. You explore, discover, create and fight. You are such a primitive species capable of extreme cruelty. This is why we have hidden from you. But now you have taken your first steps on our world, bringing death.

So we give you this simple message:

Leave us.

Stop your invasion.

Take your machines away and do not attempt to contact us.

When humans are worthy – when you treat your own species and your planet with respect – we will come to you. We will share our knowledge and together our civilisations will celebrate amongst the stars.

The slender Eutari stepped back, closing her hand and watched Jack intently. He now knew everything about the Eutari. Although few words were spoken, he was aware of their epic history, the life and incredible achievements of their species. Glimpses of otherworldly wonders and amazing sights that he could not even begin to comprehend had been revealed to him. He would travel back to Alpha base (for he now knew the exact route back to the surface) and tell them of this momentous, historic discovery. He had discovered an alien race that was willing to share its secrets about the universe. This was the beginning of a new era for humankind!

But if he failed to convince the people of Earth – if they sent more ships to investigate the Eutari – or failed to leave Mars entirely alone, then there would be consequences...

For Jack knew that if Earth failed to heed this simple warning then the Eutari would strike back. He knew that hundreds of alien races had offended the Eutari over the years...

... and every one of them had been mercilessly annihilated.