

# WE ARE MARTIANS

A Novel by E. R. Dee

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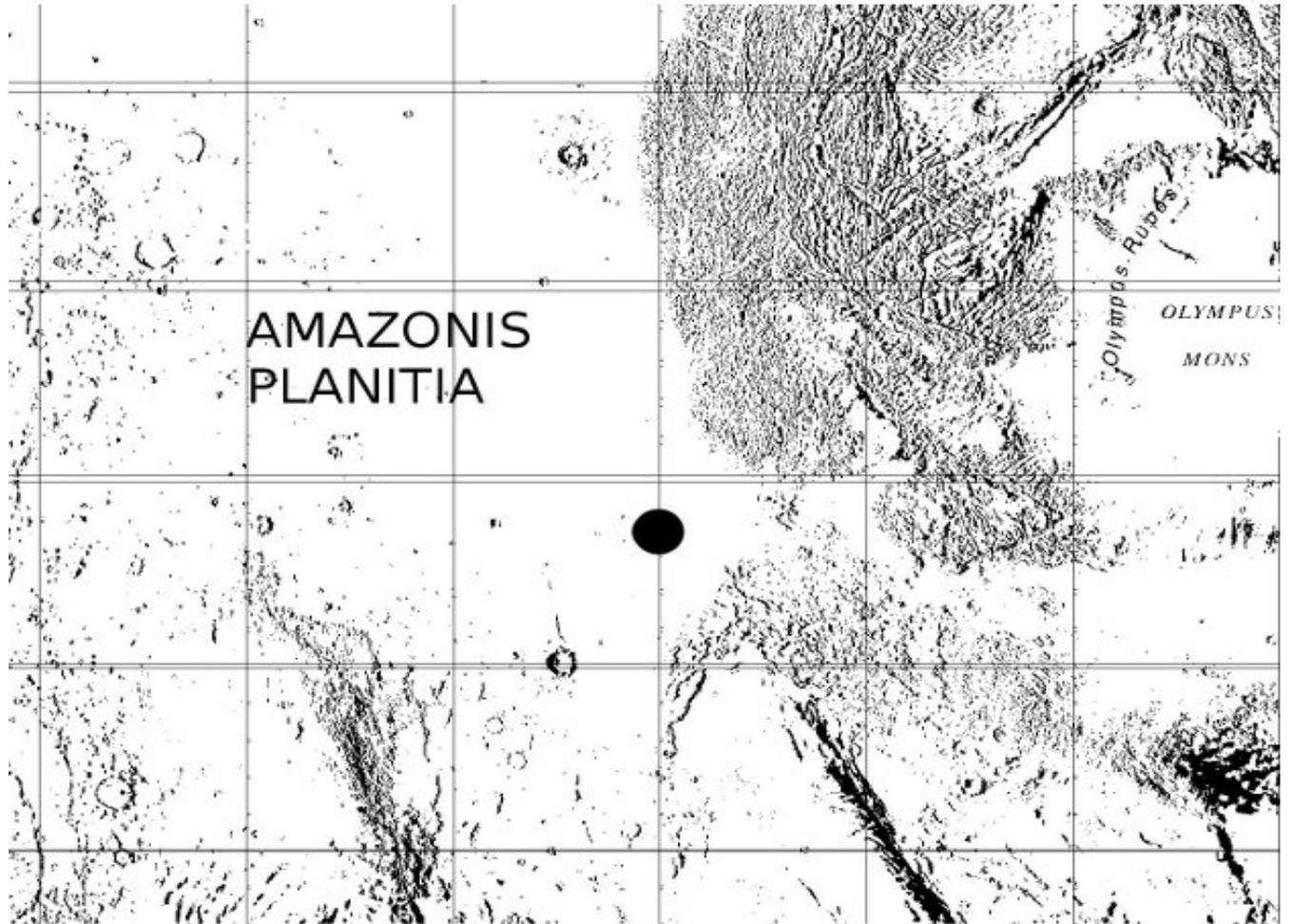
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Pat Norris emerged from the food service area, surveyed the room and made a beeline for a table on the far side where her husband, daughter, and friends sat downing coffee and dessert.

“Hey!” She said, setting down her tray and pulling out the empty chair.

“You’re late, mom! What gives?” Her daughter asked. “*Dad* even made it here before you did today.”

“I got stuck helping to put a story to bed,” she said, settling in and looking from one blank face to another. “A sad news story, I’m afraid.” Everyone stared at her with questioning silence, so she gave them a spoiler: “It was confirmed by the authorities that Roger Barton died in a plane crash.”

“What?” Her husband John’s face grew pale as his smile sank into a frown of shock and sadness, as he and Roger were both business partners and good friends.

“Oh, no . . .” Marrika Abbott moaned and put her hand over her mouth.

“It’s not on the news yet!” Geoffrey Abbott said, turning about and looking at the monitor screen on the far wall. “Unless I missed it.”

“That’s old news. It’ll be topping the seven o’clock news. We didn’t want to start a panic or ruin an otherwise productive week, so we held off on this report as long as possible. Several days ago, however, we heard his plane had vanished from radar in a storm over the Indian Ocean. We waited on the story because talk of a crash was just conjecture from news agencies and reporters. Then, only hours ago, came the confirmed report of them finding debris from his private jet. With this confirmation in hand, we put together a piece on him,” Pat said, taking her first bite of dinner.

“Wait a minute . . .” Geoff looked from her to her husband John and then to his wife Marrika. “What did you mean by start a panic?”

“The report we got included comments from the directors of his companies. Among the comments they made included: ‘We’ll have to see about that down the road.’ They were referring to us.” Pat told him.

“What’s that suppose to mean?” Marrika asked, growing concerned about *that* remark.

“Well, our production staff found comments from Roger and several board members indicating that he did the Mars thing solo and they weren’t a part of it, nor did they share his interest in outer space,” Pat said, with a shrug. “So, I’m not sure about our status. Mars Limited is an autonomous entity with a staff on Earth. Roger, however, was the driving force behind the project for over three decades.”

“It seems like you’re taking this all rather lightly!” Marrika’s voice shrilled a little as she watched Pat calmly eating her dinner.

“I’ve sat on this story for most of the week and we were working up our report all afternoon. Besides, if I let the things that come across the wire get to me, I’d have ulcers and high blood pressure!” Pat told her and then shrugged. “Look, there’s nothing you or I can do about it now. Roger’s a good business man and if he could do something, like leaving a will demanding that we continue, he would have. Wouldn’t he?” She wrinkled her brow and continued: “Did any of you ever meet with his board members or executives? His family?”

“No,” Geoff said, shaking his head. “Only management people under him. As far as I know he was never married and didn’t have kids. He never mentioned brothers or sisters. Whenever we went to his house, it was a business meeting or business event. One of his grand parties with mostly staff and people like us.”

“Other than staff, we were never introduced to anyone in his business world . . . right?” She looked at her husband, who shook his head in agreement. “Sounds like we were isolated from anything negative, dismal or bad.” Pat shrugged as she took another bite of dinner. “I suppose we’ll hear officially once the dust settles.”

Everyone in the dining area grew silent that night as Australian billionaire Roger Barton’s picture flashed on the monitor screen with a twenty-minute eulogy given by Barton’s network staff back on Earth that was now being replayed by the Mars network.

Barton had been a very accessible man and everyone there had met and talked with him many times back on Earth. Most had been to his parties in Brisbane, seen him at conferences or the job sites where he would talk to them on a first name basis. Everyone in the room was genuinely touched by his passing, except for the children who only knew of him through the cards and presents they got each term that was sent for their birthdays as Roger Barton was terribly proud of the ‘Martians’ that grew out of the Earth people he sent up to work on that desolate planet.

Bored to tears the younger children sought out the older ones like Tristin Blau and Amy McGill, who were twelve Earth years old. They led a pack of children to the table where the almost fourteen-year-old Jennifer Norris was sitting across from ten-year-old Karen Abbott. Amy bent over and whispered into Jen’s ear.

“I’m . . .” Jennifer smiled and looked at her dad, Doctor John, and then at her mother. “Going with them.” She pointed towards the exit doorway. John Norris just nodded his acknowledgment as Jen sprang to her feet and picked up her tray to take to the busing bins.

Craig Anderson and Jerry Thompson, who were standing by Amy, motioned to Karen.

“We’re going to go play chess or something,” Karen told her mother who nodded her head in approval. Karen then stood up, turned and headed out with her pack that included Roberto, Hiro, Eric, and Paul Reid, who at eleven, was the oldest boy on Mars.

Jennifer, Tristin, and Amy gathered up the rest of the older kids stating that they were all going to the game room. This came as a pleasant surprise to the mothers who had already missed part of the video broadcast while dealing with fidgety little ones.

The girls walked the children over to the room filled with chess and checker boards, duck pin lanes, pool tables, Foosball units, shuffle boards and other diversions meant to keep the locals from going totally stir crazy.

Tristin and Jennifer got the tournament chess boards set up. Jen was one of the better chess players out of those who played at the Amazonis outpost. Her dad, Karen’s mom, along with many of the Russians still put Jennifer to shame, but she did her best to hold her own and learn from their attacks. Tonight, Jen played against Karen, Eric, Roberto, Jerry, Craig, and Hiro, all of whom were good at chess. Jen expected she would end up conceding to one of them each tournament. Tristin was teaching the younger ones chess using the same tournament model, but showing them how bad moves played out and what they could have done to make a better move. While Paul played chess, he wasn’t all that great at it. His game was Foosball and he was now one of the best players on Mars, beating out dozens of construction workers and technicians at least, half the time. Another thing he was good at was cards, although Karen and Jennifer gave him a run for his money in both poker and eight ball.

*Hey! Jen once told him. Karen and I really know our geometry and trig!* Referring to their mastery of bank shots on the pool table that often put him to shame as he just made straight shots to the pocket.

Paul nudged Jennifer and pointed to the balls he racked up on the table. Now Jennifer was not only playing timed chess against six other kids, one of whom was almost half her age, but she was also playing eight ball with Paul at the same time.

“I’m going to run the table on you!” He told her.

Jennifer then ran around the table. “Beat you to it!” She said.

That got laughter out of Karen, Jerry, and Craig until Jen walked over to the chess boards and slapped the clocks after she’d completed each move.

Back at the pool table, Jennifer broke, allowing Paul to run the table until he scratched.

“Thank you for moving all of those balls out of my way,” she said, chalking up the tip of her cue and looking things over. After going around the table once she returned to the chess boards and made moves at both Roberto and Jerry’s tables before hearing Paul clear his throat.

“If you need to spit up, there’s a restroom over there,” she told him, nodding towards the back of the room.

He shot her an impatient glare.

“I don’t see a clock on this table,” she said, stretching out and positioning her stick to the cue ball. “Two ball over there,” she pointed with her stick. “Four ball knocks the seven ball in over there. The four ball could go in as well.” She stretched out even more and whacked the cue ball. The two ball went in, as did the seven. The four ball bounced back and tapped the cue ball. “Four ball there!”

“Crap . . .” Paul muttered under his breath.

“Again,” she said to him. “The restroom is over there.” She took the shot and the four ball went into the same pocket as the seven ball. “Back in a flash!” She said, going over and moving pieces on boards belonging to Karen, Hiro, Craig, and Roberto before returning to the pool table. “One ball over there!” She pointed. She then whacked the ball which hit the rim behind the pocket came back out and kissed the cue ball then settled off to the side. “Damn it!” Jen muttered and put her stick up against the wall. “Go!” She waved her arm. “Take your shot. Run the table.” She went back to the chess tables and turned to face Paul. “When I come back I wanna see you standing there with no balls!”

Karen, Craig, and Jerry broke out in hysterical laughter. Jen closed her eyes, turned about and blushed. “I didn’t mean it to come off that way!” She muttered, breaking into a chuckle herself. “What’s Paul doing?” She asked of Eric, who was trying hard not to laugh as he was one of Paul’s chums.

“Standing there and patting the palm of his hand with the stick,” he told her. “If I were you I wouldn’t bend over because I think he took that the wrong way!”

“If I win I get a kiss!” Paul said dryly, as he headed for the table and his shot.

“And if I win you wear a sign on your back all day tomorrow that says ‘kick me, I’m a doofus!’”

“Sounds good to me!” He bent over and moved the stick back and forth.

“You know you only get that kiss if you have no balls!” Jerry reminded him, as the laughter continued.

Paul turned and pointed the stick at Jerry. “I’ll deal with you later!” He then turned back to the table and his shot.

Roberto made a move on her king with his knight. “Check!”

Jen walked over to the board, made a move and hit the clock.

“Thank you!” Roberto smiled and quickly made another move. “Check.”

Jen went over to Hiro and made a move. “Check,” she told him.

She went over to Karen and made a move. They were now chasing each other around the board.

She went back to Roberto and made another move and then made a move at Jerry's table. "Check and in two more moves mate," she told Jerry.

"What?" He said, looking over the board as Roberto pointed out the two moves to him.

"Check," Roberto told her after he'd made the next move. Jennifer countered and then Roberto moved his queen across the board. "Check."

Jen stood back and looked at his board. "Crap!" She muttered, making the only move she saw.

"The restroom . . ." Paul nodded with his head as he looked at Jen with a big grin. "Over there!" He then turned his gaze back to the pool table.

Jennifer wrinkled her nose, shot him a glare, tossed her hair back and then looked at her board with Roberto.

"Check!" Roberto moved a rook across the table.

Jen stood there and shook her head, realizing what had just happened. "And in three moves mate," Jen laid her king down on the board in tacit resignation. "Very good game!"

Roberto, at only ten-years-old, was a really good chess player, and he'd win against Jennifer not quite half the time, but he still couldn't beat many of the Russians, who were among the best players, while Jennifer had beaten most of them at least once.

Jen moved on Karen again. "This is a stalemate, isn't it?"

"In strict rules of chess not for a few more moves," Karen told her.

A scowl came over Jen's face as this meant one loss and one draw.

Jen moved pieces against Hiro and Craig. "Check!" She announced to Hiro.

Craig then made a move.

"Was there a reason you did that?" Jen inquired, as Roberto, Jerry, and Karen looked over the board.

"Cause he's a dumb ass?" Roberto put forth.

Karen pointed out the next few moves and put his piece back where it was and showed him what he could have done.

"Let him take the move back and try it that way," Jen said.

"Cuuuuse me!" Paul shouted. "Eight ball over there!" He tapped. "And I'd like my kiss French style!"

"Yeah, right," Jen muttered very softly. "In your dreams . . ."

"What's French style?" Karen inquired, looking from Robby to Craig to Jerry.

"Tongue to tongue," came Roberto's somber reply.

"Yuuuccccckkkk!" Karen prolonged the guttural sounds while making a face of disgust.

Paul scratched once more, blew steam and muttered something under his breath.

Jen then knocked in the six ball and went back after the ball that eluded her last time only to have it bounce back out again. "Gees! Is that a rigged ball?"

Paul made a fist and punched the air as he shouted: "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!" He then went back to the table and lined up another shot. This time, he made it.

"All right!" He stood up straight and twirled his cue stick. "I'd like my kiss now!"

Jen made a face and cocked her head while pondering ways of getting out of this predicament with honor. She felt a poke behind her as something got palmed in her hand and *that* made her smile. “All right,” she said, moving towards him. “Here it comes, so close your eyes.” Paul shut his eyes and puckered his lips in anticipation of sheer delight. In her hand was a silvery, bell-shaped object with a slip of white paper that she brought up to his face. “There’s your kiss!” She slowly pressed it to his waiting mouth, then turned her head and giggled at her new hero, Karen, who was standing behind her with a bag full of Earth candy fished from the snack area in the game room.

“That’s not fair!” Paul said, looking at the foil wrapped booby prize. “I said a French kiss!”

“You said you’d like your kiss *French style*,” Karen corrected, as she read from the package label. “This comes from the Dumont plant in Belgium under license from Hershey in Pennsylvania. They speak French in Belgium and Dumont is a French name. That makes this a ‘French style kiss,’” she made a big grin as all the guys at the chess table laughed.

The kids continued to make the rounds in the game room until the hour got late and they all headed out the doorway to the elevators. Tristin ran point and Jennifer brought up the rear with everyone else spread out between the two older girls.

“Want another kiss?” Karen held out the package to Paul. “I’ll give you a choice!” She puckered up her lips to him.

“Out of the way, squirt!” Paul said, moving around her.

Karen mouthed silent words of vexation as he walked away. Moving into the main concourse, she ran towards the others, brushing against Paul and catching up with Craig, who was just in front of her. “You want a kiss, don’t you,” she held out the bag. Craig stopped and took one. She took his other hand, pulled him to her, pressed her lips against his, then turned and stuck her tongue out to Paul while dragging the befuddled Craig forward once more and swinging his hand with hers.

“What’s up with you?” Jerry asked of the very frazzled Craig, once they reached the elevator doors. Karen waited to see if Craig ‘kissed and told.’ He didn’t. He just stood there with a blank expression on his face.

With the ding of the arrival bell, their attention suddenly turned to the elevator doors that had just opened before them. They all filed into the car and the third and fourth-floor buttons got pressed as the doors slid shut, bringing that night of adventure to an end.

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The workers on Mars eventually learned that the Barton heirs were looking to divest themselves of the *Out Of This World* product line. That was the line of sodas, snacks, candy and fruit beverages providing key financing to Mars, Ltd., the company that operated the colony of now well over three hundred men, women, and children who lived and worked on the many Martian scientific outposts, along with the orbiting space station.

Various scientific bodies in Australia dealing with space and astronomy had tried to take over the Mars project from the Barton group, who had eagerly donated the operation, but not the Earth buildings or product lines, as those were being sold off along with all other Barton assets.

The government departments and agencies took in as many staffers as possible and let go of those not vital to the day-to-day operation.

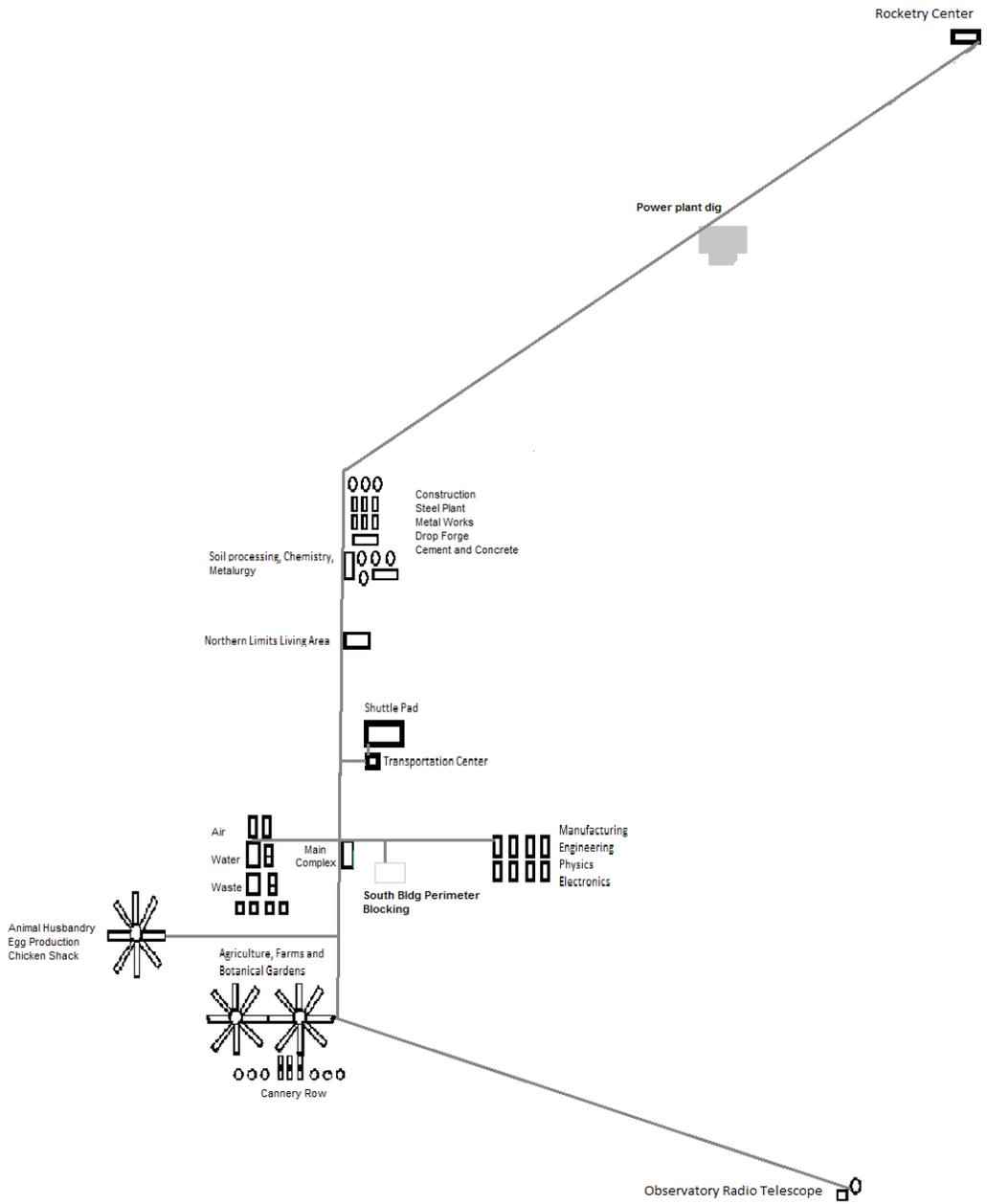
Getting a budget from any government for science and space work that wasn’t defense-related was nearly impossible and what you got from the powers that be was hardly enough for a project like Mars. Mars needed regular infusions of air, water, food, clothing, medicines and other goods. These had to be sent into space by rocket and directed to Mars by remote control or a live crew. The reality of running an off world entity hit the fan, so the Australians partnered up with the European Space programs.

Even with the costs split among eighteen nations, there were issues, so a large part of the operation got sold to Russia and China who agreed to take the Euro scientists along for a ride to Mars and back. Australia, the country of origin for the privatized Barton Mars project, bailed out of the operation altogether. They would still receive residual benefits such as reports, soil samples, cores and other trifles for their heroic efforts in trying to save the project that was now in the hands of Europe and Asia.

Roger Barton, the richest man in Australia and one of the richest people in the known universe, had put together a funding organization that included his rich and powerful friends, various nations, readers of science and science fiction who subscribed with as little as one dollar a month. It was with these millions of subscribers who wanted to invest in space and see progress on other worlds, along with the Barton fortunes and other sponsors, that had enabled the Mars operation to go on for decades. Without Barton, however, this funding network fell apart.

Barton ran the biggest commercial operation in the Pacific Rim. He owned construction companies, rental companies, hotels, condominiums, bottling plants, confectioners, broadcasting, cable, and satellite networks. He had plowed his own money into Mars, and used his business clout to get letters of credit to finance an operation now in a governmental collective that had to answer to bureaucrats, elected officials as well as the taxpayers of each nation, most of whom thought space exploration was a waste of money and resources.

The new Consortium of Mars Operations, as the multinational pact called themselves, notified the Barton contingent still on Mars that everyone would continue at the same pay and benefits that Barton had negotiated on their contracts. In return, they expected work on the nuclear reactor to continue as planned. They also noted that the Russians and Chinese were still committed to the small particle project set to begin construction once the power plant was up and running.



Design: J. Norris  
Drawing: E.R.Deer

Jennifer Norris was just a toddler when the initial plans for the north region were drawn up. Her dad, Doctor John, was the major architect of the Amazonis Martian outpost so he was involved in all the projects that had buildings. He split his time between the dig for the power plant and the completion of the Northern living complex that was designed to service workers in that area.

As with most cities and towns Amazonis was built on north, south, east, and west concepts. Unlike most Earth cities, however, the landing field was located almost in the center of town. This was for convenience as when they were first building the settlement the shuttle was used as their shelter and they needed the outside places to be close to where the men and equipment were located. When they started building both permanent and temporary work areas these were placed next to, but well spaced from, the landing field.

The first permanent cement structure was the drop forge that was built to see if they could make workable metal out of the hematite that made up much of the surface. This structure was intentionally kept a distance away from the temporary shelters and the observatory out of fear of explosions with molten metal flying about. The second permanent structure made out of cement was the warehouse and transit center located close to the landing field.

The landing field was a vast expanse the size of a stadium with beacons on all four sides and outer markers to the west and east that guided shuttles into ground zero. Originally just a flattened dirt area, ground zero was now a cement slab higher than the topsoil that surrounded the area.

The main living complex was built to the southwest of the landing field to avoid the flight path and immediate crash zone. The agriculture farms and chicken shack were built further to the south and west. Chemistry and soil processing were located up north where the steel plant had been built. The observatory was way down in the southeastern region away from lights and electrical interference.

When a small nuclear power plant was proposed they decided that it was to be built way to the north so that it wouldn't interfere with the radio telescope or pose a serious fallout hazard should an accident occur. It also had to be well out of the shuttle flight path.

Because of all of this northern expansion a new living facility was needed to be built close to, yet safely away from, these toxic work areas. It was also expected that when the nuclear plant became a reality even more expansion in production and workers would occur as they would almost certainly expand the small metal production facility that only rolled sheet steel, tubing, rebar, and I-beams. While steel production was expensive with all the gas, coke, and oxygen required to make the product, it was far cheaper than importing it from Earth as they had done for the first few structures that were made entirely out of Earth metals and cements. With the new power plant, they could also switch from hydrogen fuel to an electric arc furnace for the metal works saving a ton of money each term.

The nuclear reactor would bring a new era on Mars; one of high-powered electricity to replace the toxic, volatile hydrogen, nuclear, and hydrazine batteries they used along with the motor driven generators.

Roger Barton figured that by the end of the new century more than a thousand people would be working and living on Mars building complete cities with Amazonis as the first. It would be the London, New York, Moscow, Rome or Sydney of Mars and Isidis on the other side of the planet would be the 'second city.'

Right now there were over two hundred on the surface spread out over the entire planet with most of them there at Amazonis, some at Isidis, another hundred were up at the OSLO in orbit around Mars

and a few scattered at tiny scientific settlements to the north and south. A total population of just over three hundred.

This new building, that was nearly finished, would eventually house about another two hundred people who would work in the northern sector at the power plant, steel mill, chemical processing plants, and soil refinery. The Russians and Chinese also planned for a small-particle project to be built in the northwestern zone. As a result, they pitched in with materials for the power plant along with Roger Barton, France, and India.

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It took almost an hour for Doctor John and daughter Jen to reach their destination as the transport had to traverse a flattened dirt road. Asphalt or concrete roadways were impractical due to the frigid temperature fluctuations and windstorms that would suddenly cover the roadways with shifting sands. With dirt roads, all you had to do was send out a few bulldozers and a civil engineer to help keep you on the straight and narrow. In the span of daylight hours, you had a roadway back up and running. With a concrete or asphalt road, the first thing you had to do was try and find it under all the sand that got blown over everything. Then you had to clear it away without damaging the asphalt surface and sometimes there'd be many inches of sand and rocks spewed over everything. With cement and concrete, you had to deal with cracks, crumbling, potholes, and sinkholes. It was just too much maintenance and would take far too long to construct in the frigid tundra that was Mars, so dirt roads were the norm.

Erecting a permanent building was time-consuming and hard enough! Northern was now in its second Martian year, or about four dog-years, as the kids called Earth-years. One year for a human was seven for a dog. One year for a Martian was almost two years for an Earther as the Martian timekeeping system had forty minutes more each day than days on Earth, with months that ran fifty-five or fifty-six days instead of thirty or thirty-one. A Martian year was 689 Earth days. Hence, a calendar year for a Martian was almost two years for an Earther. Dog-years. On Earth a building this size would be completed in less than six months. This one was only made as far as the walls, floors, and power units after almost four dog-years.

From the transport bus windows, you could easily tell a building once you were close enough to see the beacon. This high off the ground post acted like a lighthouse on Earth to guide people during dust storms or at night. The sturdy titanium-steel pole that was sunk deep into the ground and surrounded by concrete also served to hold the radio antenna that kept communication going between buildings. Next, you looked for the six-foot tall retaining walls that bordered the garage entrances. A series of green LEDs on top of the wall for the down ramp or red LEDs for the up ramp. The four walls blocked the path of sand storms from wreaking total havoc on the ramps and underground garages. Here, the north and south walls made up the ramp while the east and west walls blocked sand from going straight down into the garage area. Around the east wall, their transport went in through an eighteen-foot gap, then turned down the ramp-way and went into the parking garage stopping up against **Airlock 1** on the main wall.

Their transport kissed the lips of the lock and the shrouds on both the transport and wall around the airlock collapsed creating a seal. With a jerk and shudder, the transport bus made contact with the wall. The man riding shotgun on the left seat got up, flipped over his pressure hood, closed the inner doors and verified that the outer door seals were as airtight as possible. He talked on his com unit and the inside lock man opened the wall doors. The two exchanged nods, read their instruments and then the shotgun man came back and opened the inner doors.

“Northern Limits,” he said, turning on the address system. “Exit in a single-file and orderly manner!”

Those people working here then got to their feet and passed freely between the transport bus and the building without having to wear pressure suits.

“What’s with the kid?” Ryan, the inside lock man, asked when he saw Jennifer follow in behind Doctor John.

“Why do you ask? Isn’t this place safe?” John asked, skeptically.