

The Rubicon Saga - Part 1

We Are Mars

Cheryl Lawson

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Dedication

To all of us - the little people, the big people and everyone in between - that look up at the vastness of space and believe, with all our hearts, that we will go there.

To my family for enduring my maniacal enthusiasm for writing this story - for listening, encouraging and standing with me through it all. Love.

Timeline in Earth years

- 2035 Mars Mission inauguration
- 2069 First unmanned flight to Mars to establish Rubicon base
- 2075 Rubicon near completion. First human flights to settle Rubicon are launched
- 2076 Rubicon becomes first permanently-settled, non-Earth colony
- 2080 G-mod program successfully breeds first 20 babies
- 2095 Rubicon settlement population surpasses 1000

Quick facts on Mars

- Fourth planet from the sun, orbiting at a distance of 228 million kilometers
- One day on Mars takes 24 hours and 37 minutes
- Mars completes its orbit of the sun in 687 Earth days
- The atmosphere on Mars is thin, made up, mostly, of carbon monoxide, nitrogen and argon
- Temperatures on Mars range from 35° C (95° F) mid-summer at the equator, down to -143° C (-225° F) at night in winter
- Mars is known as the Red Planet because of the high concentration of iron in the soil which oxidizes, making the ground and the dusty atmosphere appear red.

WE ARE MARS

Year 2128 (Present Day). Fifty-two Earth years after Rubicon's establishment.

The sweat beaded on his forehead. The auger slowed, then stopped spinning and he put the capsule containing the blue liquid into the sample compartment that ordinarily brought solid ice up from deep within the glacier for testing in the lab. He looked around the dark, quiet cavern.

He was alone.

At this time of night, no one else was around and he could work in peace - undisturbed and unnoticed. He needed to be quick though - the new drilling crew would be here in two hours to begin the ice extraction at this site. Everything had to be in place before they started their shift. He needed to be careful to leave the work site just as it was when he arrived down here an hour ago. There could be no trace of his activities, no link back to him.

The capsule locked in place and he set the depth and speed of the drill, checking over the details of the operation one more time to be sure there were no errors. He pushed the start button and the machine buzzed loudly and began to whine and vibrate as the blades turned. The dim glow from his headlamp cast long, moving shadows from the auger. It spun and dipped downwards into position. The turning auger made contact with the surface of the ice, grinding and shuddering from the resistance of the hard surface around the hole he'd just excavated.

All the sounds were muffled inside the suit's helmet. His breathing was even, and he blinked twice to clear the sweat that ran into the corner of one eye.

The drill sank deeper and deeper, occasionally grinding

and slicing into the side of the already-drilled hole. He wished there was an easier way to deliver the package, but there wasn't. Using the drill, and the existing excavation to get it down there, was the only way to do it in such a short space of time. It went deeper into the glacier.

He watched the screen and waited. It would be about twenty minutes before the sample compartment on the drill head reached the cavity in the ice into which he would release the contents of the capsule.

He looked up again and watched the shadows twist and dance on the cave walls. It was a frozen, encrusted dome, carved out millennia before by molten, gushing lava. He couldn't imagine anything that hot in this icy place. The thick columns of ice, the crusted, frozen floor of the cave, the sheen of smooth, solid ice, that was older than time itself. It all defied the image of red-hot, liquid lava pouring through here - hollowing out and melting the rock around it, boiling and sloshing with intense, withering heat.

The drill kept going.

This job had better be worth it, he thought sourly to himself. He was sacrificing a lot to do this and if he didn't get his big payout, it would be the end for him. The ways in which this could go wrong were endless, but the risks were calculated, and possibilities of failure examined, down to the last detail. He forged ahead with confidence. It was finally time to change the game and this was the kick-off. The drill head reached the programmed depth in the glacier and slowed to a stop. He stood, checked all the instruments one more time, then gave a simple instruction that would set the plan into motion—*Deploy*.

His heart beat a little faster. He felt the small thrill of anticipation. He projected his thoughts out along the timeline of

events that would unfold, and he smiled to himself. Only days separated him from his goal. If it worked, this plan would create a chaos that guaranteed he'd go unnoticed and undetected.

Soon, he'd be leaving this place with victory in hand. It was a pity they'd delayed his departure by demanding he report on the mission's progress and success. Without the need to report in every four hours, he could have left today and avoided any potential fall-out if things went wrong.

He was done down here. His shadowy figure slipped into the darkness, leaving the capsule to crack and ooze its contents into the glacier. The blue liquid froze on contact, becoming part of the ice, as if it wasn't even there. The capsule continued to dissolve into the zone of ice surrounding the cavity until there was nothing left of it.

The drill stood silent at the glacier's surface once more. The ice and cavern appeared unchanged and undisturbed, exactly according to his plan.

WE ARE MARS

Beginnings

2110 - Eighteen Years Earlier

The dark room was filled with anticipation. The short film started to play, and the history lesson began. Their young eyes were large, reflecting the moving images from the screen. They sat still, absorbing the story with varying degrees of fascination.

The movie began with a monologue - *They called it Rubicon after the famous river in Italy, crossed by Julius Caesar, millennia ago, on his way to Rome. This Rubicon bears as much symbolism as its ancient predecessor - there is no going back this time either. Just as Caesar conquered Rome, so Mars was conquered. The prize for its conquerors - the settlement of Rubicon. A beacon of hope for the future, a scientific and social marvel, a new planet to call home.*

Humans are the only multi-planetary species, a species of unparalleled intellect and technical ability. We have successfully conquered the galaxy...

The movie played on, describing how the Rubicon settlement was established in 2076.

It had been an active mission for over five Earth years, with the work of building the initial settlement habitat happening only in the last year before the human landings. Once the construction robots had completed the miles of underground tunnels and biomes, Rubicon was massive when compared to earlier, temporarily-inhabited bases on Mars and, also when compared to the semi-permanent habitats on the moon orbiting Earth. With only the out-buildings on the surface as evidence of its presence, Rubicon was, essentially, invisible from above. The dusty, red equatorial plain was the domain of what the crew aboard the orbiting landers called *the rough works* - low,

bunker-like brown buildings. The rough works blended almost perfectly into their dusty surroundings and housed the mechanical operations that managed everything from atmosphere to sewage. This ensured there was enough room below for living quarters, gathering places and a medical center. In addition, there was an education facility, science, technology and biology labs, many offices and various control centers and hubs.

Tube-like corridors connected the parts of Rubicon. They snaked in and out, around bends, up and down gradient changes all throughout the underground caves. The caves were selected for their vast emptiness. Some elevators and open, rising platforms were installed for operational efficiency - to get to the surface or to navigate the vast labyrinth below Rubicon where the lava tubes stretched out in endless, winding darkness. One larger work elevator had been installed to access the massive frozen glacier in the depths of the cave system where all the settlement's fresh water reserves were extracted from.

The gradient changes of the ancient lava tubes were gentle. They were easily navigable with short flights of stairs. There were thousands of stairs in Rubicon, but none of the staircases was more than ten steps high. One of the most common sounds resonating, dully through the settlement, was the quick cadence of footfall, as people came and went - up and down - along the tubular corridors.

The process of assembling Rubicon had taken several Earth years. The acquisition of building and development supplies from Earth had been a slow and strategic necessity at first, but once the highly advanced, large-scale 3-D modular printers were installed and operational, the pace of construction and installation had accelerated greatly.

When construction neared its end, scientists had prepared the two main experiments of the first mission directives. Their tasks included the difficult and time-consuming work of establishing the terraform projects on the barren Mars landscape; and the creation of the designer humans that would inhabit Mars from that time on. In time, the terraform projects were placed on hold, in favor of the development of massive, underground greenhouses that proved more successful and cost-effective.

The progeny experiments had encountered some early failures, but in the decades that followed the first missions attempts, the experiments yielded a good number of able-bodied and strong young people.

The images on-screen changed again and told the story of the first scientific discoveries and projects at Rubicon in more detail.

Dana, a young, blond girl, watched the movie with interest. She was ten. Astute and quick for a student of her age, she was one of many children who had emerged from the human genetics program that had begun many years before.

The film ended and the lights in the room gradually resumed their normal brightness. Their instructor was a cool and intelligent young woman who had graduated from the first class of g-mod's - that was what they called themselves - g-mod's. It was short for *genetically-modified humans*.

Dana watched her teacher with fascination. She wanted to be just like Ms. Shaw. She was poised, even-featured and had an air of control and purpose about her. She had been designed to teach. It would be her life's work and she loved it. Dana knew that all the g-mod's would one day fulfill the vocations they were designed for. She was being raised to be in administrative

leadership. Others would be doctors, scientists, geologists and so on.

Being g-mod came with responsibilities and expectations. They were all expected to meet certain standards of excellence as designer creations. The g-mod's were built with one thing in mind; work excellence - their survival on Mars depended on this uncompromising trait. They were all expected to be obedient and submissive to authority. They were all expected to demonstrate reasonable levels of independent thought and process. That was how the program had been envisioned.

No one could have predicted that the g-mod's would have deep-seated neuroses, fears, doubts or overwhelming feelings of being lost and alone. Dana kept all of that to herself. She kept the nightmares to herself too. She didn't talk to anyone about the dreams that woke her night after night, that soaked her through with deep dread and a sense of being desperately alone.

No one talked about the effects the program had on the young children who were left in the care of robot minders overnight. Apart from the soulless, lifeless robot nannies, the children were unattended in the nurseries and dorms of the children's wing of the residential area. Their nightly isolation was a result of the shortage of human care-givers. There was no one to comfort and soothe them through the long Mars nights. Such a degree of care was deemed an unnecessary cost by the financiers of the mission.

The children in the g-mod program were having the fear and neuroses bred out of them. How could anyone guess they weren't successful at eliminating the children's terror, if no one was around to hear the soft weeping and moans of lonely, scared girls and boys?

Dana sighed and promised herself that, one day, when she was able to, she would make some changes. The next generation of g-mod's would not have the nightmares, nor the need to cry themselves to sleep, alone at night.

Mistakes

WE ARE MARS

Year 2128 (Present Day).

DAY ONE

Jaxon

“Get the goddamned thing working Fields, or I’ll demote you *again!*” Miles Oldham barked with frustrated aggression. The shift supervisor stalked out of the door of the 3-D manufacturing workshop.

“That man has a very large stick up his ass,” Chuck Hart muttered under his breath. He was busy across the room from Jaxon Fields - the focus of their supervisor’s wrath, and his best friend for life.

“Him and all the other stuffed shirts out there,” Jax returned, with a derogatory sneer at the foreman’s weak attempt to assert his authority. He shook his head, dismissing Miles’s uptight demands. He lay on his back, fastening bolts on the belly of the machine mounts of the enormous printer.

When he crawled out from under the bench a few minutes later, he had a smug look on his face. Around here, being a non-gen was usually not something you took pride in, but Jaxon wore it like a badge of honor. He was proud of the fact that he was not some designer baby thought up in a lab with a neat, predictable future planned out for him. He was one-hundred percent full-blooded human - flaws and all.

The non-gen tag had started some years back to distinguish between the natural-born children and the ones that came out of the genetics labs. As an active mission, the Mars settlement

coordinators had strongly discouraged sexual relations, but it was inevitable that people gravitated towards each other for company, comfort and excitement. With the passage of time, this happened more and more. The natural result of these liaisons was a burgeoning population of Mars-born humans that were symbolic of the defiance of the rules and expectations of the mission founders and controllers.

Jaxon broke as many of the rules as they could come up with at Rubicon. He was self-confident, stubborn, resourceful and extremely charming. He had caught the disapproving eye of the settlement commanders years before. Regardless, he continued to defy all measures to bring him in line. His prospects were not good - six demotions in ten Earth years, was not a good track record.

His many offenses included disruptive behavior, insubordination, truancy, fighting and making advances on the women in his work units during work hours.

Jaxon knew they couldn't do much more to him than force him into the lowest, most degrading work posts, but what they didn't know was that he challenged them, openly, to see how far they would really go. His many times in the brig had cost him pay credits and the pleasure of some beautiful, young company while he languished in disciplinary confinement for his offenses.

He was a smart-ass with a smart mouth, but behind the cheeky bravado was a razor-sharp mind that was free to run scenarios and possibilities and spend glorious hours concocting havoc that had the turkeys in Security running in circles.

The confines of the small city underground were no match for his intellect, his boredom and his yearning for adventure.

"He envies you, that's why he's being an asshole." Chuck

came over and slapped his friend on the back, grinning at him.

Chuck knew the game. He got caught up in Jax's troubles often and spent almost as many nights as Jax did, in lock-up. Their close friendship was guaranteed trouble. Standing too close to someone like Jaxon Fields, it was hardly surprising when the shit flew in your direction.

"Chuck, my boy, I think you're right. He looks at me and wonders how one man can be so smart, so good looking, so quick and so *tall*." Jaxon laughed with sarcastic delight. He joked, good-naturedly, about his boss's short-comings. Jax stood head and shoulders taller than Miles and he knew that he intimidated the shorter man -not only with his intelligence and brash personality - but with his superior build and height.

By design, the g-mod's were all smaller in stature, because of the confined spaces of the prefabricated buildings of Rubicon. In contrast, Jaxon was, at least, a few inches taller than most of the men at Rubicon, with wide shoulders and an enviable physique. He had chiseled features and a mop of clay-brown hair that was in need of some tidying up. He dragged his fingers through his hair and flashed a perfect grin at Chuck. That roguish smile had the ability to reduce the most disinterested woman to a mess of delightful giggles and fluttering eyelashes with a single gleam. Jax's charisma was impossible to resist and he knew it.

The mischievous delight from poking fun at Miles was slow to fade. He was having a good day. He'd been to the surface to work on the ventilation extractors in the morning, then returned to work on the cranky, old printers for the hour that remained before lunchtime. His good mood was due to the thought of a secret lunch-date he'd arranged with Maliyah Suarez.

As g-mod's went, Maliyah was something special. She had a Brazilian genetic footprint - big golden-brown eyes, soft, smooth skin, long, lustrous, cocoa-brown hair. She worked as head of botany and was the *hottest* scientist at Rubicon. She spoke in a measured, smoky voice that made Jaxon imagine her in the throes of passion. She walked with a sultry swing, completely unaware of the megawatt sensuality she exuded that made even the plain uniform she wore, seem sexy.

Yes, he was looking forward to getting to know her better. A lot better.

Jaxon turned to Chuck. "I'm sneaking out early to hit the showers - I'm a mess. Meet you in the admin atrium in twenty minutes?"

Jax headed out the door, a spring in his step. Chuck had some admin work to put through, he'd meet up with Jax and then he would, also, get some lunch.

Jax headed down the corridor away from the support and maintenance node of the underground work complex. The corridor - like the rest of the place - was starting to show its age. The acidic yellow LED lighting was out at irregular intervals along the way. The endless, discolored ducting and pipes, that ran in the support braces above his head, oozed crusty mineral deposits that formed thick bunches around junctions and joints. There were many repairs evident in the tubular corridors. Glistening residues ran in long, slimy streaks down the curved walls. The gleaming, wet and corrosive dirt was becoming a regular part of the cleaning schedule to avoid it building up too much.

The floor decks squeaked. Combined with the dense, resonating footsteps echoing from every quarter of the place, it made the structure of the settlement sound like an old, creaking

ship, tossed by waves at sea – at least, that’s how Jax imagined it.

He loved watching old movies – especially ones that featured Earth’s seas and oceans. Jax thought, if he’d been born there, he would have been a sailor. He dreamt of a life in which he could spend months at sea, free of the tyranny of work schedules and demanding g-mod stiffs.

Jax ducked around a corner and entered the large atrium that connected the corridors of the maintenance node with the rest of the administration structure.

There was natural light here, thanks to the large, glass-domed tubes that fed daylight from the surface of Mars down shafts to each of the atriums.

Designed for relaxation, people communed together in the atriums around Rubicon to soak up some of the weak, filtered sunlight, socialize and enjoy the harmony of the peaceful trickle of fountains, organic greenery and regular, scheduled entertainment. Some people also held their meetings in the atriums, preferring them to the windowless conference rooms in their work sections. There were cubicles and clusters of tables and chairs. There was an informal order to the place. The great, arching domes above glowed bright with artificially supplemented daylight. Screens of tall, green bamboo provided privacy, acoustic dampening and a bit of color. If you tried hard enough, the atriums’ charming attempt at atmosphere felt real.

Jaxon crossed the sunlit atrium, his shadow casting moving silhouettes on the floor tiles. He wove between tables and entered the shady corridor leading away from the work node towards the area of residential pods where he lived.

Each large, domed, atrium was like the hub of a wheel.

The many corridors, leading from the atriums, connected to other areas of the settlement. The corridors fanned outwards, like the spokes of the wheel. All the work and living spaces filled the gaps along the corridors that lay between the atriums, a neat and somewhat systematic design that could be expanded on over and over again as time passed.

Jaxon rounded one last corner, descending a short flight of stairs. He hunched to enter the low, and poorly-lit, passage running past his pod. He did not live in a good part of the residential area. His zone was old, cramped and badly-maintained. His demotions and status as a non-gen were the reasons for his less than desirable surroundings.

He pressed his thumb to the lock and the door shuddered open with a grating rasp. He'd been meaning to fix that for a while, but then again, there were plenty of things he'd been meaning to fix. *One day*, he thought, *when I am old and bored I might get around to it.*

He took off the short, straight-cut jacket of his uniform and hung it on the hook in the entrance, then grabbed his things to head to the showers down at in the communal ablution facilities.

Only the top brass at Rubicon had their own, private bathroom facilities. The rest of the populace had to share. It wasn't bad, the shower cubicles were spacious and clean because the tiles had a coating of hydrophobic nanotech that meant there was little to no moisture clinging to the surfaces.

In the early days, this type of technology was a justified expense. It was about comfort and hygiene, but it was also about the experimental application of new tech.

When the Mars mission first hit the scene, private companies fell over each other in the race to be the 'first' to have their tech on the mission. Some of them gave their innovations away

in exchange for the enormous publicity their involvement in the future Mars settlement generated. Time had the effect of reducing their enthusiasm and desire to participate, though. The justifications grew harder and the interest in contributing tech dwindled. The flood of much-anticipated experimental technology soon tapered to a trickle.

What was on offer felt more like cast-offs and hand-me-downs than innovative and mission-advancing tech. The growing reluctance by firms to hand over their technology advancements in exchange for big press gains had the effect of creating a scenario for sky-rocketing mission costs - acquisition budgets grew to ridiculous proportions in no time at all.

Those budgets came under fire from vigorous and vocal opposition to the mission. There was mounting objection to the mission's costs and proposals when compared to the perceived pay-offs. It took less than thirty Earth years to reach the point at which it was almost impossible to get anything but mission-critical resources from Earth.

Jax wanted to remodel the dated ablutions but he knew it meant losing some of the pioneering tech that made them functional and sustainable in their current state. He shook his head, dismissing the thoughts about the tech. He had other more enjoyable things to think about. He shed his clothes, revealing a taut physique, and turned on the water in his shower cubicle.

The hot spray sputtered at first before settling into a steady flow - the heat of it stinging his neck and back. The steaming water felt so good sluicing over his body. His tired muscles needed the heat.

There was never enough warmth down here, despite Engineering's best efforts to vent off some of the heat from the

reactor and keep the temperatures steady at twenty-one degrees, Celsius. The constant dampness was largely to blame for the chill; and the old ventilation system was to blame for the clammy gleam of moisture that was pervasive at Rubicon.

The mission ships - arriving every six Earth years from that planet - never carried enough supplies, replacements or new tech anymore.

Their settlement was old and temperamental, but Jaxon accepted it as a personal challenge to keep the aging infrastructure ticking along - or in some cases - get it, coughing and sputtering, back to life.

He stepped out of the shower and padded, barefoot, over to the mirror. He needed a shave. His beard was showing darkly on his face. He had been so busy for the past few days that a shave had been low on his list of priorities. It felt good to, finally, have a chance to clean up. He was a bit too vain to show up to his first date with Maliyah looking like he didn't own a working shaver. He scrutinized his appearance and reminded himself that he also needed a haircut soon. His wavy hair was falling softly around his ears already. But when did he have the time to sit for long enough for someone to cut it?

He was a bit pissed at Miles for busting his ass again, because it stirred a guilt in him that was uncomfortable. It made him think he really should start shaping up. He hated admitting this to himself.

He loved the non-conformity of his lifestyle, but he had sunk almost as low as anyone could go for a man of his considerable abilities and knowledge. These days, he felt like he was wasting his potential and getting bored too often. He was disruptive as a result and the push-back, from people like Miles, was an uncomfortable issue for him. *Next stop: Janitor, Jax.*

Time to stop screwing around, he thought, guiding the shaver over his angled face.

He made a mental promise to himself to start making better decisions - starting with keeping his mouth shut whenever a sarcastic comment threatened to undermine his hard work.

With his ablutions done, Jaxon headed back over to his pod. He put on a fresh uniform, shrugged back into his jacket and checked his reflection one last time in the small mirror beside the door. He smiled his approval.

Jax knew Maliyah would like what she saw. He knew how to use his attractiveness to his advantage. Heading out the door, he felt the thrill of the chase enliven him. He put his troubling work situation out of mind and devoted his thoughts to how much he was looking forward to exploring Maliyah's soft, full and inviting mouth.

Maliyah

Struggling with one of the usual problems they experienced in the lab - not enough power to run all the machines, all at once - Maliyah hissed in frustration. The overloaded circuit board had tripped again. It was a daily challenge for the maintenance department to keep up with all the repairs to Rubicon's aging systems.

She needed to be patient and wait her turn for a crew to make it to the botany lab. She logged a call-out for someone to come, again, to look at the faulty circuits. The ancient wiring prevented them from keeping all their vital research equipment up and running. It was a problem she'd become accustomed to - everyone had.

It had been almost five years since the last supply ship arrived from Earth with desperately needed new equipment, supplies and people. Everyone was eager for the relief that always came with the arrival of the ship.

Maliyah hoped that Jaxon would be in the crew that would come to solve the mysteries of the failing circuitry in the lab. She'd met him at the club social the week before and, now, she found herself thinking about him all the time. She liked him. More than that, she felt irresistibly drawn to him.

She'd never really taken much notice of Jaxon before, but something about the way he'd walked into the room that night had made her really take notice.

She stared absentmindedly at the cool glow of the backlit wall panels of the lab, remembering every detail of the man. She had a half smile on her full, parted lips. She closed her eyes to better recall last week's encounter...

Jax's hair had still been damp from his shower. He wore a clean button-up shirt and a pair of vintage pants that were a rare, but comfortable choice of his for when he was off duty. He called them *jeans*, and they fit him to perfection.

The faded blue of the denim stood out in the sea of standard-issue cream-colored pant-suits that everyone else wore.

The recreational clothing made in the settlement at the textiles shop was not known for its style. Distributed once a year, the rec-wear outfits - along with their gray work uniforms - were plain, durable and functional. The fabrics were derived from bamboo grown in the artificial forests of the interconnected greenhouse biomes. The clothes were not popular or well-liked, but there was a dress code, and everyone obeyed it.

Everyone, *except* Jax.

He'd persuaded Tom - a friend that arrived on the last

Earth supply ship - to smuggle in a few pairs of jeans for him. It had cost Tom some of his food rations for the trip, but the payoff had been an introduction to a girl Jax knew from an earlier mission. His two friends were now co-habiting, with a kid on the way.

Maliyah remembered, Jax had finished telling his jeans story to a laughing group of enamored young women at a table in the club, before sauntering over to order more drinks at the bar. His broad smile had lingered on his smooth face.

Maliyah had been listening to her best friend, Lenny, at the same time as watching him over Lenny's shoulder. She'd memorized his features in an instant - the flash of intelligence and alertness in his ice-blue eyes, his long, straight nose and his sculpted lips, his angular chin...

She watched him sweep the room with a cursory gaze, waiting for the drinks to be poured. His eyes had come to rest on her and he caught her watching him. With a quick nod, he had smiled at her. The connection felt electric. Dropping her gaze, she remembered feeling the thrill of excitement, tinged by panic.

As young students, much of what they were taught in behavioral aptitude studies was about avoiding interpersonal connections and fending off unwanted attention. Fraternization was strongly discouraged and, in some cases, punishable.

Maliyah knew people who were ordered to participate in behavior-modifying programs. They were made to take drugs that curbed compulsions that fell outside of the accepted and approved levels of interpersonal interaction. Their transformation from vibrant, exciting individuals to obedient, dull and eerily vacant automatons was upsetting and served as a deterrent to most people.

She had felt the panic, but also the flush of attraction, and had looked up again, only to find Jax still watching her. He had handed off the drinks at the table of chatting women, excusing himself and left them, making his way back to Maliyah and Lenny.

“Can I buy you a refill on those drinks, ladies?” His smile stayed in place. He had waited for a response from the two women, who glanced at each other in silent communication.

“Hi Jax.” Lenny had smiled back warmly. Her glance flicked to Maliyah – still staring at Jax. “Maliyah, you know Jaxon Fields, right? He’s in maintenance. He’s Chuck’s friend, remember?”

Maliyah’s cheeks had flamed.

She spent far too much time working by herself and did not pay much attention to the people around her in the settlement. It was a close-knit community for obvious reasons, but she’d only come to the club at Lenny’s insistence.

“Of course! Hi Jaxon.” She held out her hand and had sensed, too late, the awkwardness of the too-formal gesture instantly.

He had shaken her hand, his smile widening.

She remembered now that she had wished for the ground to open up and swallow her at that moment. Her social ineptitude had made her feel a deep sense of insecurity in the presence of the tall, attractive man.

“Nice to finally get the introduction. I’ve been trying to think of ways to start a conversation with you ever since Chuck and I came in to take a look at those circuit boards day before yesterday.” His voice had a velvety timber to it. He sounded so self-assured.

“Speaking of Chuck, I’ll leave you two to get better acquainted.”

Lenny had hopped off her stool and left to greet Chuck. He had come through the door, looking for her.

Now, while she watched over her experiments in her lab, a smile played on Maliyah's full lips. It had been an amazing evening with an amazing man. She was really looking forward to seeing Jax a little later today.

Soft beeps came from the machine next to her on the lab counter. It was finished running the soil analysis from greenhouse three. She went through the motions of saving the data, removing the sample trays and setting up the findings in neat data tables.

Her workload had tripled since the new greenhouse had come online. The recently-installed biome was not producing at optimal output and she and Lenny were hard at work trying to figure out the cause.

Her attention was diverted for a moment by a new message from Dana Becker, Rubicon's chief administrator. The flashing message was marked ***Urgent***. Maliyah rolled her eyes. Everything with Dana was *urgent*. Maliyah firmly ignored the glowing red icon on her message board and carried on compiling the data from her samples.

Dana could wait. Maliyah knew she probably wanted an update on the batch of samples that had come in earlier in the day. They were from the new glacier drill site.

At the time, Maliyah had not really payed much attention to the messenger that stood in the door. She had continued to load her greenhouse samples into the mass-spectrometer, waving him over to the "Pending" box on the workbench.

The glacier was the water source for the entire settlement. It was the size of a small ocean and lay deep beneath Rubicon. Using a large extraction drill, assembled in the cavernous void of a deep and ancient lava tube, they extracted the ice from the

glacier. It was pumped to the surface filtration plant where it was melted, filtered and fed into reservoirs to be used for everything, from drinking water and cooling the nuclear power reactor, to flushing toilets. The drill-bore could only reach to a depth of a thousand meters. The old site had hit that limit earlier in the week. In preparation for the change-over, Dana had ordered a survey to test the water quality and safety from the glacier at the new site.

The survey samples, and Dana's unread, urgent message were connected to the new drill site preparations.

Maliyah made a vague mental note to take a look at the drill-site samples after lunch, all the time playing over the coming liaison with Jaxon in her mind and finding it hard to stay focused on her work.

Dana

It wasn't enough to be smart, efficient and ambitious. Dana Becker knew she had to be more. She had found it a challenge to get people to take her seriously from early on in the training program. Her small size, light frame and blond curls made her look younger and more vulnerable than her twenty-eight years. It meant she was constantly underestimated as a student, patronized as a budding manager and overlooked once or twice when she vied for leadership positions against candidates that were chosen only because they appeared to be stronger and more capable than Dana.

She'd worked twice as hard, become tougher, faster and more adaptable than anyone else in her class and peer group.

She had also developed a bristling personality that exuded

an intense ferocity.

It made her come across demanding and uncompromising. No one that worked with her got the chance to really know her. She was a supremely private and unapproachable young woman. People had the general perception of her as an icy, workaholic bitch. She didn't have the time, nor the energy, to correct their mistaken ideas. This place could kill you in an instant if you disobeyed orders. She was in charge of keeping people alive, not winning a popularity contest.

Dana was endlessly frustrated by people who didn't take their responsibilities and jobs as seriously as she did. They had no idea how much more difficult they made it for her when they screwed up.

She was the one that presented status reports to Mars Mission Control on Earth. She caught hell for everything that wasn't up to scratch. There was always something they could use to reduce her efforts to the sum of Rubicon's failures - replacements that were too expensive, project deadlines that were missed, inconclusive experiments that resulted in failure.

Her personal favorite was, how disappointed they were that, to date, there'd been no evidence of past or present life forms existing on Mars. Somehow, they found a way to blame *her* for that.

The possibility of discovering life on Mars had been a major motivator for funding in the early phase of the settlement's development, despite there never being any evidence of life on the Red Planet. She hated the fact that the powers-that-be were so narrow-minded in their understanding of Rubicon - boiling it all down to that *one* criterion. Why could they not seem to understand what a true marvel it was that Rubicon existed at all?

Dana looked over the latest security reports on her screen. Nothing appeared to be unusual. Security and peace enforcement was one of those divisions she worried the least about.

She felt Ridley Barton was an asshole, but he maintained firm control over the settlement's law and order. He was a formidable and fierce warrior-type with an excess of masculinity and pride. He hated Dana for being the one chosen to be chief administrator. Ridley's ambitions ran as deep as his pride and both were trampled when Darius Muller, the Mars Mission Commander on Earth, promoted Dana as the successor to the outgoing commander on his return to Earth.

Dana picked up her ATOM to scan through work reports. Her ATOM was one of the personal electronic devices everyone at Rubicon was issued from at the age of thirteen. "ATOM" was the current brand-name for the devices that had arrived with the last mission ship from Earth.

ATOMs served many purposes, including communication and tracking, productivity management, personal health and wellness monitoring, transaction handling and security access. They were fully customizable and worn in a see-through pouch on a sleeve of their uniforms.

No one went anywhere without their ATOM. It was an essential tool for coordinating life at Rubicon.

The engineers at the settlement's tech labs were in the final stages of testing a new device prototype that would, hopefully, replace the ATOMs in the coming year. The new devices would be made completely at Rubicon from parts developed and created in their own labs, and materials sourced from locally-quarried mineral deposits. Dana had initiated the project almost two years ago, when Darius informed her that there would be no more personal devices coming from Earth

on future missions.

Dana scanned files on her ATOM. She was looking for an update about the samples from the new glacier drill site. Samples had been delivered to the botany lab early that morning.

Maliyah was one of the people Dana felt she needed to remind on a regular basis that she had responsibilities and duties requiring her to be more disciplined in her approach. She was always going to the lab to get what she needed from Maliyah. Dana brooded about the fact that her deadlines didn't seem to mean much to Maliyah.

A frown creased her brow, her thoughts turning to Maliyah and Lenny. Whenever Dana went to the lab, the two of them were involved in a lively conversation, laughing and joking about something.

She found their easy friendship irritating because it evoked a jealous desire in her to have the same kind of relationship with someone. The jealousy, in turn, would create anger at her own weakness and she would have to remind herself that she was far too busy for friendships and the like. The deep longing would persist though, despite her self-talk, giving rise to a restless agitation. Lenny and Maliyah's friendship was an uncomfortable reminder that she was quite alone in her own personal life.

Dana decided that sitting at her desk waiting for the reports from Maliyah was pointless. She had a deadline to meet. Her weekly status update to Darius was due tomorrow and she wanted everything to be ready before then. She left her office and made her way towards the Sciences node. She entered the large, sunlit atrium that connected Admin to the other corridors leading off in different directions.

Movement from one of the booths caught her eye. She spied

two of the biggest problem individuals at Rubicon having an animated conversation over cold drinks. Dana thought Jaxon and Chuck must be on a break. After briefly considering this, and with her temper flaring, she believed the more obvious alternative was that they were shirking yet more of their duties, having blown off their work for the afternoon.

These two non-gen's were a serious pain in the ass for Dana. She had more trouble with Jaxon than with Chuck, but where one went, the other, invariably, followed. She glanced over their appearance, suspicious immediately when she registered that Jaxon was clean-shaven, his sleeves were pushed up and his hair was damp. There was still a whole afternoon of the workday left, yet he looked like he'd clocked out for the day.

She couldn't stand that he refused to conform. She blamed it on him being non-gen. From what she'd read in his personnel file, it appeared that he had inherited his mother's lack of respect for authority. He'd also inherited a formidable stature, which Dana refused to acknowledge as an obstacle to attempting to pull him in line.

She straightened to her full height and squared her shoulders. The two men realized - too late - she was making straight for them at a brisk pace. Jaxon scrambled out of the booth and stood, looking like he fully intended to flee before she made it across the atrium. He wouldn't evade her this time.

"Fields!" Her voice was a clipped, powerful command. He froze in his tracks and turned with a sheepish look on his face. He ruffled his too-long hair at the nape and waited as she strode to within inches of him and stopped with her arms folded across her chest. He had a hard time taking this tiny woman seriously but was trying not to smile. He knew that his plans with Maliyah were in peril if she caught even a whiff of

his good humor.

“Dana.” He cleared his throat. “What can I help you with?”

Jax was painfully aware that he looked a lot fresher than he ought to for this time of the day. A distinct disadvantage to always being on maintenance crews was the constant grime and sweat of the often-physical work he did. Chuck, who had been running behind schedule, had only arrived a few minutes earlier.

A few minutes too late, Jax thought, holding Dana’s penetrating stare. His vow to try and straighten up wasn’t even an hour old and he was already in trouble - with the chief. He knew she could make life very difficult for him and she seemed immune to his charms.

His record included several unsuccessful attempts to negotiate his way out of tough spots with her. He scowled at her. He’d always thought she was gorgeous, but as the *chief*, he knew she was strictly off limits and he wouldn’t even consider trying his luck the way he did with so many of the lovely women at Rubicon.

“You seem to think today is a half day. From what I can tell,” She looked at the screen of her ATOM, “there’s still four hours of the workday left. Do you have a reason, that won’t sound like some bullshit excuse, for looking like you have taken the rest of the day off?” The sarcasm was unmistakable.

Jaxon wanted to roll his eyes at her obsessive nit-picking. There was no reason for her to be so pedantic - everyone took a lunch break - at least they *should*.

He didn’t want to rouse her suspicions any more than his appearance already had, so he decided to let her believe he was goofing off and playing truant. It was easier to explain and handle than the truth - his secret lunch date with Maliyah.

He shrugged and stayed silent, which immediately raised her ire. He saw it in her clear, green eyes. They filled with fury and he knew he was in for it.

Dana wished with all her heart that she wasn't so completely unnerved by this man. He was devastatingly attractive, but she was a professional and you didn't fraternize with your underlings - especially ones that caused you so much grief. Jaxon was, without doubt, the most irksome creature she'd ever encountered. She hated that he made her feel inadequate, small and vulnerable. He was the *only person* who had the ability to peel back her tough veneer and expose her private insecurities. She refused to look weak in his eyes - her pride wouldn't allow it.

She glared up at him with all the venom she could muster and declared, "I'm gathering my reports for tomorrow's update. Where is yours on the current status of the water filtration system?"

Dana was looking for a way to catch him out. If he'd neglected to do his work, she could penalize him and take him down a notch, making herself feel superior for a brief moment. These power games were getting tiring, but she had to come out on top. She'd lose all credibility if she didn't persist in her efforts to diminish Jaxon's infuriating sense of self-importance.

Jax fumed, crossing his arms over his chest. He recognized her attempt to ensnare him with a misplaced answer. He would not give her the pleasure of trapping him with words.

"Chuck finished up the reports before meeting me here for a quick run-through of what we need to do tomorrow." He made it sound like they were actually having a work meeting that she'd interrupted. Jax knew a thing or two about how to

bullshit the powers-that-be.

“As it happens, we need to do something about the water down here. There are several pumps that are already clogged up and working at below fifty-percent optimal flow rate. It’s thanks to the fact that the filtration plant on the surface is screwed and the damage to the filters is allowing too much sediment into the pipes. It’s screwing up systems from the plant all the way down through to the lower service decks. The filters are due for flushing, but we can’t risk it - they’re too damaged. Any attempt to clean them could blow the whole system. I’ve been waiting on your go-ahead for about three days now to make new filter housings and filters. You’re the one tying my hands on this one, Dana.” He did not attempt to hide his disdain, nor his anger.

She sneered at Jaxon. He’d issued her with a direct challenge.

He was blaming *her* for the water filtration problem and she had a feeling he was trying to manipulate her into making a hasty decision without doing a thorough evaluation of the water situation first. No one told her what to do - *especially* not Jaxon Fields.

“We’re not in a position to replace things at will. There’s no way you could understand how many systems need attention at any given time; and how much this all costs the mission. *I* will be the judge of how bad the water filtration problem is. I will take a trip to the surface tomorrow to do an inspection and then I can see how real the problem is for myself. In the meantime, you stand down. Leave it the hell alone. The low water pressure and cloudiness is something we will all have to put up with for a little longer.” The last sentence came through gritted teeth. She was struggling to control her anger which had already reached melt-down. The man was *infuriating* and brimming with self-importance. *How dare he* tell her how to do her job?

She turned and stalked away from them, leaving Jaxon and Chuck to exchange a look of concern. She'd picked the wrong problem to micro-manage this time.

Jax and Chuck both knew how serious the water filtration issue was. Jax cursed his temper and his ego. He should have handled that with a great deal more care. It was a very serious situation that had gone to shit in seconds because he and Dana had allowed their emotions to get the better of them. It was beyond him why he *always* let her rattle him.

Try as he might, he could not seem to get through a discussion with her without it becoming a charged-up rant. He hadn't been able to tell her there was a team headed up to the filtration plant to set up for a flush of the whole system in a few hours. She'd stormed off, ignorant of the facts. Dana would have his head on a silver platter if he went against her orders and spoke to the night-shift supervisor himself.

He reminded himself to send her a message after his lunch with Maliyah to explain that there was crew scheduled to do a flush that night. It was in her hands now to prevent it. If she didn't cancel the work order, the filters were in danger of being completely destroyed by the force of the water that would flow through them. He hoped that she'd overlook their stand-off and do the right thing.

"You screwed up, pal," Chuck said sidling past Jax, his hands shoved into his pants pockets. He shook his drooping head. This was one of those times when he'd been standing a bit too close again.