THE ETHICS OF SILENCE

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Chapter 1

ARRIVAL

With a loud CLUNK the ship settled into its berth. Mason Turner had a mental vision of people rushing out and kissing the earth after the completion of an extended voyage. But kissing the earth beneath his feet was more than impractical--it was impossible. He exited the ship inside an artificial cavern whose ceiling, walls and floor were covered with a thick grey polymer. And even if the polymer had not been underfoot, kissing the earth would still be impossible; this was not Earth--this was Mars.

The vision of kneeling down and kissing the ground faded, but still Mason was thankful to be on a surface that wasn’t constantly spinning. (He knew that Mars rotated on its axis just as Earth did; but, just as on Earth, there was no feeling of motion. The surface beneath Mason’s feet had every impression of being fixed and immobile.)

The voyage from Earth to Mars had been on a ship that rotated to simulate artificial gravity. The ship had only turned at a rate of four revolutions per minute--a slow, lazy spin that was barely perceptible--at first. At a distance of only 20.7 meters (68 feet) from the ship’s axis of rotation, the Coriolis Effect nags at your subconscious. And that is 20.7 meters at the point where your feet are firmly planted at 0.376 Gees, Mars normal. That places the inner ear about 19.2 meters from the axis when standing. Making a complete revolution once every fifteen seconds was something that can be ignored completely for a few hours. It becomes mildly irritating after a few days. After a few weeks, one begins to think that the spin will cause him (or her) to become totally insane.

But then one gets used to it. Like a gigantic zit on the tip of your nose, one is always aware that the spin is there, but it becomes something that can be tolerated for the remainder of the journey. And after 8 ½ months--260 very long days--the rotation suddenly ceases. The constant turbulent swirling in the inner ear halts. But the spin is gone!

Mason resisted the temptation to kneel down and plant a kiss on the unmoving surface beneath his feet and scanned the terminal for any sign of a welcoming party. A pretty, young woman pointed at Mason and waved. He separated from the group of other passengers (27 in total) and staggered in the direction of his greeter. When he finally reached her side, she was laughing openly with no attempt at concealing her mirth.

Mason offered his hand as he stood swaying before the woman. “Mason Turner. And, for the record, I don’t always walk this way.”

One hand grasped Mason’s while another reached for his shoulder and prevented him from toppling. “I’m Janet Edwards, personal assistant to the governor. Give it a day or two and you’ll be walking normal again.” Janet nodded toward the other passengers who apparently were also having difficulty staying on their feet. “Everybody walks funny when they stop spinning.”

“I assume you’re here to take me to the governor’s office, Ms. Edwards?”

“Tomorrow. Today I’m going to get you settled into your apartment. And we’re very informal here. Just call me Janet. Do you mind if I call you Mason?”

“Sure. Mason’s fine.” He reached into his pocket and produced his electronic notepad. He tapped the screen which remained blank. He tapped it again. “Something’s wrong with my notepad.”

Janet reached for Mason’s notepad. “It won’t work on Mars. I’ll get you one that is linked to our system. It may take a couple of days, though.”

“It worked on the ship.”

“The ship has an Earth relay. Plus they cache huge amounts of data so that it usually seems like you have an immediate link to the Earth network. Didn’t you ever experience some really long delays when accessing data on your notepad?”

“Yeah, but not too often.”

“The shipboard system stores a *lot* of data. And it is also pretty good at predicting what data you may want to access based on past requests. But if you request something really off the wall that it doesn’t already have in its database, the wait can be ten to twelve minutes when you get near Mars orbit. So we use a totally separate network on Mars. We’ll get you a notepad in a couple of days and, in a week or two, we’ll sync your data.”

“A week or two? That’s insane. I have orders on my notepad to report immediately to the governor. I’d show it to you if my notepad worked.”

Janet rolled her eyes. “Immediately! So you jumped on that ship yesterday and rushed right here?”

“Not exactly…”

“I’m guessing that you spent two hundred fifty something days on the ship.”

“Two hundred sixty.”

“I was thinking in Mars days, but they’re almost the same. Add to that the fact that after you received your orders, you had to wait for a ship from Earth to Mars. How long?”

“About a month.”

“That means that the governor made the request for an investigator about a month before you were given your orders. And I’m sure that he used the word ‘immediately.’ He’s not a colonist and he still thinks that you can hurry everything. It doesn’t work that way on Mars.” Janet stepped away from Mason. She stood on her toes and held his notepad as high as her arm could reach.

When Janet released his notepad, Mason shouted, “Hey!” but didn’t trust his wobbly legs enough to race forward and catch the device. There was no need since it drifted in dreamlike slowness and landed on the toe of Janet’s shoe. With a skilled kick, the notepad was transferred from Janet’s toe back into her hand. “Lesson one. Things move slow on Mars. Your notepad took well over a second to fall eight feet. On Earth, it would have taken about half that time. Our gravity is slower, our days are longer, our years are longer and there isn’t any way you can get from Earth to Mars in less than five months. And, even at that, you may have to wait over two Earth years for a launch window. Nothing happens immediately on Mars.”

“Is there a lesson two?” Mason asked.

“Yeah. Lesson two is that no one on Mars likes you. So don’t expect a whole lot of cooperation from the colonists.”

“You don’t like me? Why not?”

“I don’t dislike you as a person. I don’t know you. What I don’t like is what you represent.”

“What do I represent?”

“Earth, or more specifically, the NAU.”

“What do you have against the North Atlantic Union?”

Janet shook her head. “You’re just like the governor. You really don’t have a clue. If I decide that I *don’t* dislike you as a person, then I might be persuaded to tell you.”

“Fair enough. So how do I get to my apartment?”

“We walk.”

“How far?”

“About five miles.”

“Could you give me that in kilometers?”

“On Mars, we use the old standard measures. I could convert it to meters but you might as well get used to the local units of measure. It’s five miles.”

“No transportation?”

“We’ve got transportation. We walk. Lesson three. Travel on Mars.” Janet began walking.

Mason followed close behind. “What about my luggage?”

“It will be sent to your apartment, tomorrow or day after tomorrow.”

“Why not today? Why can’t we just take it with us?”

“What’s the hurry? What do you have in your luggage that you can’t live without for a couple of days?”

“All I have is my clothes and not many of them. Did you know that they only allowed me to bring 11.3 kilos and that included the clothes I was wearing? That’s insane.”

“Not insane. Every kilo that you brought with you meant that a kilo of something that the Mars colony desperately needs was left behind.”

“Okay. I’ll buy that. But why 11.3? Where did they come up with that number?”

“Twenty-five pounds. We don’t use kilos on Mars.”

“Why not?”

“Because a pound is a more useful unit of measure than a kilo.”

“I don’t understand.”

Janet stopped and took a good look at Mason. “Tell me, how much do you weigh?”

“On Earth, I weigh about 90 kilos. So on Mars, I guess I weigh about 35?”

“Wrong. On Mars, you’re still 90 kilos. Grams, and therefore kilograms, are a unit of mass. It doesn’t matter if you are on Earth, Mars or floating in space, your mass is 90 kilos. You still have the same inertia as any 90 kilo mass either here or on Earth. But I would guess that you weigh about 75 pounds now that you are on Mars.”

“What does it matter whether you use pounds or kilos?”

“To be honest, it is mainly because the Mars colony wants to distance itself from Earth. We don’t appreciate the NAU telling us what we can and cannot do. We considered creating our own system of measures but we decided to adopt the ancient English system. It is convenient and useful. And it seems to piss off the NAU.”

“Why do you hate the NAU so much?”

“Ask the governor.”

They walked in silence until they entered a tunnel. Janet said, “The Mars colony consists of eight large natural and man-made caverns connected by tunnels. Can you ride a bicycle?”

“Huh? I rode one when I was a kid.”

“I’ll see if I can get you one to use while you are here. Most colonists use bikes to get around. It’s faster than walking.”

“The entire colony is underground? Nothing on the surface?”

“We have solar collectors on the surface, lots of solar collectors. We are further from the sun than Earth is, but we don’t have any cloudy days. We live underground because Mars doesn’t have the benefit of a magnetic field to protect it from radiation. A solar flare on Earth causes beautiful Northern (and Southern) lights. On Mars, a solar flare can be lethal.”

When the tunnel opened up into another cavern, Janet pointed to a large cube-shape. “That’s the governor’s office. I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

“The governor’s not there today?”

“He’s there.”

“He doesn’t want to see me today?”

“He would see you today.”

“Then why don’t we go there right now?”

“Because I said so.”

“Why do you get to say so?”

“Because, besides being the governor’s personal assistant, I also represent the interests of the colony. Don’t be in such a damned hurry. Remember lesson one.” Janet paused. “And lesson two, also.”

“Well can you at least tell me why I’m here?”

“No. The governor requested an investigator. He will explain what he wants you to investigate.”

“But you know?”

“Yes.”

“And you won’t tell me?”

“No.”

“Lesson two?”

“Lesson four. The colonists and the governor don’t always agree on what is best for the colony. The colonists didn’t want him to drag someone here to investigate what should have been handled locally. There are a lot of things that the Mars colony needs but instead, the NAU sent us 200 pounds of something totally useless. 225, counting your luggage.”

“I wasn’t the only passenger.”

“Yeah, about that. We don’t like the scientists either. If they would send just the instruments, the colonists could perform the experiments and observations. But for them, this is the ultimate field trip.”

“They weren’t all scientists.”

“Those are the ones we resent the most. Fourteen passengers. Three families. The ultra-rich who can afford to vacation on Mars. They actually believe that they are doing us a favor by coming here and spending an exorbitant amount of money. Money that we can’t use to buy the things that we really need because they are overloading the ship with their worthless mass.”

More silence. They entered another tunnel that led to another cavern, and another and another. Janet led Mason to a cube shaped building that appeared to be identical to many other cubes. She handed him a tiny sheet of paper that read:

005:019:003:021

Janet pointed to the numbers. You are in cavern number 5. This is building 19. Your apartment is on the third floor, number 21.” She faced a camera and stated, “Janet Edwards authorizing building entry for Mason Turner. Effective immediately, expires in one year.” And then to Mason, “Face the camera and state your name.” When Mason did so, Janet continued, “The building will now recognize your face. Touch the door and it will open for you.”

They climbed the stairs to the third floor and found apartment 21. The face recognition procedure was repeated and Mason was admitted to his new living quarters. The apartment was huge, much larger than any Mason had inhabited on Earth. He made a low whistle. “It’s enormous. Are there others sharing this apartment?”

Janet chuckled and shook her head. “It’s tiny compared to most. And, no, you have the place to yourself.”

“Is your place this big?”

“At least twice this size.”

“Why so large?”

“We’ve got lots of space. The surface area of Mars (not that we actually live on the surface) is larger than the usable land area on Earth. Earth Population is approaching 10 billion. The entire population of Mars is only about 600. About 250 are adults--almost all married couples. 125 households give or take. We’re not crowded.”

Mason wandered through the furnished apartment. The family room was larger than his entire apartment on Earth. There were three very spacious bedrooms. The combination kitchen and dining room was even larger than the family room. Mason opened the refrigerator--empty. He opened a cupboard. Inside were stacks of nutrient bars. “Yuck! Don’t tell me that you live on this stuff.”

“Not as a rule, but it will keep you alive until you can go shopping. We’ll set up your credit…”

Mason spoke the words in unison with Janet, “...in a couple of days.”

Janet laughed. “Nothing happens quickly on Mars.”

“And a couple of days for my luggage. I don’t have a change of clothes to wear when I see the governor tomorrow.”

Janet opened another door revealing what appeared to be a LaundryMate. “Toss your clothes in here. In about four hours, they will be clean and dry, ready to wear.”

The LaundryMate that Mason had in his apartment back home did the job in only fifteen minutes but he was beginning to understand that everything takes longer on Mars. “What do I wear while I’m waiting four hours for my clothes to be cleaned?”

Janet laughed again. “Just run around naked. It’s unlikely that you are going to have any visitors and, even if you do, you and I are the only people who can open your door.”

“Shouldn’t I be the only one who can open my door?”

“Probably. But I’m not ready to give you the ability to lock me out. Not just yet.”

Mason frowned but changed the subject. “What time do I see the governor tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here to pick you up around Oh Nine Hundred. I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to procure you a bicycle that quickly, so we’ll have to walk to the governor’s office.”

“What time is my appointment?”

“You don’t have an appointment. The governor will see you when you get there. He’s not a busy man. But in the unlikely event that he is busy when we arrive, we’ll kill some time in the commercial district.”

“He is expecting me, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he knows that you will be in to see him tomorrow. Or the next day. At the very latest, a week from now.”

“My orders were to report immediately.”

“Yeah, about that...You might as well get used to the idea that the colonists never do anything ‘immediately.’ The clock on the wall,” Janet pointed, “is set to local time. We use a standard 24 hour clock, but don’t let it confuse you. The hours, minutes and seconds are just a tiny bit longer than what you are used to. Time moves slower on Mars. If you don’t need anything, I’ll be going.”

Janet extended her hand. Mason grasped the offered appendage. He felt thoroughly overwhelmed.

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At Oh Nine Fourteen the next morning, Janet rapped on the door to Mason’s apartment. When the door was opened, she asked, “Ready to see the governor?”

After they had walked in silence for a couple of minutes, Mason said, “You know...my clothes smelled funny when I took them out of the LaundryMate.”

“Funny?”

“Well they smelled good, but I couldn’t place the smell.” Mason sniffed his sleeve and then offered it to Janet. “You can still smell it a little.”

Janet sniffed. “Smells like sunshine.”

“What? You can’t smell sunshine.”

“That’s what my mother always said. What you smell is ozone.”

“Ozone? Why ozone?”

“Closed system. We recycle our water and air and everything else. We do everything we can to kill harmful bacteria and viruses. The LaundryMate irradiates the clothes with ultraviolet light. Makes ozone.”

“Okay...but what makes that smell like sunshine?”

“When I was a little girl, our LaundryMate stopped working. It was right in the middle of the technician’s strike and we couldn’t get it repaired for over a month. But my mom was resourceful. She washed the clothes in the bathtub. To dry them, she hung a rope outside and let them dry in the open air. That’s when we discovered how good it smells to dry the clothes outside. Even after the LaundryMate was repaired, Mom would still find time to hang the clothes in the sunshine. Every time I do laundry, I can still see my mom carrying in an armload of clothes. She would bury her face in them and breathe in the fragrance. And she always said, ‘Smells like sunshine.’”

“It does smell good.” Mason sniffed his sleeve again. “Are your parents still on Earth?”

Janet’s face clouded, the pleasant memories swept away. “No. They both died in the riots of ‘39.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have…” Mason trailed off unable to find the right words.

“It’s okay. That’s one reason I joined the Mars colony. No family ties to hold me on Earth. How about you? You got anyone on Earth waiting for you to return?”

“No, not really. My mom was a *smash* addict and I never knew my dad. When I was eight years old, Mom said that she was going to the store. She walked out the door and I never saw her again. I don’t have a whole lot of friends. But I like my job. I would like it a whole lot better if I knew why I had to come to Mars to do it.”

“You’re here because the Governor requested an investigator. You’re here because officials on Earth don’t understand that the Mars colony would function much better without their constant interference. You’re here because people on Earth refuse to understand the needs of the colonists.”

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Without any preliminary announcement, Janet led Mason into the governor’s office. “Governor Bartholomew Richards,” she began, “Mason Turner would like to see you. Mr. Turner is the investigator you requested.”

The governor stood. He was 1.8 meters in height (about 6 ft.) and his temples showed a slight peppering of grey. The governor closed his computer and offered a hand to Mason. “I hope Ms. Edwards has helped you get settled in.”

Mason grasped the governor’s hand. “Well, yes. I have an apartment but my clothes haven’t arrived yet. And I don’t have a functioning notepad. But I am comfortable even if I am still in the dark about why I am here.”

Governor Richards peered over his wire rimmed glasses in Janet’s direction. With no indication of apology she stated, “Things take time. There are priorities.”

“Then your priority will be to see that Mr. Turner is comfortable and has all that he needs to commence his investigation.”

Mason glanced toward Janet and noted that she appeared to have no interest in what was being said. He addressed the governor, “Speaking of the investigation, what is it that I am here to investigate?”

“Before we can begin, I will have to invite…” The governor scrolled through his notepad. “Here it is. I will have to ask Robert Tellus to join us.”

“Why Tellus?” Janet inquired.

“Tellus represents the Deep Mars Project.”

That got Janet’s attention; her eyes were daggers. “A Morlock! Why do we need a Morlock here for the investigation?”

“According to Tellus, the result of the investigation could be used to affect the future of the Deep Mars Project. I can have him here in an hour.”

“Okay.” Janet started for the door. Glancing back over her shoulder, she said, “We’re going to get breakfast. We’ll be back in about ninety minutes--two hours at the latest.”

Outside the governor’s building Mason asked, “Is it really going to take that long for us to get breakfast?”

“No. But I’m not in a hurry to deal with a Morlock.”

“Morlock? What’s a Morlock?”

“I’ll tell you while we eat.” Janet tugged at Mason’s elbow. “In here. The food’s good.”

They entered a building that had no outward indication that it was a place for dining. Delicious smells assaulted Mason’s olfactory. “Oh...This smells wonderful. I haven’t eaten real food since I left Earth. I smell bacon.”

“What you smell is bacon-flavored chicken. We also have sausage-flavored chicken, ham-flavored chicken, steak-flavored chicken and just about any other kind of meat-flavored chicken. We even have chicken that actually tastes like chicken. So far we’ve only got one animal on Mars besides people and that’s chickens. Someday we will get some cows and pigs, but right now we eat chicken.”

“I don’t care what it is made of, it smells delicious.”

“Well, get anything you want but don’t take more than you will eat. We try not to waste anything on Mars. Remember lesson number two?”

“Nobody likes me?”

“Yeah. If you waste food, everybody will *really* hate you.”

With lesson two in mind, Mason sparingly added items to his plate; in contrast, Janet’s plate was filled to overflowing. When her plate was filled, Janet led Mason to a payment terminal. She faced the terminal and spoke, “Janet Edwards authorizing Mason Turner for unlimited food purchases to be charged to the governor’s office. Expires in one year.” Then to Mason: “Look into the camera and state your name.” After Mason did so, she continued, “You’re buying.”

A man operating the terminal tallied the cost of their breakfast. “Any gratuity?”

Without blinking Janet replied, “Seventy-five percent gratuity on all food purchases by Mr. Turner for the duration of his stay.” Mason’s eyebrows shot upward and Janet continued, “It’s the NAU’s money. When I said that we don’t waste anything on Mars, this is the one exception.”

After spending eight and one-half months eating nothing but nutrient bars, Mason’s stomach filled so rapidly that even the meager fare on his plate was almost too much. After he had finished he questioned, “What are Morlocks?”

Janet held up her index finger until she had finished chewing and swallowed. “No discussion until after I have finished eating.” Still, half of her breakfast remained. When her plate was emptied, Mason opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted, “Not yet. Dessert first. You want anything? You’re buying.” Mason shook his head.

Janet returned with two very large pastries and offered one to Mason. “Want one. These are the absolute best!”

Mason shook his head. “I can’t; I’m stuffed.”

“Good. More for me.”

Once the pastries had disappeared Mason asked, “Aren’t you going to have anything else?”

“Not right now. But I am looking forward to lunch--you’re buying of course.”

“Of course. Now, about the Morlocks. That name seems...I don’t know. I think I have heard it somewhere before. What are Morlocks?”

“It’s from an old H. G. Wells novel, *The Time Machine*. Morlocks were a race of people in the future that lived underground.”

“Like the colonists on Mars.”

“No, not like the colonists on Mars. Well not really. We live as near the surface as possible but there are a group of colonists that want to go even deeper.”

“Why?”

“The eight caverns that make up the Mars Colony have to be pressurized. We constantly monitor the pressure to ensure that there are no leaks. If we weren’t ever vigilant, even a tiny hole could wipe out the colony.” Mason’s eyebrow raised; Janet continued, “Yeah, I know, ‘ever vigilant’ sounds melodramatic, but those are the words they constantly used when we joined the colony. So we’re ‘ever vigilant.’ At least our sensors are.

“But the Morlocks’ plan is to move the colony even deeper. If you go deep enough, there would be enough atmospheric pressure that you wouldn’t have to pressurize the colony. You would still have to watch for leaks because you wouldn’t want to exchange all your oxygen for carbon dioxide.”

“That doesn’t sound like a bad idea. How deep would you have to go, a couple of hundred meters?”

“About 30 miles.”

“How far is that in meters?”

Janet rolled her eyes. “Figure five miles equals eight kilometers.”

“Holy shit! That’s deep. Excuse my language.”

“Holy shit, it *is* deep. And someday we may actually test the feasibility of relocating part of the colony to that depth. But right now we don’t have the resources to waste on a really big hole.”

“You mean it might actually be possible?”

“Maybe. Mars doesn’t have a really large moon like Earth does.”

“What’s the Moon got to do with it?”

“Tides.”

“Tides? There’s no water on Mars.”

“Water’s not the only thing affected by tides. The entire Earth flexes as the Moon orbits. Any hole that deep on Earth would collapse in a short period of time due to tidal forces. And all that flexing creates heat. Thirty miles down on Earth the temperature would be over five hundred degrees but...Oh, those are degrees Fahrenheit. If you want Celsius, you figure it out. Oh yes, I was saying, without a large moon, Mars doesn’t flex very much and it is possible that the temperature wouldn’t be too extreme. In fact, the Morlocks theorize that the temperature would be just right without any need to heat or cool the colony.”

“Are they right?”

“Who knows? Right now we are focusing 100% of our resources toward making the colony self sufficient. Once we’ve accomplished that, we can afford to explore other possibilities--including the Deep Mars Project.”

“And Mr. Tellus is a leader in the Deep Mars Project?”

“I honestly don’t know. I know Tellus. In a colony this small, you know just about everybody. And since I am associated with the governor’s office, I probably do know everybody. But I didn’t even know that he was a Morlock until today. For the most part, they are just harmless lunatics that show up every so often and demand that we divert money and manpower toward digging a hole in the ground. The vote always goes overwhelmingly against them and we don’t hear anything more from them for a few months. I don’t have a clue why he wants to be included on this investigation.

“And another thing...We do have water on Mars.”

“Well, of course, you’ve got water. You couldn’t survive without it.”

“No. We’ve got surface water.”

“I didn’t think that was possible.”

“In the deepest part of the Valles Marineris we’ve got one really big lake. There is actually enough atmospheric pressure to allow surface water to exist. The salt and mineral content of the water is so high that you might not recognize it as water, but it is surface water.” She glanced at her notepad. “Okay. Good. Tellus has been waiting at the office for about thirty minutes.”

“So we should get back.”

“No hurry. First, I think I’ll have another cup of coffee. You want anything?”

“No. Nothing. I’m buying, right?”

“Right.”