

# From the Labyrinth of Night

by

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Nightfall. The rocky galleries flooded with shadow. Hurriedly David threw his samples into the back of the rover and set it to the laborious climb out of the Noctis Labyrinthus. The engine protested, groaning, crawling up the heavily eroded escarpment, pushed to the limit.

There. He achieved the last sheen of sunlight and was saved from creeping darkness. He sighed, relieved, and his visor fogged briefly with his breath. Before him, across the smoother ground, the trail was muted with the fine red dust that eddied like liquid cinnamon into the ruts. But it was a trail; it led to shelter. A human voice, and, of course, her.

The rover bounced on, hugging the rim of the light, gaining on the darkness. A cloud of crimson particles billowed from the oversized wheels, veiling the horizon and the face of a small, raw sun.

David glanced to his left, to where the world came to an abrupt edge. He hesitated, gauged the remaining light, turned aside from the path. A low rise, a jumbled set of ruts, and a chasm yawned before him. Pinnacles of layered rock, ravines flowing with rivers of dust, colors rippling and heaving as if the torn crust of Mars quivered like a wounded animal. Night pooled in the depths, drawing the wind from the light, voices wailing about the other spires.

Vertigo welled from the abyss, plucking at him. He shuddered in sudden fear. He inhaled deeply of his personal bubble of atmosphere, tilted his helmeted face to the lowering pink sky, raised his gloved hands and declaimed in a desperate defiance, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

His voice emerged from the speaker, a feeble mutter that was whipped away and dissipated into darkness. The wind sang, echoing in his audio receivers. He turned, crushed. The rosy haze of dusk was almost upon him. "Nothing beside remains," he whispered. "Boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away."

Shadows crept out of the Labyrinth of Night, pursuing the tiny rover like grasping fingers. David set his mouth; it would be foolish to look behind him, he was one of the only two living creatures in this entire sector of Mars. Still his neck prickled. Brought too much emotional baggage, he told himself. Think too much. Fear from within, not without.

There was the camp, the life unit like a giant clamshell half-buried in the sand. His first days there David had built a low rock wall around it, as carefully as a New England farmer clearing a field; now only a few boulders showed above the red dust. Mars was not quite ready to accept

human artifacts. He slowed, edged the rover in close to the shelter, stopped. Clumsily he scrambled out and turned to retrieve the samples. In this batch, perhaps, the evidence of extraterrestrial life. But he doubted that man would ever find new life; we're alone, folks, stuck with our terrors.

Behind him the door of the shelter opened. "Were you delayed?" The voice was soft, carefully modulated, with a note of music in it. Someone had taken great care with that synthesizer. And another voice, harsh and masculine, "What kept you, David? I was about to eat your rations!"

With an effort David hoisted the containers. Irene stepped out of the airlock and lifted them effortlessly from his gloves with her slender pale hands. "Yeah, thanks," he began. She turned back into the shelter.

David secured the rover and cast one last suspicious glance around the misty horizon. Nothing. A crimson blotch, the oversized star that was the sun, and the eternal pink sky. He craved green the way a starving man craves food.

He turned his back on Mars and ducked inside the shelter, pausing in the suiting chamber to divest himself of helmet and suit and boots and power packs. Irene was already returning from the lab to the main room, a slender covered figure winking from light to puddle of fluorescent light.

Andrei sat at the table, a tray of root vegetables before him. "What kept you?" he asked again.

"Woolgathering, as usual," David replied. He sat down.

Irene produced another food tray from the warmer and set it before him. "Do you need anything else?" she asked. "Water ration?"

"Yes. Dust in my throat."

"Something wrong with your suit?" Andrei asked. His eyes were blue, their gaze sharp as a surgeon's dissecting scalpel.

David avoided them, seizing the cup and pouring the liquid into his mouth. Tasteless, distilled from subsurface ice, molecules of an alien world flowing into his body. He wondered if they would make of him some alien life form. "No, nothing's wrong with my suit. Just that staring at the dust all day makes me feel as if I'm choking on it."

Andrei's keen glance shifted, granting reprieve. "When I was a kid," he said, "we'd go on hiking trips through Bryce Canyon, clambering up and down the bluffs like monkeys. Not so different from here, really, except for the suits. And the cold."

"No snakes," David said. Andrei was trying to cheer him up; he should cooperate. He dived with a show of enthusiasm into the vegetable stew. Not bad. Not good either. Earth roots, processed in Martian soil -- a different tang to the ordinary potatoes and carrots.

"Irene," Andrei called, and she turned from her task. "Go ahead and check yourself out. We have a chess game later on."

"Why do you keep on playing?" David asked. "She always beats you."

"Mind over matter. Some day I'm going to win."

"It's her mind..." David began, and cut himself off.

Irene seated herself and plugged the electrodes into her fingertips. The meters flickered, testing the circuits of her artificial nerves. She was still, clear chiseled profile set, fiber-optic eyes closed. The faintest blush of color touched her polymer cheeks, an indication of energy level, not emotion.

"She looks real," David hissed, as if it mattered if she heard him.

"A human form is the most efficient for the multiple tasks she's required to do. So the lab decided to give her eyelashes and teeth and hair, and decided to wire her computer brain like a woman's."

"Engrams complementary to ours -- that's what they told us, isn't it? But I don't think they provided us grizzled prospectors with a female companion just out of the goodness of their hearts."

The blue gaze fixed him once gain, peeling away layer after layer of pretense. "Of course not. It's an experiment in cultural evolution, and we're part of it. That's why we're here, scientific curiosity."

That's why you're here, David thought, avoiding the older man's eyes. "I don't know. I just have a -- a feeling. One of the puny intuitions left to us human types." Iren -- One Robot something something Experimental -- was a great scientific breakthrough for his ex-wife's biotechnical research and development team. His own nerves twinged whenever she plugged herself in like that. A technological stigmata.

Rest period. His 'phones filled with the soothing resonances of music. A Bach concerto -- precise, clear, ordered notes, a wave front through his mind. His neurons triggered by each quantum of sound, electrical signals comprehended in the infinite labyrinth of his brain, firing his senses with pleasure, with pain, with memory.

*"Marian, a computer can never be self-aware -- it can never live. It's a binary system. Magnetic bubbles, protein chips, whatever, it simply isn't as complex as a brain. You can't program it with all the subtle instinctive leaps of comprehension."*

*She turned away, as she had turned away so often in the last days. A defense, perhaps, against the memory of their baby. Their human child, vulnerable to accident, to death. "Information*

*theory," she said impatiently, her hand on the door. "We'll be providing the construct with a grammar for learning."*

*"It can never be more than a machine."*

*"We're nothing more than molecular machines." The door opened.*

*He grew impatient in turn. "We're alive, Marian. And we can create new life only one way."*

*Her spine snapped erect, her jaw tightened, denying the agony. Wordlessly she stepped through the doorway and was gone.*

And yet, David told himself, the denial was in itself agony. It used to be that men joined the Foreign Legion to forget a failed marriage; now, evidently, they volunteered for a field researcher's post on Mars. A scientist's heaven, the Noctis Labyrintius, layer upon layer of ancient rock -- the Labyrinth of Night -- the labyrinth, the place of the labrys, the double axe, reverberating to the bellows of the Minotaur -- half man, half-beast, an artificial construct -- devouring the Athenian children -- a child, a child, a child.

He started upwards, his heart pounding from the brief yet vivid nightmare. The music was over; static hissed in his ears. He flicked off the disk player, looked around at the temporarily unfamiliar shelter, calmed himself.

"Check," said Irene.

Andrei groaned. "I thought I had you foxed this time. But I'll beat you yet, honey. They couldn't have crammed that many impulses into those teeny, tiny protein chips in you mind." He extracted his king from danger.

Irene regarded the chessmen, David regarded her. Funny -- you wouldn't expect her artificial mind to change the expression of her artificial face -- why bother to program her to lower her lashes over her eyes, to smile confidently as she shifted a piece, to tap one long forefinger impatiently beside the chess board? Emotions were merely biochemical tides in the brain -- she was much better off without them.

Andrei moved, she moved again; "Checkmate," she said, and there was well-modulated triumph in her voice.

"Aargh!" Andrei exclaimed. "Too quick for me. Again tomorrow?"

In a few swift movements she cleared away the game. "Certainly. I'll go check on the culture tubes now."

Let the human guinea pigs get their ration of sleep.

Andrei stood, stretching, and realized David was watching him. "You wonder," he grinned, "why they even bothered to send us along."

Irene glanced back from the doorway. "To keep me amused," she called, perfectly deadpan.

There was something about her attitude as she moved. "Good Lord, now she's making jokes," David said quickly shrugging away his paranoia.

"She learns fast. Good night, David."

"Good night." He checked the readouts, secured the door, glanced out a dust-scummed porthole. Nothing outside. Nothing inside. In the lab Irene's movements were smooth, efficient, silent.

David lay awake a long time, brooding but he reached only the certainty that nothing was certain.

The coffee was hot; David took a quick gulp and then stood swishing it around his mouth in a futile effort to keep from burning his tongue. "Damn."

Andrei was already suiting up. "See any likely looking spots in the Labyrinth yesterday?" he called.

David returned, "Yeah. Check that gully a kilometer beyond the second marker. There seemed to be some interesting sandstone, but it was getting dark so I bailed out."

"Right."

Irene strolled through the airlock. "The empty sample containers and your tackle are in the rover."

"Thanks," Andrei told her, and with a wave of his bulkily suited arm and hand, "See you at quitting time, David."

"Keep in touch," David called after him. The coffee was a little cooler; he took another sip. The caffeine receptors in his brain were working nicely and he felt measurably more alert.

Irene was waiting. "The microbiology experiments are ready," she told him.

Reluctantly he set down the cup. His body walked into the lab; his mind followed Andrei and the rover, dwindling into a foggy peach-colored dawn. The Noctis Labyrinthus would be filled with mist, the jagged cliffs blotted into a deceptive softness, the wind still. The Labyrinth would be waiting.

All right, all right, he told himself. He bent over the readouts. Spectrometer readings were inconclusive, as usual. The Martian topsoil, with its high proportion of windblown montmorillonite clay, absorbed and released gasses in mimicry of respiration and

photosynthesis. An nice problem in inorganic chemistry, but no proof of life, microbial or otherwise.

"We'll have to refine the experiment," he told Irene, and she immediately offered several good suggestions. Work was therapeutic, David thought. He'd been thinking that a lot recently. But the problem was an interesting one, and before long he was absorbed in his task.

When he finally looked up, he was surprised at how many numbers had clicked over on the chronometer. It was long past time for Andrei to check in. Any number of things could have delayed him, David told himself. Nothing to worry about. But his shoulder blades twitched, an icicle forming along his spine.

The dark lenses of Irene's eyes dilated suddenly, and her chin went up in an unmistakable gesture of listening. Even as she moved the radio beacon let out a brief chirp.

David was on it in a moment. "Andrei?" Silence. "Andrei, are you all right?" The speaker stared back at him, mute. Hell, David thought, if he'd only tried to contact him earlier -- but that wasn't standard procedure.

Irene was fully equipped with waldos in her fingers and arms and legs; she needed the rope only to steady herself. Like a fly she crept downwards, clinging to the rough face of the rock. Once she slipped, but by the time David could clutch convulsively at the rope she was already clasped to another microscopic cranny.

She stopped on a narrow ledge, excavated handholds and footholds, reached over to the spire. The silver helmet wobbled loosely as she touched it. She paused a moment, her head bowed as if genuflecting; then she pulled the smashed form into her arms.

A twenty-first century Pieta. David knelt a meter back from the rim, his stomach yawning, dizzy. The vertigo. He'd never before left the rover. Sitting in the rover he'd felt safe. But Andrei had climbed out and walked to the edge, enjoying the view. Too close to the edge; the footprints, the red gash where the sand had given way, were painfully apparent. If only he -- if only -- what could he ever have done? Andrei, no, not you too.

Night gathered in the depths of the Labyrinth. The wind shrieked down the galleries, spinning swirls of dust upward into the dusk. Irene was moving, carrying the carbon-based husk of what had one been a life form. Numbly David pulled on the rope, helped her to wrestle her burden over the edge, placed it with less reverence than despair in the rover. Behind the scratched visor Andrei's eyes, a piercing blue, stared stubbornly upwards into the sky, but this sky did not reflect their color.

"Come on," David said. He snapped his teeth shut on the words. They drove in silence back to the shelter, and the shadows of night followed close behind them.

David threw himself down in the chair. He was so tired even his bones ached. His geologist's pick seemed to be embedded in his head, its point caught in his throat, choking him. He reached desperately for his box of disks and inserted one into the player.

It hadn't taken long. The emergency call to Chryse Base, the shuttlecraft's landing lights flaring through the portholes, the poor, weak, smashed human form bundled away. "Yeah, I'll stay here," he told the commander. "Don't have anywhere else to go."

Music. Soothing music. Vaughan Williams' "The Lark Ascending." Ascending, perhaps, like a human soul with wings into the blue vault of Earth's heaven -- carbon-based life forms died too easily, too easily.

He noticed that Irene was bringing in the sample containers from the rover. The ones Andrei had filled. She set them down, glanced at David, reached for the chess set. "You don't play, do you?" she murmured.

"No." The music filled the labyrinth of his consciousness; a violin, a clean melodic line spiraling upwards, upwards, until its clarity burst like a bubble and the orchestra answered, caught it, brought it back down to human grief.

*"You don't feel a thing, do you?"*

*"Marian, how..."*

*"You could get blood from a stone easier than I could get some emotion out of you, a tear, for God's sake, one lousy tear."*

*"Marian, please..."*

It hurts too much, it hurts -- the purity of the music, the violin floating effortlessly up -- the orchestra embracing it.

Irene opened the box, picked out a pawn, held it a moment and then crushed it to powder in her hydraulically tightened fist.

The music tore his senses into raw, aching shreds. The catch in his throat burst. He bent his head and the tears came unbidden, racked from his eyes by great, gasping sobs -- nothing, nothing, nothing.

A hand touched him, taking his in a gentle grasp. "They didn't give me tear ducts," she said, "and yet I share the sorrow." The curls of her nylon-filament hair shook, trembling like leaves driven before a storm. Her whole body was trembling. Poor silicon-based life-form, having to learn so much. David pulled her up beside him.

His tears were quickly spent, the paroxysm leaving him weak and numb. Her trembling ceased and she lay, eyes closed and lips tight, against his shoulder. The music died away into one last

resonance passed from body to body. Some robot, he thought with that faint prick of intuition, she's too much more than a robot. But the luxury of not thinking was seductive, and he surrendered to thoughtlessness.

Soon after dawn the outside sensors registered three dust devils wavering above the Noctis Labyrinthus, the vanguard of a sandstorm. David and Irene barely had time to secure the rover and prepare the heavy-duty filters before a tidal wave of dark crimson dust like dried blood crashed over them. The wind that drove it screamed and sobbed and howled, the proverbial soul in torment.

The work had to be done, so they turned on lights that gleamed oddly pale in the artificial dusk, and worked. Therapy, David explained; Irene nodded as if she understood. His tears had been cathartic, he assured himself; he was calm now, and his thoughts ticked over as quietly as the numbers on the chronometer. But he needed to play disk after disk, pulling the music like a cloak around him, warming the cold kernel of grief in his heart.

That day wore on, and night came, and day again. The harsh blue-gray luminescence of the fluoros left David's eyes raw, slightly unfocussed, like the waving stalks of some sea-creature. No seas here. Just the wind, trying to speak, trying to blot out his music -- Andrei, the child. He botched an oxygen measurement, spat an oath between his teeth, strode into the other room to check on Irene.

She was hunched over a readout, staring expressionlessly at Andrei's still sealed sample cases. With a sigh he leaned over her shoulder to squint at the flickering screen before her.

"Don't get any bright ideas," she said. "Tear ducts aren't the only body parts I'm missing."

David stepped back from her so quickly he almost tripped over his own feet. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You know darn well. Breathing down my neck while I'm trying to work." She extinguished the readout, wrenched the covers from Andrei's sample cases and sent them crashing onto the table.

"It's my work, too. And I've been at it a lot longer than you have. Just because you don't even breathe." He spun away, exasperated. Lord, she was getting to be more like Marian every moment. He had quite a talent, it seemed, for turning perfectly pleasant women into bitches. But this one wasn't a woman, wasn't human. She was a pawn. He was a pawn.

Dust matted the portholes, clogged his throat. The life unit was less a shelter than a trap. David kicked petulantly at a chair, which turned over and dealt his table a resounding blow. The disk player plunged to the floor. The "Liebestod" died, squealing, and the wind laughed hysterically at the window.

"No," David said, too stricken even to swear. Not the music. He couldn't even keep that. "David!" Irene was in the doorway, eyes wide, excited. "Come look at these samples."



He didn't care. He was tired. Maybe the wind was in itself music, calling to him. The Labyrinth, and the embrace of the Minotaur.

"David." She was beside him, her hand on his arm. "I -- I'm sorry I spoke harshly -- I don't know why."

Wearily he looked at her. No, she didn't know. But she did care. The machine cared more than the man. He shook himself, awakening his intellect, and followed her into the lab.

A row of rock samples lay under the light, cores of the everlasting sandstone, layers of orange and pink like a birthday cake. Although these particular samples seemed to have come from a less weathered area. Where was it Andrei had gone -- beyond the second marker in the Labyrinth?

David lifted a small pick and chipped at the largest sample. His eyes focused and he blinked. No, he wasn't seeing it.

He was seeing it. Green. Minute threads of green inside the rock. "I'll be damned," he whispered. "There it is."

"Just like Vishniac predicted sixty years ago," said Irene. "Algae living inside the rock itself, sheltered from the cold, from the germicidal ultraviolet."

Such algae had been discovered in the dry valleys of Antarctica; David had trained for the Mars mission there, where the bleak wastes had seemed so in tune with his mood. But to find it here, to find the first evidence of naturally-evolving extra-terrestrial life...

"I'll be damned," he said. And he grinned in a sudden dry irony. Maybe he had been damned.

Maybe he was a lost soul -- but, but, it was life. "God," he said, not in an expletive but a prayer. "We're not alone. A lousy handful of algae but it's alive, evolving..."

Irene watched, alert; he could almost hear the molecular gates in her mind opening and closing, building a frame, learning. "Algae here. What will we find on Titan? Further?"

"Just wait. There'll be lawsuits into the next century, the leave-it-alone environmentalists against the industrialists who would use this little scrap of green as a genetic base for terraforming." He laughed. "A future, you see? It's a future."

"Yes," she said. "A future. Not alone. I understand."

And, David told himself, she did.

"Human?" Yes he'd wanted a child. But he certainly hadn't expected this. God, Marian, I'm not sure this is really fair. And yet he couldn't resent it.

"The queens on their own colors," Irene said. "And the pawns in front to protect them." She seated herself and contemplated the board. "I -- I think I'm beginning to understand. My own mind, I mean."

"Don't rush it. There're some thing you're not going to want."

"The sorrow of it." Their eyes met. Her lenses were as sharp as surgeon's scalpels, peeling away layer after layer of pretense.

She had learned that from Andrei. "Yes," he said. "The sorrow, the guilt, the sheer cussedness of living. You survive, though, inside your rock."

She smiled at his simile. "And love, and the pain of loving."

"Yes, that too. Always that."

Each playing piece sat on its own square. "First move," Irene said. "Pawn to King Four." She took her role as teacher very seriously.

Perhaps thought is its own excuse for being, David told himself. Like beauty. The paraphrase seemed appropriate. He moved his own pawn.

"Second move."

Outside, the moonless darkness was pricked by light. Earth hung low on the horizon, the evening star. The wind from the Labyrinth of Night sang in perfect counterpoint to the symphony. Irene looked up at David and laughed.