

# *Galactic Geographic*

*Stephan Michael Loy*



**MID-WORLD ARTS**  
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*Part Two:  
Mars*

# *Mars 1*

Charlese snapped back to consciousness. Her eyes were already open. They were *locked* open, immobilized into a wide stare by something ... something that pressed against every molecule of her body. She couldn't move, she couldn't even breathe. She couldn't track her eyes left or right. All she could do was watch Mars fly to meet her like a hammer to a nail head.

She plummeted through a wafer-thin flash of clouds and knew she had less than fifteen miles before she slammed into the planet. She screamed in her head. Her throat, her mouth, her lungs, none of them worked.

A puff of explosive threads along the steel skeleton supporting her cerami-glass bubble. At the limit of her vision, she watched two skinny, feather-like foils snap out from the ship at a shallow angle. The atmospheric brakes? In response, the red, barren landscape filling her vision began a rapid, clockwise spin.

No sound, no sensation, not even a suggestion of movement. Charlese endured the rapid fall to Mars as if watching it through VR goggles with only the video stream enabled.

Something flashed over her line of sight, turning everything a uniform gray tinged with pink. That would be the impact bumper inflating around her bubble in order to absorb the worst of her

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imminent slam into Mars. The bumper was welcome, but also opaque. Blindness heightened Charlese's terror. She felt...she felt...

Well, she didn't feel much of anything. She was scared half to death, but in a peculiar...academic way. Her skin didn't tingle, her hairs didn't stand on end, her eyes didn't dilate, or heart beat any faster.

Charlese hesitated. Did her heart beat *at all*?

On that question, the gray drew away like drapery and bundled itself into sloppy, wrinkled folds of material. Her eyes suddenly burned, her skin felt wet, she smelled an awful, momentary stench of sour milk, and tasted melted rubber.

"Well," Oldman said from beside her, "I see you, too, are awake."

Charlese fumbled for her safety harness release. Her fingers seemed like strangers.

"I'd relax, if I were you," Oldman's voice continued. "It takes a few minutes for the body to recall its lesser neural pathways. We've nothing much to do anyway until the retrieval team arrives."

Charlese released her safety harness. She tried to sit higher in her seat, then changed her mind when the sphere began to spin. She leaned back, sucked in a few sharp breaths and carefully turned her head to see her companion.

Her head didn't quite obey. She wound up staring at khaki pantlegs and scuffed boots. The sphere itself spread all around her, but that wasn't much to look at, just cerami-glass sectioned by thin steel ribs, two chairs bolted to the floor.

Outside the sphere, deflated airbags billowed in the wind, still attached at the steel ribs from which they had erupted. How had they gotten so much crap in such a small space?

"The worst of it is over in case you're new to this rustic form of travel," Oldman said, "but, all things considered, that was a passably comfortable flight."

Charlese leaned forward and threw up on the cerami-glass bubble.

"Farther to the left, if you don't mind," Oldman suggested. "You almost spattered my boots."

Charlese turned to face him, her head flopping onto her shoulder as if her neck were an overstretched rubber band. She felt surprise when she saw him, but her facial muscles weren't up to showing it.

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Oldman still sat harnessed in his chair, covered in a thin pink slime. It dripped from his arms, eyebrows and chin and collected in gobs in the bristles along his jaw. The stuff matted his hair and greased his clothing. It ran from his ears and nose. He looked as though he'd been basted by Barbie.

"Ya luk tehbuh," Charlese said, then started coughing up pink goo.

"You don't look so great yourself. You see, this ballistics transport system is old, cheap technology dreamed up for military and government couriers, that sort of thing, but it's from the first generation of post-Gray tech, which is why you've likely never had the privilege." Oldman patted his slimy black vest as if searching for cigarettes. "It's still used by the cheap and the traveling middle class, the first describing Argenion and the second, figuratively, us. It's no pampering experience, but it's reasonably fast and safe as houses."

Charlese recalled burning down houses as part of her former career.

"Ah, here it is," Oldman said. He unzipped a pocket close to his hip and pulled out a dripping black plastic box the size of a deck of cards. "You see, they basically just throw our sphere toward its destination. They shoot it out of a fusion cannon, like a lead ball from a musket. Out we go at escape velocity and then some, dependent on trigonometry and the moon's gravity well, and we hit our destination within ten kilometers, guaranteed or our money back." He wiped the slimy box with a slimy hand, then smiled a horrid show of pink teeth. "Of course, if they're wrong, there's little incentive to pay up because we're flying through the cosmos to some other, unexpected vacation spot. That or our destination planet catches us a tad too roughly, if you get my meaning."

Charlese got only a flooding gorge. She turned away just in time to blast her guts all over her hatch.

"Yes," Oldman cheered, "like that. Of course, we wouldn't survive no matter how good the math without protection. The cold of space, the g-forces, that whole first law of thermal dynamics thing, that's why they developed the liquid infusion, solid transport system."

LISTS. Charlese groaned. She had read something somewhere, some footnote or other, about the primitive nature of early fast transport, before the advent of the time displacement drive. LISTS

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transport was the hairiest form of legal space travel, marginally safer than being launched from a catapult with a mattress strapped to your chest. But LISTS might explain the last several nightmarish minutes, or more likely hours, her recovering brain told her. No one could transit to Mars in minutes, no one but the government, anyway. And major corporations. And very rich citizens.

She squeezed shut her eyes and shook her head, reversing course on that little tangent.

LISTS was a chemical transport system. As she recalled, they sprayed the passenger with this wicked, invasive enzyme soup that hardened around and within the passenger and throughout the spacecraft cabin. The hardened spray acted as part inertial damper, part nutritional supplement, part oxygen exchange system and part metabolic inhibitor--

"Oh, God," Charlese said, sitting straight up. "How long have I--"

"Well, let's find out," Oldman said.

"Where am--"

"Again, let's find out." Oldman shook the black box and pressed a few tiny buttons.

"Is dat-- *that* a sub-space communicator?" Charlese asked, slowly learning to control her mouth.

"No, nothing that fancy."

"A satellite uplink device?"

"No, a Sony Walkman. Ah, here we go."

Oldman held down a button on his box. A whisper from the device grew to a muted shout. "--is WGN FM 1270, Your *music* station! Hey, not much exciting going on right.."

"Of course," Oldman grinned, "we'll have to wait for the date stamp, but that's the local station for Syria Planum, so we're more or less on target."

"A radio?"

"Not very sexy, I grant you that, but infinitely more useful than a satellite link. These Martian stations use very low wattage. We must be close."

Charlese didn't care how close they were. She just wished her stomach would settle, her nose would stop running, her head would stop pounding and her lungs would find an easy breath. She felt

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another geyser of puke pushing its way up her throat and tried to choke it back.

"I wouldn't do that," Oldman cautioned.

For the third and most spectacular time, Charlese spewed on the glass.

"You see," Oldman continued, "when you travel via LISTS it's important to breathe evenly and to exhale just at investment. Also to be drunk. You didn't do either of those, so you have the compound deeper in your system than intended. Not even the engineered evaporation will clean it out completely."

Evaporation? "What?"

Oldman held his hand, the one not gripping the radio, near Charlese's face. "Look closely."

Charlese worked to focus her pink-smearing eyes. A thin, pink vapor rose from Oldman's hand. Now that she noticed, it rose from everything, including her own body.

Oldman withdrew his hand. "It reaches a threshold of flash evaporation after fifteen minutes or so, then *I* will be dry as crackers. You on the other hand, well, it's hard to evaporate from deep within cell walls. Ah, here it comes..."

Oldman fiddled with his radio. Charlese sighed, a burbling sound matching a bubbling in her chest. So, she had some sort of engineer-inflicted bronchitis? She needed her stomach pumped? And now, this headache began to build, like a timpani metronome at her temples? Was that how she started her proud new career as a journalist? By puking so often and hard that brave men scrambled to avoid her presence? Or a trajectory from her mouth, anyway.

Then again, Oldman hadn't run, but he had no place to bolt for escape. She raised her head, heavy from the effort of blowing out her insides, and peeked over the wall of puke before her.

Mars. Red dirt, innumerable red rocks as if a trainload of gravel had spilled over the ground, tall, red, conical mountains far in the distance. A worthless, rusted hunk of hell with a poisonous atmosphere and not much of that. Charlese despised the view, and this... this was the planet's good side.

"I hate this place," she groaned, then wrenched forward and barfed again. This time she got her bare feet, but was far beyond caring.



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"And now, for our listening audience..." Oldman said, and shoved the radio toward Charlese.

The broadcast came in so clearly, Charlese might have sworn the DJ sat beside her. The station really was very close. "Don't forget that spring cleaning, guys. The tourists are already coming in. Let's make Syria Planum *the* station to visit this day and any day. Speaking of days, we'll get sunny skies, nineteen Celsius and winds out of the east at twenty kph on this sixth day of Second June--"

"Second June?" Charlese muttered. "That can't be right..." She started doing the math in her head, but Oldman beat her to it.

"Eight and a half months," he said.

"No, that's not possible. It felt like-- I don't want to lose eight and a half months of my life!"

"That isn't how it works, dear lady. In your new world, perspective is king. You didn't age eight months while LISTS kept you in metabolic suspension, everyone *else* did."

"Eight and a half months!"

"Really? I thought you used to be a Marine. Time dilation should be a way of life. Though technically this wasn't time dilation, just wasted time. On the other hand, that wonderful silk suit you gave up has been worn twice, traded, sold and re-sold. By now it hangs on a rack with hundreds of other Salvation Army donations, smelling faintly of mildew."

"Don't say that!"

"You're right. I really should watch my adverbs."

Eight and a half months! Charlese felt a wave of depression crashing over her wave of nausea. "Is this it, Oldman? Is this how I'm s'posed -- *supposed* -- to live my life? Stripping for the boss, getting shanghaied at any minute's notice, breathing pink snot and enduring my hundredth birthday before I'm thirty? Is that the way it's going to be?"

"Well, no. Not all of it."

Charlese slumped back in her seat. As she did, a pink fog erupted from everywhere and the sound of fans rose and fell. Her clothes felt dry. The slime no longer greased her skin. The ship interior looked freshly cleaned, except for all the puke. The cruddiness of her insides felt worse in isolation.

"And look," her companion said, putting away his radio, "the welcoming committee extends a hand in friendship."

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A dust trail appeared on the horizon, probably a retrieval crew dispatched from the station.

"By the way," Oldman said, leaning toward Charlese and sticking out his hand, "I'm Bernard Oldman, crusty but benign reporter for a capitalist, exploitive contributor to the intellectual demise of the human species. You?"

Charlese eyed his hand with suspicion. In the end, she took it. No buzzers went off, no shockers shocked. Oldman's handshake was dry, firm and quick.

"Charlese Tilbrenner, confused former lackey of the Terran military-industrial complex, now myself a mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan--"

"Okay, show off, don't strain yourself. You might start barfing again."

"I was just following the example of my mentor. That's what Argenion called you, isn't it? My mentor?"

"It sounds so portentous, doesn't it? 'Come, child, I am your mentor. I will teach you the various and subtle necessities of journalism. Sit ye at my sandaled feet! Hearken wide-eyed and bushy-tailed to the four truths, no, Oldman's four pillars -- yes, that sounds better -- of the creative magazine career.'"

"And those are?" Charlese asked, mugging rapturous attention as far as her headache, grumbling gorge and congested lungs would allow, which wasn't much.

"Oh, well, let's see. You've caught me unawares. How about: Oldman's four pillars of truth, or whatever that was: travel first class on a coach ticket; charge it to the Man and make it stick; and, oh yes, log a good story so as to keep getting paid."

"That's only three pillars."

"You already know the fourth one. Breathe evenly and exhale, or breathe raggedly and spew."

"Do I ever. Is that all there is to mentoring the new girl, Ol' Swami Oldman, sir?"

"Only two other things. The first is, no one calls me Oldman except policemen, loan sharks and interviewees previously presented in a bad light. Most people call me Bernie. A chosen few call me Bernard, the God of All Journalism and Magnet for Women. My friends, on the other hand, call me Bernie."

"I thought 'most people' called you Bernie."

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"Most people are my friends."

"Uh-huh." He was full of himself, either that or he was a natural-born class clown. Maybe he was just filling the empty minutes until the retrieval team came up. "I guess I'll call you Bernie."

Bernie looked puzzled. "So, does that mean you're most people, or does that mean you're my friend?"

"You said there were two things."

"Sorry?"

"Two things, Swami Bernie."

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot." He twisted in his seat to face her and flashed his engaging smile, now sans the pink slime. "You should realize that we've now been introduced. Oldman's Law Number One is no longer in force."

"Ha!" Charlese exclaimed, amazed at his temerity. But she should have kept her reaction more sedate. Her "Ha!" came out less a work of defiant mockery and more of a gag. No, it was *definitely* a gag. She bent forward, hacking like a cat with a hairball problem. Something sticky pushed up her throat, but wouldn't come all the way.

Bernie Oldman, bless his soul, leaned calmly toward her, arm stretched out with an open palm, and pounded her hard on the back.

Charlese watched a pink glob fly from her mouth and pop like a bubble before it struck the floor. Sublimation, recorded her mind. Even from within the discomfort of gagging, she thought it was cool as hell.

"The first order of business is taking care of that," Bernie said as he settled back into his chair. "That being the congestion, the wooziness and the headache. Don't worry, dear child, Father Oldman has the cure."

"Ack!" Charlese responded. Two urges suddenly clutched her, one to further decorate the glass and another to ruin the seat of her flight suit.

Decisions, decisions.



The retrieval vehicle was a claptrap horror. It showed irregular, angular surfaces so erupted with antennae, communications dishes, sensor wands, exhaust pipes, fender bars, feelers and God knew what

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that Charlese expected *something* on the monster to puncture at least one of its eight balloon-like wire-mesh tires. It was a kind of giant, gypsy, closed-cab dune buggy with a crane boom sticking up on top.

It pulled up to within five meters and rocked to a halt on bad springs. The whole thing was stained red by Martian dust, layers of red of at least four shades. It didn't get to the wash rack much.

"Hey," someone called over whatever passed for the sphere's radio. "Youse peoples wouldn't be flight Oh-Double Two-Tree-Kay-Dash-Sixspot, would'ja?"

"That would be us," Bernie answered cheerfully. "Please, friend Martian, take us to your leader."

"Ayah, right. I don't suppose youse folks is dead, is ya?"

"No!" Charlese bellowed, so loud that Bernie cringed. "We are most certainly *not* dead!"

"Okay, okay. Sheesh, don't haf to take no offense." The voice faded then, as if the man covered his mike. "Sorry, boys, no salvage today!"

"God give me strength," Charlese muttered, and began a rough jag of coughing.



The retrieval team dropped them outside the dome at Syria Planum Station. From a distance, the place had been awe-inspiring, a froth of cerami-glass and steel bubbles reflecting golden on the empty wasteland. Up close, it was a dump.

From out on the station's doorstep, the grisly details jarred the senses. The sphere rocked gently on a sand-blown corrugated steel pad, just outside a pressure door painted in garish red-and-yellow caution stripes. Garbage was heaped to either side of the pad: boxes, canisters, overflowing old-fashioned dumpsters, hundred-liter aluminum drums and mounds and mounds of less specific crap. Vent stacks projected by the seemingly random hundreds from the glass and steel structure. Steel buttresses arced from the curved face of the dome and plowed into the ground at twenty-meter intervals, a redundancy in stability and static grounding. The buttresses, the vent stacks and the dome's steel skeleton all bristled with static rods and communication antennae and everything, *everything* was smothered in dust.

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Figures in pressure suits trudged about the pad, some tending the station exterior in ways Charlese couldn't fathom, some driving marsmoving equipment, mainly to add to the impressive junk heaps. Three of the pressure suits plodded to the sphere. Two of them dragged thick steel tow cables, eyehooks swinging from the ends, and proceeded to stoop to either side of the sphere, scraping and banging to attach their lines. The third stopped with his back to the ship, holding up a pair of red signal flashlights.

"So, you see," Bernie said, having rattled on during the whole two-hour retrieval operation, "Mars is an ideal place to start a career at *Galactic Geographic*. It's rustic, yes, but it shows the extent of old colonization, before people jumped on a liner and made their journey of manifest destiny while watching a movie and snacking on microwaved chicken dinners. There are far more exotic planets to settle, planets with actual atmosphere one can breathe and air pressure one can enjoy without his circulatory system exploding out through his ears. This -- that is, Mars -- is where the real adventurers settle in, the people who know what interplanetary expansion really means."

Charlese groaned, her head pounding, her throat raw from throwing up. "They're here because they've no prospects on Earth and they ran out of money to go anywhere else."

"That too, but doesn't that characterize all periods of population expansion in human history? I mean--"

"Please, Bernie, I don't want to talk about this."

"Well, it might be important to--"

"I said I don't want to talk about this. I don't want to talk about Martian history, how the West was won or the Time-Life timeline of substandard space travel. My head hurts, I can hardly breathe and my throat tastes like an open sewer. If you don't mind, I'd just like to sit here and be miserable."

"I understand, Charlie, I really do. I can call you Charlie, can't I? I don't want to be rude, but Charlese is a name that takes some concentration for casual conversation."

"It's my name, *Bernard*."

"I realize that. But, as people call me Bernie though I was christened Bernard, perhaps you have a nickname that doesn't make me want to dust off my pants every time I say it."

"What?"

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"Oh, now you're upset--"

"What did you mean by that? You're making fun of my name?"

"Not at all. You misunderstand. It's just that your name is so... formal."

"My head is going to explode."

"You're presumably a writer, look at it this way. Any name that is awkwardly written in the possessive is just begging for a nickname."

"Please, head, please explode."

"Come on, be a sport. Take my name: Bernie. Bernie's. Bernard's. No problem. Your name? Charlese. Admirable. Men fall prostrate at your feet. Charlese's. God save civilization from itself."

"It's happening," Charlese moaned, leaning forward and holding her head. "My head is going to explode and my last joyful thought will be that it takes you with it--"

The sphere lurched and Charlese yelped. She reached out for something to stabilize herself, but there was nothing close within reach but puke.

Someone grabbed the shoulder of her flight suit. She turned to find Bernie leaning far across to steady her. His face was less than a foot from hers.

"Relax," Bernie said. "This is normal. They've attached us to a skid and are pulling us into the dome." He flashed that broad, endearing smile. "Good news, Charlie. You'll soon be free in the artificial Martian air."

Charlese vomited right in his face.