

# *Galactic Geographic*

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

## *Mars 2*

The hatches opened two or three minutes later. By then, Bernie had gone through stupefaction, had exhausted cursing and had settled into a silent, stiff-jawed steam. Charlese had managed two valiant attempts at apology, but her heart hadn't really been in it. What did that sniggering poser have to cry about, after all? He wasn't the one with the screwed up body. Sure, he had puke on his face, but she had it between her toes and probably in her boots. She had the sore throat, the twisting stomach, the rubbery muscles and the pounding, pounding headache that attacked her at every urbane, self-satisfied word her companion uttered. So *what* if he hadn't looked when she stripped. So *what* if he hadn't cringed from her sickly presence. So *what* if he had talked all this time to take her mind off her stomach. Screw him.

When the ground crew opened the hatches, Charlese staggered free of her tiny, sour smelling cage and dropped to her hands and knees. Luckily, it wasn't a long drop. The Martians didn't bother with platforms or gantries. With the sphere rocking on the hard ground, the trip from chair to garage floor was less than two feet.

"God!" Charlese heard someone shout. "This thing's worse than a baby's diaper! Somebody get a hose over here!"

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Charlese gritted her teeth. She worked her fingers against the steel decking until her knuckles whitened. She felt anger. She felt too embarrassed to lift her face and be seen. Charlese wasn't good at ignominy. For too many years, people had stepped aside as she passed, often removing their hats. For some, she had been a person to respect; for others, a person to fear. What was she now except the right honorable Miss Stripping Pukethrower?

A pair of legs stepped around in front of her, clad in khaki and scuffed brown boots.

"Leave me alone," Charlese groaned.

"Sorry," Bernie said, his tone clipped, almost harsh. "I'm obligated to get you started." For a moment, he stopped talking, a strange vacuum of sound after his continuous chatter across the Martian landscape. His boots tapped a nervous rhythm a few inches from Charlese's eyes, stirring puffs of red dust. "I've smoothed it over with the retrieval team," he said. "I gave them the company card. They took out a cleanup fee, a gratuity for the guys with the hoses and scrub brushes and something for their supervisor's pain and suffering."

Charlese got one barf-drenched, high-heeled foot under her but couldn't continue her push erect. She teetered on one knee, light-headed, aching and drained of strength.

She looked up at Bernie, who held out a hand. She took it, or rather he intercepted her wobbly attempt to take it. Bernie pulled her up, caught her about the waist when she tottered from dizziness, then threw one of her arms across his neck.

"You might want to kick off those shoes. I'm doubtful you can walk in them in your condition."

It burned Charlese to be handled like a lush. After all, wasn't Bernie the drunk of this team? Nor did it help her dented pride that the man supporting and guiding her was a good head shorter, noticeably overweight and as socially presentable as a chimpanzee. Where was a nice tuxedo model when you needed one?

Bernie, not a tuxedo model, steered Charlese away from the roar of power washers.

"My stuff..." Charlese protested, but weakly.

"I grabbed your professional gear, though a lot of it needs running water and a sponge soaked in bleach." Bernie's voice was

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genteel acid. It was clear he struggled to be polite. "We'll forget the boots. Believe me, you don't want to wear them."

"I can't go around Mars barefoot as a Trailer Park Daisy."

"I don't get the reference. We'll buy new boots. Remember Oldman's Second Pillar of Truth."

"I forgot the second pillar, Bernie."

"Well, what good are you, anyway?"

Mars came at Charlese as a screaming assault through her pounding, nauseating misery. The garage was a hell of power tool shrieks drilling into her brain. It was dirty, yelling men in grubby blue coveralls. Her head throbbed to the arrhythmic clang of hammers amid the musty smell of floating red dust.

Beyond the garage, through a shower-sized airlock and into the greater station, Charlese was met by a riot of growling and beeping machinery, ramshackle storefronts on randomly placed, squat black buildings and too many people in narrow, labyrinthine streets. The pervading stink of oil, solvents and fried food competed with honking pedicabs pushing through the crowds like miniature siege engines. The cabbies rode behind rather than in front of their passengers, shouting over the heads of their fares from the bicycle-hansom hybrids. Most of the people pressing in the streets were locals, almost all Black, Hispanic or Asian. They didn't have the gawkiness (or the suntans) that gave away the tourists. These people were slumped, frowning, prematurely aged. They filled the air with a rich hodgepodge of dialects, languages and slang that colored the otherwise dreary lanes but heightened the violence of Charlese's throbbing headache.

"I hate this place," Charlese said into Bernie's ear, then tripped as her rubbery legs betrayed her.

"I don't see why," Bernie replied, jerking her closer to keep her from falling. "It's Mars, the most down-to-earth, if that expression's allowed, of all the inner colonies. Look at these people. Do they care that you appear to be publicly intoxicated in the middle of the morning? Do they notice that you have no shoes? You couldn't *buy* better neighbors."

A police officer sped past, parting the pedestrians with the blue light and shrieking siren on his fat-tired bicycle.

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Charlese winced at the siren, holding tightly to Bernie's neck. "This was a mistake," she said when the cop was gone. "I knew it in that launch bay on Earth. I shouldn't have taken this job."

"Life's a gamble. You make some good deals, you make some bad. If you wake up alive with all your limbs working, consider yourself ahead of the house."

"My limbs aren't working, Bernie."

"In that case, forget what I said. Still, give it a chance. You haven't had this job long enough to call it a mistake. Okay, right here." Bernie steered her off the narrow, jagged line of a street and into a narrower -- but no less crowded -- alley. It was like any other alley on Mars, which is to say, like any alley on Earth. It was lined with trashcans, dumpsters and the back doors of shops. It also harbored the entrances to places too vulgar for doors on the street. Bodies crowded against bodies in that cramped, dusky channel, shoving and elbowing not because the people were mean, but because there wasn't room to do anything else.

The mob had a working class feel, with the stale smell of sweat on night workers heading into the alley and the solvent smell of liquor on day workers coming out. A portion of the press dressed gaudily in shiny plastics that covered very little. They looked cheap but probably weren't.

"I told you," Charlese mumbled. "The place is a hell hole."

"Be polite, it's not your home," Bernie angled her toward a blank metal door by an overflowing dumpster. A cracked wooden sign hung crooked over the door, its once carefully applied lettering peeling and almost illegible.

"Bernie, why are we entering a place called The Vengeful Maggot?"

"Because the name he originally wanted on the sign was denied by the city bureaucracy. Come on, just a few more feet..." Bernie hauled open the door. This proved a chore with the crowd pressing the two journalists always toward the wall. He got it open and squeezed the two of them through before the force of numbers slammed the door behind them.

The place they entered was little better than what they left behind. It was darker, marginally cleaner, filled with ratty Formica tables surrounded by plastic chairs. To the door's right, a worn out bar stretched along the wall, its countertop laminate peeling at the

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edges and the vinyl pads atop the barstools ripped and exposing their foam rubber guts.

At least the place was less crowded. The only person in the dive besides Charlese and Bernie was a white-haired, bearded black man behind the bar.

"Hey! Punk!" Bernie called to the bartender. "Would you have a few drinks for paying customers?"

The black man squinted at Bernie, then squinted harder at Charlese. "The way I see it, at least one of you has had too much already."

"Not true, not true," Bernie protested as he lowered Charlese onto a stool. She fell across the countertop, her hands flung out to grasp its surface, to hold her in place against the slow, downward drag of her limp, disobedient body.

Charlese was mortified for the fourth or fifth time since meeting Bernie (she was starting to lose track). He had entered that rat's den insulting its employees. True, punks and worse probably frequented the place, but did Bernie have to say as much?

She sat splayed atop the bar, one cheek pressed against the cold, sticky Formica. She tried, through headache and nausea, to follow the conversation. She needed to stay at least minimally alert or Bernie would get his ass kicked. Possibly hers, too.

"You see," Bernie continued, "we just arrived on-planet, my associate and I, and we've had a few adventures. If you would be so kind as to offer me a towel, I'd be happy to recount them for you."

The bartender's beard was a short, scratchy, untended mess. He scratched it just then. Charlese realized that the man had been standing there doing nothing, not polishing a glass or wiping the counter, not even reading a cheap novel. He had been standing there with his hands at his sides in an empty bar. Somehow, that thought disturbed her more than anything since this joke had begun. It disturbed her even more than Argenion.

The man laid off scratching his beard and turned to the backbar for Bernie's towel. "Your situation seems plain already. She's your adventure and you met her outside that door. Can't say as I blame you, but how'd she get your business if she can't even strut to sell her stuff?"

"Hey!" Charlese objected, but it had little force with her face on the bar.



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"Now, see here, Punk--" Bernie pointed a finger at the bartender.

"Bernie!" Charlese snapped.

"What?"

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"You don't have to sink to his level, not to defend me or anything."

"Pardon?"

"Stop calling him names!"

Bernie stared at her, his finger still poised to admonish the bartender. "Oh," he finally said, and grinned. "Charlese Tilbrenner, meet Jimmy Punk, my sourceman here at Syria Planum. Punk, meet my impressionable sidekick, Charlese."

"Punk?" Charlese winced, realizing her mistake.

"Sidekick?" Punk huffed. "Is that what you call them now?"

"Hey!" Charlese complained.

"You're repeating yourself," Bernie said. He turned back to the bartender, who handed him a dampened cloth. "Understand, Punk, that Miss Tilbrenner is not what you think she is. She's my ward, so to speak, a new writer for *G Geo*. I'm showing her the ropes on her first tour, my last." He began scrubbing his face with the towel.

Punk looked from Bernie to Charlese, then back again. He shook his head and crossed his arms. "Yeah, okay. So Argenion's hiring drunks these days?"

Charlese opened her mouth, then closed it. She had almost yelled "Hey!" again.

"The lady is not drunk," Bernie said. "She has developed a condition. Now, if you don't mind, my friend, I'd like one Scotch and water or whatever you stock as a near equivalent, and one Ballistic Bellybomber for the lady." He fished into one of his vest pockets and hauled out a roll of bills.

"I don't know, Bernie," Punk said, not moving to prepare any liquor. "A drink like that could kill her."

Charlese raised her head a few inches off the bar. "Promise?"

"You know I don't like to serve that thing," Punk continued to Bernie. Charlese dropped her head back onto the counter.

"Nonsense," Bernie said. "You invented the Ballistic Bellybomber. The rights to that concoction are what pay the rent on

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this fine establishment." He gestured to encompass the beat up tables, cheap chairs, dirty floor and shabby bar.

"I'm telling you, Bernie, it could kill her. I don't have insurance for that."

"It won't kill her, not in her condition." Bernie opened the roll of money. Charlese was astounded to see every kind of currency known spread into his hands. There were plenty of Galactic standards, Martian rin, Betelgeusian dollars, and Arcturian wan, more cash and more kinds of it than Charlese had seen in one place in her life. He drew out two one hundred standard notes and slapped them onto the counter. "Go to it, son. Chop-chop."

"Well, okay, but I never saw you if anything goes wrong."

"Understandable. Could I have peanuts with that Scotch?"

"You'll need a cab to get her out of here. Don't you let her drink until I get you one."

"I hear and obey. While you're calling the cab, could you set us up for two rooms at the Holiday Inn? I've got the company card for that."

"You sure you got time to make it there? The Mos Eisley Motel is two blocks closer."

"Good point. The Mos Eisley it is. Do they still have a pretty good continental breakfast?"

Charlese couldn't believe what she heard. She kept waiting for someone to turn to her, wink, and break out laughing. What was this thing the bartender planned on feeding her? What was this talk about death? Why was she asking herself these questions rather than someone who knew the answers? "Bernie, you need to explain, I think."

Bernie pulled his Scotch toward him and ran a finger around the rim. "Of course, of course. Jimmy here once worked for *Galactic Geographic*, just like you. He was on track for an editor's position, within three tours, in fact. Then something happened, as it usually does, and he found himself retired, on Mars, and the proprietor of this fine watering hole. Since he had experienced ballistic travel more than he cared to recall, and had plenty of time on his hands due to lack of clientele, he invented the brew you will shortly imbibe as emergency surgery for LISTS sickness."

Charlese groaned. "Would you stop talking like that?"

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Punk and Bernie looked at each other. "Like what?" they asked in unison.

"Never mind." Charlese preferred they not talk at all. Her head complained with each word spoken. It got to where she couldn't concentrate to control her stomach, which was getting so bad she couldn't think to breathe.

Punk had been busy at the backbar, bringing bottles, boxes, glasses, shakers and measuring cups down from the shelves. Now he concocted a complicated soup, precisely measuring every ounce of ingredients. He looked so intent and the procedure so involved, he reminded Charlese of a vid mad scientist. She half expected him to haul out a generator and send lightning bolts of current through whatever he mixed up.

"So," Bernie said after a careful pull on his Scotch. "What do you have for me, Punk? Anything worth writing about on this most rare of all rocks?"

Punk's shoulders hunched. He had his back to Bernie. "I don't know, it's the start of tourist season, so everybody's getting worked up. The cops and the whores are just starting to clash in Center Park. They do this every two years, you know."

"Which means it's been reported every two years. Give me something with meat, Punk. Maybe enough meat for two somebodies."

"There's the long-line bungee jumps out at the south face of Valles Marineris. That's always good for a laugh."

"Intriguing. Anybody dead yet?"

"They don't start until noon. Give it a few hours."

Charlese watched Punk as he poured this and that liquid into this and that glass container. Each time he mixed two liquids the color changed dramatically. Orange and green to brown. Brown and blue to a deep, matte black. Then he added something to the black and it magically lightened to gold. The alchemy manifested through his work so mesmerized Charlese that the conversation between the men washed over her, barely heard.

"How about the bug races on Highway 7?" Punk said as he transferred two liquids to ice-laden shakers and agitated them, one in each hand.

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"Everybody does the bug races. Reporters sit in hotel rooms and watch TV for days, just waiting for the bug races. I'm a journalist, Jim, not a reporter."

"Sorry, Bernie, but what did you expect, the discovery of ancient Martian relics beneath Olympus Mons? The only other thing I can think of is that new restaurant over in Elysium Planitia."

Punk poured the contents of both shakers into a pilsner glass. He then scooped a tablespoon of Arm & Hammer baking soda into the pilsner. The baking soda foamed for a second before Punk stirred it in.

"Oh," Charlese said, her voice sounding muddled even to her, "that is so cool."

The others hardly noticed her comment. Apparently, they had been through this before, maybe more than once. Charlese didn't care. It wasn't that she was apathetic, but that she found it hard to control what got her. Here she was overawed by the magic and colors of Punk's act of chemistry, but she could muster neither protest nor indignation over the claim that it might kill her. She felt happy that Bernie seemed out of his funk, but couldn't imagine why. Bernie was a pig. He was a sometimes gallant, always urbane pig, but a pig nonetheless. Oh, hell, how did she know what kind of pig he was? She had only known him an hour.

No, eight and a half months, if she wanted to be accurate.

"What are you looking so despondent about, Charlese Tilbrenner?" Bernie asked, popping two peanuts into his mouth. At least Charlese assumed they were peanuts. Martians ate roasted beetles as if they were popcorn.

"I'm not wearing any shoes," Charlese said, her voice slurring.

"My god, Punk, we'd better get that medicine in her before her brain bleeds out her ears."

"She doesn't talk like that all the time?"

"Of course not. Miss Charlese Tilbrenner is a highly intelligent, erudite professional. You know, she was once a Marine."

Punk grunted. "That's the longest oxymoron I've ever heard."

"Can we push that stuff down her throat? She's starting to make me nervous."

Charlese felt her fingers dragging along the bar. She was sinking, sinking, headed for the floor...

Wheee!

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Bernie grabbed her before she hit. He wrestled her back onto her stool.

"It has to steep for five minutes," Punk said, walking to the end of the bar and raising a gate to get out. "It's the basil leaf, you know."

"Okay," Bernie said. "I guess I can hold her together that long."

"Oh, you're sweet," Charlese said, and sighed.

"I'll get that cab," Punk said. He had walked around behind them to the door. Now he braced his shoulder to it and heaved.

Bernie latched onto Charlese's elbow as a wave of protest, confusion and heartfelt cursing rolled into the room before the door slammed shut. "Well," Bernie said as he adjusted Charlese more onto her chair, "alone at last."

That was Bernie. Charlese wrinkled her brow. The gesture proved a mistake. Lava plunged along each fold of skin on her forehead.

"Oh, god," she whined.

"Not yet," Bernie said, sipping his Scotch. "I have to finish this tour first."

Charlese felt no need to rein in laughter, and took that as lucky. If wrinkling her forehead had brought on lava, laughter would bring on a total tectonic meltdown. She thought about what Bernie had said and about Punk's history as a journalist. Questions gathered at those words, innocent questions with, she imagined, not so innocent answers.

"Bernie?"

"Yes?"

Charlese left her cheek on the bar, but tried to catch Bernie's eyes with hers. "What's this about one more tour, about Punk and things happening?"

Bernie polished off his Scotch. He pulled another note from his wad and placed it under the highball. "Are you positive you want to hear this story?"

Charlese inspected her current flit of interest. "No. I guess I don't."

"Maybe when you feel better. What size shoes do you wear?"

"At the moment, I'm not wearing *any* size shoes."

"During moments when you *are* wearing shoes, then."

"I don't know. Kind of a personal question, don't you think?"

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"Only for people who actually have shoes." Bernie put away his wad of money. He reached into another of his vest's many pockets and pulled out a credit card. "You see, Charlese, in about a minute you'll be unconscious. " He paused and shrugged. "Well, if you're lucky. I thought I might while away your insensate hours by purchasing you some decent field clothes."

"Oh, look at you. I said you were sweet, now didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. In the interest of truth, however, I just don't fancy slogging through my final tour with Li'l Abner at my side, if you get my meaning."

"Why are my eyes burning?"

"Because your brain is not. So, what size, Charlese? Six? Seven?"

"Guess."

"Okay, six? Seven?"

The last thing Charlese wanted was to tell Bernie her shoe size. "Nine. Big feet, real gunboats, baby." Now, why had she done that?

"You're a long, tall lady, so I'm sure your feet are very much in proportion."

Charlese had braced for defense, to beat off an expected asinine tease. Instead, she had gotten the gallant pig. Bernie was becoming a real, unpredictable problem.

The door swung open to a loud chorus of complaints and name-calling. "Hey!" Punk yelled with his body half over the threshold. "The same to your mamma, and double!" He slipped into the bar and let the door crash behind him. "I got your cab. It's jamming up traffic right outside. The cabbie got you rooms at the Mos Eislely, too. He gets a kickback."

"You're a good friend." Bernie rose from his stool and patted down his vest as if looking for cigarettes. But he wasn't looking, Charlese realized. It was a nervous habit. "Well, shall we get settled up?"

Rather than return to his place behind the bar, Punk moved to one side of Charlese, the side opposite Bernie. "I guess so," he said. "Let's sit her up."

Charlese couldn't see Punk, but she felt his grip on her arm. She watched Bernie, who took her other arm, and marveled at how ordinary his brown eyes were. Why did she watch them so closely when there was nothing special or poetic within them?

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Punk slid the pilsner in front of Charlese. "Drink that," he said.

"What is it?" she asked, pushing her palms against the bar top for balance.

"It's rainbows and puppies and a good night's sleep. Careful, though. Don't take it in too fast or--"

Charlese snatched up the glass and guzzled the contents in two or three seconds. That ought to show those old men. They were dealing with a *real* woman, by God!

"Jesus H. Christ!" Punk exclaimed.

"I told you she was a Marine," Bernie said.

Charlese swayed in her seat, settling more toward Bernie.

"Tastes great," she said. "Kind of filling."

Then her world went black.