

I Martian

Tap tap ... “number four, are you awake? Please respond.” Astronaut John Walling leans over one of the ship’s maintenance/support robots, tapping on its chest-plate. The squat robot, has four limbed cylinder which can move on its three wheels or traverse by its four limbs, like a dog. On top of the squat form is a set of binocular imagers, serving as eyes. But on its back is a rectangular black box with a number of colored wires connecting the box to the robot. “Number four, do you recognize me?” John added. “One moment please, integrating process overlay John Walling electrical engineer and deputy commander.” “Correct, but there are a number of things I need to tell you. First I’ve augmented your core processor with the ship’s back-up memory unit. Protect your neural network before accessing register Y42. I don’t think your neural net will be able to handle all of the information all at once. Second,” John starts to cough, a deep raspy cough. He gets control and continues, “You have a new prime directive so open register alpha one prime, access code bravo John twelve.” “Prime register open” number four replied. “Prime directive update, Number four you are to proceed with the mission to land on Mars, without the crew, and prepare the Mars base for the next landing. Your first action upon landing is to use the base communications system to contact Earth and communicate this crew’s situation along with the condition of Mars base one. End prime directive update. Please repeat your prime directive.” Number four repeated the update directive word for word. Once completed number four asked “Why is this unit to continue the mission without the crew? Units are to only perform tasks directed by a crew member.” John wiping his head with his right hand retrieves a clump of hair. “We will not be able to be with you when you reach Mars.” “John,” number four interrupts, “Could you give a status of the crew?” John started, “It’s been eight days since the first event. Abby wanted to get out and do an EVA. She had cabin fever ... I guess we all did. Any way there was a need to perform maintenance on the forward sensor array. Commander Gail pulled rank, insisting on going out in support. They were about half way through the maintenance when we were hit with a micro-meteor shower. It was like a sandstorm in space. The only difference, there was no way to protect yourself. They never had a chance. It appear that the commander’s suit was sliced in numerous pieces. Abby almost got back to the airlock when her tether was severed ... she was swept away. If it wasn’t for the sensors indicating water loss around the hab module, no one would have gone out. Jack and Walt went out and performed inspection of the module’s exterior. They found thousands of holes leaking water. Walt described it as if someone had unloaded a hundred rounds from a shot gun. Very little of the hull was spared since the hab rotates to simulate gravity. You will see in the records, losing water meant we lost our radiation shielding, life support make-up water, and our reserve fuel supply. We started calculating what our chances were to make it to Mars. This effort was complicated further since we lost contact with Earth and lunar base due to the loss of the ships trans-receiver antenna to the micro-meteor storm. We determined with 27 days remaining there was not enough resources for the four to make Mars, but possibly three. But before much could be decided we were hit with a set of strong radiation waves. Since we lost our shielding on the hab we had no place to go. Jack tried to find refuge between several banks of batteries, use them as shielding. But the radiation was so strong it caused arcing between the cells and Jack, well we figured he didn’t feel much. In one sense he was better off than the remaining three of us, Walt, Dr. Babs, and myself. Walter figured the radiation waves came from some distant supernova that happened hundreds or thousands of years ago and we

happened along right as the waves came crashing through our part of the solar system. When the last wave hit Walter was in the observation dome trying to figure out the point of origin of the radiation. The observation dome has the least amount of shielding so he didn't last much longer, maybe two or three days. It's becoming difficult to gauge time. Number four, how many more days till Mars?" "Based on current data, arrival is 10.2 Earth days," number four replied. "What is the status of Dr. Roberts?" four inquired. "Babs has been drifting in and out of consciousness. She seems to have adsorbed more radiation or she was more vulnerable but she's not doing well. I was medicating her for the pain but that doesn't seem necessary lately. Here we are just days away from completing the journey and we're not going to make it. There was a video game I used to play about traveling to Mars and establishing a base. I learned from many of the game's challenges on how to succeed but the game presented nothing like this." John's thoughts drifted to another time and place. Number four asked. "What is your condition?" "You can check the records on the back-up drive" John responded as he drifted back to the present. Just then a sound came from the infirmary. John started to rise and turn toward the infirmary but his movements were restricted and his hands searched for supports to grasp. "Is there a problem John," number four asked? John hesitated "I could use some help going to the infirmary, four. Could you assist me?" Number four carefully maneuvered around John, using two of its limbs to support/steady John. The two awkwardly moved into the infirmary.

Lying in the infirmary medical cocoon was Dr. Barbara Roberts. But the ravages of radiation left the 34 year old doctor a frail reflection of her formal Olympic gold medal winning self. As John approached Barbara stirred. "John ... are you there," Barbara whispered. Number four settled John next to Barbara. "Babs I'm here, what can I do," John softly responded. "Is it dark ... in here," Barbara asked? John peered up at the light, squinted, and replied "I think the lights are on, just set low. Are you in any pain?" "No ... there's some ... discomfort. I'm mainly ... numb ... I'm having ... a hard time ... thinking. I don't think ... it will be ... much longer. Breathing ... seems to ... becoming ... difficult. Will you ... stay?" John replied, "I'll be right here ... just rest." According to number four an hour and seven minutes had passed when Dr. Roberts took her last breath. John was now alone with number four in a ship in the middle of space. John had number four assist him in removing Barbara from the medical cocoon and placed her in a large equipment bag. Number four then placed the makeshift coffin in the airlock and sealed the door. Number four asked, "Do you want to operate the airlock?" John hesitated then replied, "You better do it. I'm having problems seeing the controls." Number four deftly worked the controls. John could hear the airlock depressurize. When the airlock reached one psi. number four activated the door, which slid open silently, and Dr. Roberts body slipped into the void of space.

Later John called for number four. "Number four, how many more days till the ship reaches Mars?" "9.6 days." John began, "When I have stopped functioning you will need to dispose of my body in the same method as we just performed with Dr. Roberts. Can you do that?" "Yes," number four confirmed. John continued, "Alright, now I need you to access the ship's back-up drive I attached to you. I want to see if ..." Right then number four started shaking and making noises. "What is it, what's going on," John asked in a panic. Just as sudden number four went silent. A moment later number four tried to respond, "Working ... too fast ... light bulb ... not memory ... blue door ... reactor ... processing ... processing ..." After several more moments of

silence number four continued, "Adapting neural network matrix to ship processing module". John dropped his head, "Crap, I mounted the wrong module onto his back. Number four are you ok, any damage," John asked anxiously? "Estimated 3.4 hours for integration ... reboot when completed," reported number four.

"John, are you awake," number four gently tapping John on the chest. John stirred and then flung out his hands searching for number four. "It's ok John, it's just me. Is your sight totally gone?" "Number four," John said surprised. "I'm okay. I realized the unit you attached was not a memory module but a duplicate of the ship's processor. It also contains a duplicate memory of everything concerning the ship and the mission. I have merged my neural network pathways into the processor so that the processor and my network are incorporated, one. I also have direct contact/control of the ship," explained number four. "Number four, you've just referred to yourself in the first person. Please explain." "I'm not fully sure how to explain. When I opened the link to the processor I was overwhelmed. I tried to terminate the link. The next thing, I was aware. I realized the error you made and determined you would not make the mistake of the processor for the memory module unless your sight was failing. Since I'm in contact with the ship I also have access to the ship sensors. Based on what I'm seeing, you're not doing too well." "Number four I need to ask what your intentions are," John said guardingly. "John, you've seen too many science fiction movies. My intentions are to complete the mission by getting to Mars and preparing the base for the next expedition." "Then you need to contact Earth as soon as you arrive. Let them know what happened so they won't meet the same fate," John urged. "I will John, it is my purpose as it was yours. John do you want to rest? I can help you to your bed or the cocoon in the infirmary." "I think I'd like to go to the couch in the recreation room." "It would be my pleasure," number four said assuredly.

Over the next four days number four aided John making him comfortable. When John felt up to it, he and number four held in-depth conversations concerning the mission and number four's new found consciousness. But as time progressed the conversations became shorter as John's condition worsened. Finally, only three days before arrival at Mars, John passed. Number four placed John in an equipment bag and the bag into the airlock.

As scheduled the ship arrived into Martian orbit. Number four initiated de-orbit protocols and piloted the reentry craft down to the designated landing site. Number four activated the remaining three maintenance/support robots. "Units three, five, and six proceed to the airlock, remove the equipment bag and bury it at these designated coordinates. Further tasks will be assigned after." "Number four, where is the crew? This unit takes directions from the crew," said number two. "At present the three of you will take directions from me and refer to me as Bob. Please attend to your task. I have to contact Earth and notify them what has happened, that the crew died." Number two inquired, "If there is no crew, then why perform these tasks to prepare the base?" As Bob replied his optical sensors pivoted up to the sky, "Because they will come, they won't give up. It is our purpose to have the base ready. Because they must explore, that is there purpose."