

Igor Harb

As the Earth Slips Beneath the Horizon

A space romance

Part 1 of At the Edge of the Horizon trilogy

Chapter One (Frank)

The morning cold was slowly dissipating. Frank noticed that he was only barely in the shade, and realized it was time for a break, and to look up from the excavations. He wiped his brow, stood up straight, turned to face east, just left of the Sphinx, and patiently waited for a minute, until the red horizon behind the pyramid was set aglow, first in orange, and then in yellow, as the sun appeared just above the peak. Admiring this magnificent sight, he listened to the sounds of the stirring desert, as the first rays chased away the nocturnal creatures already searching for shelter or burrowing under the sand. He shaded his eyes to stare at the pyramid some more, then straightened his dark hair and stretched his back, before returning to work.

Slowly brushing the dust and sand from the sediments of an ancient building materials was a time-consuming, yet important task. It was usually delegated to college students, however, at this early hour nobody else had come out yet, and sometimes he liked to focus on the basics. Only with patience and dedication will the bricks uncover the markings and signage that can lead to unearthing the details on the building's past, its inhabitants, passers-by, the rulers, the overall condition of the settlement, land and culture. Only once the dust has been removed and he can access the primary surface, will he be able to begin radiometric dating – providing not just the exact archaeological age of the building, but also the geological age of the materials used. When did the volcanoes and sea shells form the cornerstone that the pharaoh consecrated for this pyramid?

Brushing suddenly became meaningless, as the swirl of a strong wind began dispersing the sand and the dust all over his bricks. He raised his head and saw the rotorless copter, which might have been silent compared to its predecessors from the previous century, but no less windy. He raced to protect the excavation site from the hail of sand and was struggling to cover up the foundations with a giant sheet of foil, while the gale worked its best to rip it from his hands. The wind only picked up as the plane touched the ground, but by then he had already managed to fasten the first corner. He had been caught by sandstorms before, so he knew what needed to be done.

In the background, the doors of the disc-shaped aircraft opened, and through them came a woman with jet-black hair in a ponytail, mirrored, fitting glasses covering most of her face, protecting her from the sand. She walked up to him with a determined step, grabbed the other end of the cover, and helped him affix it over the excavation site.

“What are you doing, can't you see I'm working! This is sophisticated, detailed work, and you're acting like an elephant in a china shop ...” He was at a loss for words, as he realized

that the person next to him is not yet another straight-edged bureaucrat or billionaire quasi-philanthropist full of empty promises of financing and brandishing an image team for selfies, which were an unfortunate fixture of such excavations, but a person in uniform with distinctions.

He nearly began stuttering, when she posed a very sensible question: “What would an elephant be doing in a china shop?”

“Ehm. Shopping? They used to live near here. Once. Well ... phrase ... erm ... means that you are rudely breaking delicate things.” Pause. “But thank you for helping. What are you actually doing here? This is a protected site; we have the permits from the ministry and all.”

“Eldridge,” was the short and flat answer, and with all the tabs on her uniform he should have been prepared for it. Naturally he wasn’t. He went pale and broke out in a cold sweat. Eldridge House Hotel, or just Eldridge for short, was a nice inn with a long history in Kansas, where he once spent a night. Sometimes he used such memories as mnemonics. But this was not a moment to slide into the past. He knew what needed to be done.

“How long do I have?”

“Enough to pack your things here. The ones from your apartment will be sent over. Where is your assistant to take over the excavations?”

“Asleep in the hostel. It’s his day off.”

“Not anymore. Somebody will be waking him shortly to take over the project. The location will be secured until then.” She gestured towards the west, where two SUVs were speeding towards their location. “And you’re coming with me to the manta.”

“The manta ... where are we going?”

“That’s confidential.”

“When will I come back?”

“Also confidential. Eldridge.”

He always knew there was the chance that someday they would pick him up and take him away. Eldridge. Back then the choice seemed simple. Five-year financing for any research project with a (nearly) full budget for a support team and the option to extend in exchange for ... He thought he had gotten the proverbial free lunch, that in one fell swoop he got rid of dull administrative work and finally got the chance to do what he wanted. Fieldwork. Away from people. Eldridge. The requirement seemed abstract, as in spite of analyzing and

overanalyzing all possible scenarios he never managed to figure out how or why exactly the agency would need his set of skills and know-how. Eldridge.

Once they stepped into the aircraft, he flopped down into the seat she pointed to and strapped in. As soon as the buckle clicked and the safety light switched off, the woman entered a simple order and the autopilot took over “manta’s” flying and navigation. During lift-off the windows tinted dark, so that he could not see outside.

“What’s happening? Is this a kidnapping? Am I being taken to some dark location to be tortured?” He was rambling.

“Please calm down. This is standard operating procedure. As the mission is confidential, so is the flight.” He detected a light Slavic accent in these few sentences. He was still not able to see her eyes through the glasses.

“Where are you taking me? I have the right to know.” He went for the decisive approach.

“Confidential,” she replied dryly. But the corners of her mouth ticked up somewhat. He took this to be a promising sign.

Inhaling, he tried a new approach. “OK. What if I guess?” He struggled to keep his voice level to stymie the growing panic with a hint of exasperation.

Now the corners of her mouth lifted. Could be less than a millimeter, but he didn’t fail to notice. “All right, do try.”

He closed his eyes and focused. “So, when we stepped in, your *manta*, an odd name, but I see the resemblance, was facing west. The liftoff was nearly straight up, and then in this very comfortable chair I only sensed some adjustments to the right, but not to a full turn. This model goes up to one or maybe two Mach, and we keep on accelerating, so the destination is not particularly near. For now, we are still above the desert, and to the northwest is the Mediterranean ... Hm. Following a straight line, you could be taking me to Reykjavik to see the volcanoes, but I doubt this little thing can go more than five thousand kilometers, so I’d wager something more Continental.”

She bowed in praise, adding a palm-up gesture to congratulate – and this time the ends of her lips actually inched up. A more optimistically inclined observer could even say that she smiled. He liked this indication of goodwill. “Not bad. I should remember to program a circular takeoff next for next time.”

“Well, and what awaits us on the Continent?”

Now she really did smile. “What do you think lies in this direction on the Continent?”

“Cities? Museums? Cafés?”

She was almost holding back a laugh now. “A bit more ambition, please.”

While he strained to find better examples, he looked at her uniform. He never liked them, or the people who wore them. He preferred solitude, but if he had to be around people, he favored individuals to parts of some puzzle in a formation. You see the uniform, and not the person, he always thought. Except this time, he didn’t actually see her uniform. Not until now. These tabs were not ranks in air force, army or the navy. These stars had an orbit and this was no arrow, but a concave deltoid. Her smile kept widening as she watched how his eyes were opening in surprise, as his disbelief turned into a stare. “The Planica Star City,” he stuttered in a shock.

She took off her glasses and looked him in the eye. “You have no idea about the rabbit hole you fell into, do you, Alice?”

Chapter Two (Frank)

Now he really didn't have a clue what was happening. But what was there to do? One thing he knew, was that he had to keep his eyes open. And his eyes stopped on the mysterious uniformed woman. He quickly assessed that she was nearly his height, with jet-black hair, pulled up into a pony tail, athletically built and with warm brown eyes, no longer hidden behind glasses; and he also noticed that there was still a slight uptick to the ends of her lips. This he continued to see as something positive. And the fact that he's actually a rude weirdo who has not even introduced himself or asked her for her name, as not particularly positive.

"My name is Frank," he began somewhat awkwardly, and offered her his hand. She grabbed it and shook firmly, while a new wave of bitter realization hit him. "Oh, you probably already know this ... Because I'm your mission ..." He quickly regained composure and continued. "Anyway, I'm glad we met ..."

"Julija Perun," she replied with confidence, "lieutenant, Solarpol. Call me Julija, because, yes Frank Beddoe, I know quite a bit about you."

"All good things, I hope." His attempt at a joke felt lame, so he immediately changed the topic. "What are Solarpol doing here on Earth, did you run out of criminals to chase in space?"

"I'm returning from the gravity well, and apparently you'll be heading there sooner or later as well," she explained while unbuckling and getting up from the seat. The manta seemed to reach cruise velocity.

"To Solarpol?"

"No, you're just a delivery along the way."

"And here I was, just beginning to believe that I'm a real person and not a mere parcel," he said, attempting again to break the ice, as he followed her suite, unbuckling to stretch his legs take a look around.

"Funny," she said, rolling her eyes.

"And where are you delivering me? And, furthermore, why?"

Julija walked around the cabin, checking various screens and instruments, then turned back to face him. "Well, I have also been struggling with that for a while now. I cannot manage to figure that out from the sparse orders I received. And you can imagine how this can be a problem for a detective."

“How can you not know where you’re taking me?” He tried to phrase it as a question to get her to talk more.

“Oh, how charmingly daft.” She rolled her eyes. “Of course, I know where I have to deliver you, at least the first station. But for Eldridge’s sake I don’t know why.”

“Eldrige, heh. Perhaps we can come up with some theory, but tell me first, do you really think I’m charming?”

She kept full control over her facial gestures; however, a faint blush appeared on her cheeks as she realized what she actually said. In response his lips now broadened into a faint, yet winning smile. He noticed that she sized him up and reflexively straightened his back to appear taller.

“You tell me what you’re doing in the desert – are you some kind of a hermit?” She wasn’t losing her cool, apparently determined to slide past this fleeting moment of carelessness. She picked up a tablet and began verifying the data.

He sighed. “This is going to sound boring, but I’m researching the beginnings of irrigation in Ancient Egypt. Digging canals, Nile flooding, these sorts of things.”

“Yes, this is hardly the story for a thriller. But, please, continue, every detail can be key in an investigation.”

“Hm, irrigation was one of the first terraforming technologies – man changing the environment in order to improve living conditions. People changed a major part of the Nile’s delta, and in turn it changed them.”

“Right, but now, you’re apparently headed to space. What could you irrigate in space?” She put down the tablet into the magnetic holster, and walked to the wall on the right, which contained a small refrigerator. She took out a water bottle, and offered him one.

“I’m not an expert in actual irrigation; I’m just studying how it worked ten thousand years ago.” He pondered something, took a sip of water, then continued: “I got to Ancient Egypt after leaving the Deuteronilus project.”

“Deuteronilus? Is that a Nile tributary?”

“No, that’s shorter for Deuteronilus Mensae, the Martian plain where traces of icebergs were found.”

“So, you’d irrigate Mars? Liquid water can’t exist on its surface. Air pressure and all that. I should know.”

“Of course, that’s certainly impossible today, but billions of years ago that planet had rivers and seas. The objective of the Deuteronilus project was fully theoretical; we did everything in the lab and computer simulations here on Earth. Well, my assessment was that it all would take millennia. It was one of the reasons why I left.”

“And what were the others?” asked the detective in a professionally non-imposing voice.

He nearly answered, then composed himself, blinked several times, took a deep breath and decided to steer the conversation elsewhere. This was not the time to prod these wounds. “Nothing. Hm. What are you doing on Earth. Isn’t Solarpol tasked with hunting bad guys in zero gravity?”

He pretended to focus on opening the fridge, but with the corner of his eye he was monitoring her response. It seemed to him that he recognized the moment she opted to drop drilling him. He was grateful. He wasn’t ready yet to have this conversation. Especially not with someone he just met.

“Injury on a mission; complicated double fracture of the femur. We have great doctors up there, and they patched me up immediately, but stable gravity is the best recovery treatment, so they sent me back. The doctor finally confirmed full mobility and strength, so I’m going back. I just have to redo all the test for basic training first.”

“Ouch. Complicated fracture. I had that. Recovery took for ages, and I couldn’t find a way to get back into shape.”

“It was fairly quick for me. Mostly with cycling and swimming. There was some running, but I couldn’t push it, because that would put too much pressure on the fracture. I started missing it. Up there the treadmill is a daily routine, so unless you are absolutely crazy for running, you suffer.”

“If you have running up there, it can’t be that bad.” He opted to run with this clue and immediately noticed how she turned and leaned towards him.

“You also run?” she asked with sincere interest.

“Every morning over the dunes. Before the sand heats up, when your soles glide gently over it. You know that feeling when you push off the dune ridge into the void and just know that you will land softly ... and when your steps gently slide into the loose ground ...” His eyes slipped to the left, into the past, but when he looked at her face, he worried for a second that he lost her interest with his babbling. Just for a second, and then he noticed how with barely noticeable nod she kept staring at him, as if she wanted to extract these feelings from him. And he probably wasn’t wrong.

“And when the sand grains cool between your toes and each push sparks a cloud of quartz and dust behind you ...” she said, continuing his thought as in a daze, and he exactly knew where her mind was at. She closed her eyes for a moment, then continued with a clearer focus: “Yes, I know what you mean. But don’t worry, there will be many opportunities for running.”

“How come?”

“Planica is at the foot of the Alps, this little spot that managed to avoid the worst weather extremes that hit Europe. It’s the complete opposite from the desert, but it’s just as beautiful, you’ll see.”

“And what will we do there?”

“There is only one reason to land in the Planica Star City: astronaut training. And this includes a lot of running in nature.”

“So, I’m to go to space?”

“Yeah, looking at my orders and instructions, this certainly appears to be the case. Did you ever want to be an astronaut?”

“Yes, I mean, didn’t everyone? I did research Mars, but everything was more or less theoretical, and I never expected to see space up close. But I did work for a space agency back then. Well, after leaving for Egypt I supposed that this theoretical door was now closed. Too many burnt bridges.”

“It’s true that they won’t let just anybody up there, but on the other hand they are always building new space stations and bases and recruitment is ongoing. Look, we’ll be at Planica in about an hour, so take the time and study the folder with basic info. Here you go.”

Frank took the light blue tablet and began browsing the documents. It included the basic info on the space center and the training modules for individual specializations.

“Interesting, but I have about a million more questions.”

“Of course you do. But most of the answers that you won’t find here are above my pay grade anyway.”

“Yes, what about the basics: where exactly am I going, will I be there a month or a year? What does training look like?”

“Right, I do know quite a bit about this. First, there is the medical examination and a few tests. This is basics and we’ll get it done already today. In the afternoon we’ll learn all the details. Astronaut training without any specializations lasts several months and up to a

year. I've already done it, so I'll get through it faster, especially since I have to catch the window for Mars. But don't worry, while I'm here, I can help you.

Frank continued to browse on the tablet, skimming the data, looking for some pattern, not finding any. He looked up and at Julija with some desperation.

"Look, I don't have any other answers right now." She reclined her chair so she was almost lying, pulled out a folded cap from her side pocket, and put it on her face. "But I do have one piece of useful advice: during training make sure to rest every chance you get. You'll need it." She laid back into her comfortable chair, stretched out her legs and let him read.

Third Chapter (Julija)

One hour to destination, she kept telling herself, focusing on the trails awaiting her. In her mind's eye she played out every task and every move that she will have to complete with perfection to achieve the required score. This has been her priority for the past year. I will not be screwing this up. But her mind wandered to Frank, who was apparently browsing through the materials, because she heard taps on the glass. What the hell is behind all of this?

She opened her eyes and observed him. With elbows resting on his knees, he was focused on the words and charts. Even though he quite obviously didn't know what was going on, he didn't let panic or gloom take over, but was instead preparing to face changes, to adapt to what was happening. She liked these kinds of people. She liked to have them on her team.

And with that her mind wandered to her team and the thirty million miles of emptiness separating them. Solarpol was the most prestigious security force in the world, hell, the whole solar system, but it wasn't the prestige that made her love her job. No, she wanted to be back because of her team, the people who stood by her side during the most difficult and dangerous tasks she ever took on. Because of the people who were able to think in three dimensions; even in four when faced with long distances.

She missed them, the whole unit. Nic, Cassandra, Boris, Yoshi, Jair, Zainab and Alex. Him the most, but, what the hell, now is not the time for this. Better to focus on mentally preparing for the tasks ahead ... and on what secrets lie behind this Frank. As a detective it was clear that she cannot pass up a juicy case like this one.

Once again, she began going through the physical and psychological tests that Planica had in store for future space cowboys. Her subconscious flexed the appropriate muscles, confirming what she already knew, yet did not dare to truly accept: that she was ready and will waltz through the tasks. The broken bone has fully healed and her leg didn't hurt a bit when she pushed off for a jump, and – even more importantly – also when she landed.

Yet she was still trying to bring under control that quiver that you learn when you're trying subconsciously to avoid placing stress on the injured limb. And together with it the anger she felt to the maniac who harmed her.

It was a routine inspection. The statistics of his working hours were somewhat above the norms, but this information alone was no indication of a broad use of illegal stimulants. They didn't even receive a report. Two construction workers were selected at random for inspection. Everything above the board and in line with laws and regulations; everyone

heading to space knew they could be subject to this. It was about safety. She immediately noticed that he was sweating too much. She carefully observed him, and after Cassandra's search of his locker didn't turn up anything, she suggested they check his bathroom cabinet. He twitched. That gave him away. That's why she didn't stop when she saw the cabinet was empty. He tapped on the tiles on the back one by one until she heard the hollow echo. That's when he panicked and ran.

Now she associated this hollow echo with the pain that followed. With the agony of healing. With separation from her team, with return down the gravity well. Regardless of how much she loved coming back to Earth, this time it represented a failure, a disappointment. The Stars, My Destination, she remembered the title of that old book. But she couldn't fool her own mind. The first association for the stars was the overflowing sky when Alex and here were doing the system check on the outside of the space station and were stuck for an hour in the beyond during a comms outage ... and then for another in the decompression chamber ... completely alone. Those conversations under the lights of the constellations led to touches that burned even through the space suit, and when they were able to take them off in the chamber ... She vividly remembered how it turned her on, him helping remove her layers ... No, I must let this go. It was just a moment of loneliness, of awe in the magnificence of space. Otherwise, the next day, it would not be back to the same old routine. Otherwise, the next day, he would not just be her supervisor once again.

Space will bring new challenges, but I must get there first. She focused once more on going through the tests that will follow later that day. Muscles twitched in the rhythm of the exercises she will have to complete, and she was just sliding into a sleep as the manta was shaken by turbulence. She opened her eyes, looking at Frank, still focused on the manual. He's not that bad to look at, she thought. But my destination is elsewhere.

Intermezzo: Planica Star City

Planica: Jump into Space

Welcome to the Planica Star City. In the shelter of the Alps lies the most advanced European center for research on preparing the human body and soul for space habitation. Generations of astronauts, space explorers and Martian pioneers have trained here, and you are among the chosen few to not only follow in their footsteps, but brave new paths into the Solar system.

The Star City grew from the Planica Nordic Centre, which moved the boundaries of human endurance in ski flying. The path from long ski jumps to the great leap into space was not implausible as in both the human body is exposed to the same forces already studied in depth in the 20th century. The famous space engineer Herman Potočnik Noordung was among the first to point that out in his seminal book *The Problem of Space Travel* already back in 1928. After developing programs to control and master these forces we began preparing people to conquer the great beyond.

Astronaut training at Planica Star City includes both physical and psychological training for tackling the greatest challenges that not only you, but all of mankind is about to face. Training courses, centrifuges and pools lay the groundwork at our campus, as we also provide training in space mechanics theories for advanced space navigation, emergency health services and zero-gravity dental medicine training, along with isolation and anxiety preparation courses.

At application you select the modules you want to master, so that they will form your skillset and knowledge base. Space agencies, corporations and other organizations that manage the infrastructure beyond the Earth's orbit constantly recruit from the pool of our graduates, so make sure to check which profiles are most in demand in order to ensure your ticket into the space future.

At the candidate's request all trainings can be conducted in English, German, Spanish, French, Mandarin or Slovenian, as our instructors come from all parts of the globe. As most candidates opt for English, and since the groups there are somewhat more crowded, we recommend learning other languages. For details inquire at the administrative office.

On the Sunny Side of the Alps

Planica, also called the Valley under the Ponce range, is a glacial valley ...

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Source: Preparation for Your Space Journey: A Guidebook for Astronauts. Published by:
Založba Goga, 2078, p. 3.

NOTE: A lot happens in the following chapters, but in the final third of the book they get to space, so here is how that happens and what follows in a few more assorted snippets.

Chapter Twenty-One (Frank)

...

They strode through the doors with helmets under their arms, just like in that scene from that old movie – only Sanchez was missing – and as promised the attendant was waiting for them. He moved swiftly around them, checking all the movable parts of their space suits. “All is as it should be,” he finally announced, then moved closer to Frank and whispered in his ear: “Thank you.” While Frank was staring at him in disbelief, he already took his helmet and placed it on his head. He did the same to Julija, gave them a small bow, and once again loudly said: “Bon voyage!”

Julja and Frank exchanged another glance, but were at this point not even shocked by such bizarre behavior. They walked towards the rocket and entered the elevator. The ascent took longer than anticipated, but at least it provided an increasingly majestic view over the launch site and the thick palm foliage surrounding it to provide some protection from the noise and the fumes. A bit further afield were the workshops, the office buildings and some houses that were part of the *Centre Spatial Guayanis*, also surrounded by palm trees, and in the distance, they were able to see the jungle on one side, and the Atlantic on the other. Or was this perhaps the Kourou river? He couldn’t tell from this perspective. Unconsciously he grabbed Julija’s hand and she squeezed him back through the gloves.

The elevator stopped at the entrance to the capsule, and even though more than a century of the space program has brought some incredible breakthroughs, the capsule was still only the size of a tiny studio apartment at the top of a skyscraper-sized thrust rocket. Julija stepped forward and motioned him that the room’s orientation is switched around, which he already knew from training. They climbed into their seats, buckled up and connected their suits to the oxygen. Julija took over the controls of the launch and the communication with the control tower. Frank leaned back, closed his eyes and tried to focus.

He had been training for this, but just for a few weeks, and now he was about to be blasted into space. Into fucking space. He realized that he is still unable to grasp that. Perhaps he will when they cross the stratosphere. Right now, there is nothing else to do but to try to relax and wait.

Julija punched buttons, moved the handles and spoke into the headset, and then finally she also relaxed as the countdown began, still just like in those old movies.

“Ten. Nine. Eight. Seve. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Ignition!”

The acceleration pushed him so far into his seat that the previous maneuvers in the ramjet felt like a playground merry-go-round. He felt the pressure on his skin, on his bones, on his muscles and joints, on eyeballs and even on his teeth. He tried to say something, but his voice apparatus was no longer operational. He swallowed the saliva that was pumping into his mouth, but wasn't sure if he would be able to activate the throat muscles and the peristalsis.

“It's all right even if you faint,” he remembered her telling him during training. “It happens to a lot of guys.” Even though this sentence clearly referred to the launch into orbit and this exact situation he was in right now, he couldn't help not to recognize some other context. Anyway, he decided that this would not happen to him, thank you very much.

The noise was unbearable, and the vibrations were above and beyond anything he experienced during training. His head was pounding again and the pressure from acceleration was pushing his eyelids down. He forced himself to keep them open, as he worried that he might fall asleep immediately otherwise. He saw the consoles with counters and digits and some readouts that he was supposed to understand, but that meant absolutely nothing to him in this moment. His thoughts jumped back and forth, but he forced himself to focus on the here and now. Pushing the pain aside, he attempted to glean some useful information from the displayed data.

Regardless of where he focused his eyes and how hard he tried to remember his training to understand individual values, he couldn't form logical connections as the pain overshadowed his thoughts. With difficulty he turned towards Julija and saw how in spite of the stress of gravity and noise, she was gracefully managing switches and confirming queries from flight control.

She must have noticed him looking, as she turned towards him, winked and said: “Look through the porthole on your left.”

He turned his head with difficulty and saw the curve of the horizon, and not far away the terminator, bringing a new day into South America. What was it she had said? Your first view of Gaia kills you? He had seen this image of the planet from the 30 or so thousand kilometers altitude a million times before in photos, movies and sensory feeds, but it could not compare with what he was experiencing. So small, so fragile, so far away ...

Suddenly he flinched, as something poked him into the elbow. He immediately looked towards Julija's seat, but she was no longer there. "Hey! Up here!" she said and he followed her voice and saw her floating above. Confused, he looked towards the porthole, but the Earth was no longer there, just the black skies, filled with stars. "You were out for a bit," she explained. He cursed on the inside, then decided there's no need to fret. "Unbuckle your seatbelt, take off your helmet, make yourself at home." He laughed. "So, what, this is our home for the next thirty hours," she said.

He did as was instructed, took off his helmet and handed it to her, then unbuckled and slowly floated from the chair. "Insane!" he said.

"Yes, I have not met a person who wasn't knocked out by this sight. Stretch and float around, so you will get used to the feeling." It did take some getting used to, as simulations in parabolic flights, centrifuges and underwater exercises couldn't get him used to the real thing, to the fact that suddenly there was no ground beneath his feet. "Don't worry, soon we'll have you floating around like you were born in weightlessness."

He doubted this, as he was completely cramped up. Easy does it, he told himself. "Do we have anything to eat?"

"Of course, food, it's been like five minutes." She sighed.

He looked at her apprehensively, but noticed that she was barely containing a laugh. She did a backflip, and her hair flowed in every which way, as she laughed out loud and gathered them in a bun.

Chapter Twenty-Six (Frank)

...

You get to take your first steps on the surface of another planet only once, and most people prepare monumental statements in line of Armstrong's giant leap for mankind, but with everything Frank went through in the past few days, these steps on the Martian regolith, as the soles of his boots sank at a third of gravity into the dust right next to the giant pyramid, couldn't seem more mundane. And at the same time the slowed movement in a space suit reminded him of pool training in Planica and of Julija's voice guiding him through every step.

He was facing one of the biggest mysteries of the entire human history, yet he would be willing to give it up for just a single touch from her.

He followed Murkowski and Smith with care and diligence. When they reached the building, he touched it so as to confirm that it is indeed real. "Here is the entrance," Smith pointed to him, as Murkowski was already making his way there. Frank raised his thumb to confirm he understood, then went in step behind Smith. The entrance was big and primarily functional just like everything in space. Murkowski was already at the control panel, entering the password. The doors opened.