

Second major effort



The cheering quit as quickly as it had erupted. Each member of the space agency froze in sudden silence, staring wide-eyed at the monitor with one anxious mind. The explorer had descended perfectly through Titan's atmosphere and plunged into the largest of its many methane lakes. Now the great exploration had begun.

This second major effort in the quest to find extraterrestrial life in our solar system is much different than the first one. The first mission, fifteen years earlier to Mars, turned into one of the most momentous events on earth. A new calendar became popular around the world starting year zero when the Martian microbes were found. From this find two stunning lessons were learned about life on earth: Mars had life before Earth did and these Martian microbes are nearly identical to the primitive ones of earth. These Martians were the ancestors of us all! They must have arrived on Earth in the exchange of planetary fragments during the violence of the early solar system.

For this mission to Titan there was a third lesson from the Mars experience: Living microbes could be found in unexpected places with harsh conditions. After Mars the search expanded to Saturn's moon Titan, a place covered in lakes of methane, because numerous experiments had shown that the basic processes of life's chemistry could work in liquid methane at minus 290 degrees, though much slower. These life forms, if they existed could be nothing like Earthling-Martians. In looking for life on Titan no one quite knew what they were looking for.

This was the moment Bronson Vandertide and his team had worked long and hard for. The deep satisfaction of seeing their Titan explorer illuminate the lake bottom so brightly and operate with such nimble flawlessness was just the beginning. The moment was so engrossing that it was easy to forget they were watching what happened eighty minutes ago.

A collective gasp was elicited by the group when a structure of water ice appeared looking like a miniature volcano.

I name it Mt. Fuji. said Bronson. There was brief laughter among the team and silence once again as the craft sped on past it.

It's slowing down! Bronson exclaimed moments later in a hushed voice.

Though he was the first to notice, all instantly knew what it meant. Everyone bent forward and narrowed their gaze upon the upper right corner of the monitor. The craft was programmed with the intelligence to recognize certain shapes of interest, such as living colonies of cells on the lake bottom. Any idea what such living colonies might look like on the bottom of a methane lake on Titan was highly speculative of course, but once again, the craft did perform as they had intended in choosing as they would where to pause and investigate.

THERE! LOOK! shouted another as he rose from his chair, pointing. Murmurs and gasps filled the room as everyone saw it. Irregular dark blotches occupied a region ahead where the lake became deeper.

Everyone keep in mind, commanded Bronson in a monotone voice designed to cover his excitement, no one can say what these are-yet.

The craft remained hovering, waiting for further instructions from earth. The

whole room stared in open-mouthed wonder, gripped by a feeling resembling horror.

Bronson was the first to stop breathing. He felt as if he had turned to stone. The others drew in a collective breath soon after. Many slapped their hands over their mouths. No one expected this. Just off to the right barely visible in the darkness, floating over the floor of the lake were oblong bulbs with shiny speckles embedded in them. Some structures seemed connected to these but details were difficult to see. The gem-like speckles were the most eerie of all the mysteries seen so far, seeming to reflect back at them with a similar sense of horror and curiosity.

Expand that portion over there! ordered Bronson, aware that everyone knew where he meant. There was just enough to illuminate that dark region with the reflecting gems to give the oblong structures barely discernible definition. For several long minutes all of them just stared.

They're turning. whispered Bronson.

Movement is 4.7 millimeters a minute. reported Darrin, the head control operator.

Living, Bronson whispered, then became silent in a momentary state of shock, Beings. he finally uttered.

Everyone kept staring without blinking, mesmerized by the creatures who barely seemed to move, yet communicated life to those watching. Bronson started to breathe heavier and faster. Soon he was hyperventilating. He stood and fidgeted clumsily with his chair, then he tossed it over and burst forth with a shouting command;

SHUT IT DOWN!

What? asked Darrin, innocently.

The light! Stop burning them with it! Shut it down. Darrin quickly touched in a command. Still rapt in silent staring, all remained frozen until Bronson's next outburst;

I SAID he shouted with fury, then stopped all of a sudden when he snapped out of shock and realized his mistake.

It's eighty-two light minutes to there, sir. said Darrin in a high and gentle voice trying to avoid provocation.

What is wrong with you sir? growled Mike Martz at him with a tone of sarcasm. Bronson rubbed his hands into his face, then with clenched fists he shouted back;

We are NOT to do harm! Whatever this is, I will not let us become destroyers of alien life forms. We have found some life form here perhaps yes, but I hope we haven't blasted them to death with our light!

The other agency members began to murmur and look back and forth between Martz and Vandertide.

Good decision! yelled Martz derisively. He glared with hatred at Vandertide for a few seconds and then angrily walked out. Vandertide had picked up his chair and sat back down. He became lost in his own thoughts, unaware of anything outside of himself.

When he became aware of his surroundings again he realized that Mike Martz had left. He saw everyone else still watching the monitor on the wall with great intensity, but he couldn't watch anymore. Back into his shell of contemplation he went until he heard a sudden murmur in the room and the noises of people rising from their seats and shuffling about. The craft had

finally received the command and its light had gone out. The only light left was the distant, dim sunlight penetrating through the moon's clouds and finally the lake, so the monitor was nearly black. Vandertide rose. They all stood still and turned to him in attention. He gathered himself mentally and began with a hint of shame in his voice;

Well, it looks like our mission had a major success and major failure all in one. We talked about finding sentient beings beyond earth like drunks talk plans for future wealth and fame. We didn't properly consider how this should be handled. I think the truth is that none of us really believed we'd find this. We're unprepared in all kinds of ways.

I don't want this news out yet. We'll have to light them up again and have a look, but no more of this bright light. We have the capabilities to vary the wavelengths as well as intensities on the craft's lighting. I want you all to work on finding a possible combination of lighting parameters with low enough energy to use here. There's so much you can do with light. Let's come up with a way to shine a beam that won't harm them. I'll come back in a few hours.

Bronson needed time alone to think and one of his favorite places to be by himself was at the science museum in a room called The Twentieth-Century Laboratory, a place no one ever visited or found interesting except Bronson Vandertide. He usually looked forward to his routine stroll there to be alone, but before he left the agency building he saw something very disturbing. On the wall in the lobby was a television monitor which was always on but with the sound off most of the time. It was on the space agency news

channel as usual, but Mike Martz was on talking to a reporter, which was not normal. Stunned to see him on the news, Bronson fumbled to get the sound on.

I believe Dr. Vandertide has become incapacitated. Said Martz without emotion. Of course, I have no idea how long his fit will last. He has been known to have these fits and has forced us all to secrecy about it. Bronson's jaw dropped.

I take it upon myself to let you know this since the integrity of the agency requires disclosure of such.

YOU MOTH! yelled Bronson at the TV.

I will be taking command of the agency as soon as I am in possession of the Comm Transmitter. We have protocol for passing along authority which I will activate Martz went on.

In reaction, Bronson grabbed his chest and felt inside his coat for the Comm Transmitter. Holding it firmly in his hand he answered back;

THERE'S NO WAY YOU'RE GETTING YOUR HANDS ON THIS, MIKE!

I am taking this action not only because we need a new leader at the agency, but because there has just been an exciting new find from the Titan explorer Martz began revealing.

As soon as he heard this he ran down a hallway to the old locker room. He had abandoned his old locker long ago like everyone else had. As with the Twentieth Century Lab, storage lockers were a relic of the past which no one had yet bothered to tear down and remove. Inside his locker were old clothes, paper notebooks, phones, chargers, wallets, metal keys, writing

pens, I. D cards, toothbrushes and various other things which hadn't been in use for decades. Under the junk was a motorcycle helmet he used back in his early days at the agency.

This helmet is so old, he thought to himself, and I'll look strange, but it's best that I'm not seen right now. He put it on and walked swiftly out of the building.

Out on the street he heard people starting to talk about the newly found Titans. Quickly the rumors became wild with descriptions of monsters as large as lakes devouring each other as in the Greek myths. He heard one woman say she knew that he, Dr. Vandertide was on board the ship and the Titans had taken him hostage, forcing him to fly them back to Earth to lead a Titan invasion of our planet. Bronson was at least grateful about one thing; the growing Titan mania was so distracting that he escaped being noticed wearing his strange old motorcycle helmet.

He knew he couldn't hide in the Twentieth Century Laboratory for long. Martz knew about his habit of coming here to be alone, and if he wanted the Comm Transmitter he would be here, too. Yet he believed Martz was enjoying a fantasy of having the power he sought and a moment of fame. Once it all collapsed, it would be easy to fire him.

He swung open the door to the lab, pulled off his helmet and stepped inside. It was relaxing for him to be among the old flasks and graduated cylinders, glass distillers and Bunsen burners. He took in a deep breath, let it all out with a weary sigh and felt a little better. Now he could plan his next steps.

Bronson had miscalculated. It would be the last good breath he'd take for a couple of minutes. Mike Martz appeared behind him at the door walking silently in. He was holding a plastic trash bag with a plastic ribbon draw string. He crept up to the unaware doctor and quickly threw the bag over his head. Bronson reacted right away, violently scratching at his face, tearing the plastic open. Then Martz pulled hard on the ribbon and tried to throw Bronson on the floor but he stood tough and stayed on his feet while ripping at the bag.

The struggle between the men heightened. Bronson forced his fingers under the ribbon on his neck and pulled out while Mike pulled harder to close it on his neck. Bronson moved his head frantically from side to side, burning the skin of his neck from the extremely taut ribbon. Now Martz miscalculated. He pulled on the ribbon with all of his might and the ribbon snapped. Bronson was completely free and hadn't lost consciousness. He turned around and saw Martz holding the torn-up bag with a momentary expression of shame on his face. Martz then gave Bronson a hard stare and threw down the bag.

Give it to me. he demanded. Bronson rubbed his throat and said in a raspy voice;

So you didn't waste any time coming for the Comm, did you, Mike? I underestimated you.

I'm sick of you and your weak, high-minded ideas. he spat back. I want total control of the agency because I am not afraid of taking command and ploughing forward even if it hurts something. Give me the Comm and get out of my way.

Mike, you're right about one thing: I am afraid. I'm afraid of ignorance and

the harm we do because of it. It isn't weak to respect the life we find, leaving it alone if that's the only way to avoid molesting them. But why am I talking to you about not molesting them after what you just tried! I would never turn over authority to someone like you!

I just told the world about you.

Oh, your brilliant news conference. That's right, I'm unfit, so your said.

Everyone sees that you're weak, and after the way you acted today no one wants you back! I am not afraid to burn the guts out of those creatures in order to see what's inside. It's our right. We're the ones who built the craft which got us there. As far as I'm concerned they are ours and they have no reason to exist but for our science. Give me the Comm Transmitter. Martz stepped threateningly towards him.

Strong emotions froze Bronson thinking, making him forget how he had just fought for his life and won. He was overwhelmed for the moment, plagued by self-doubt. As Martz approached staring at him with wide, furious eyes Bronson felt more of his will melt but managed to bend slightly towards him and put his hand out to halt his advance.

Let's talk this over. Don't you realize the problem of contact with living beings in a cold methane lake? Bronson pleaded. What good does it do to destroy them like this? We are as red-hot coals to them. Just shining our light to have a look boils them. If we reach into their lake our arm would instantly freeze and break off. Their metabolism has to be thousands of times slower than ours. If we want to know them we have to give this lots of time and take it way easy. Bronson stepped forward and took Martz by the shoulders at arms length.

Mike, I trusted you. I still do because I have to trust everyone collaborating on this project. Scientists should be careful, sensitive observers, not cold dissectors. These Titans and we are two extreme life forms to each other. Our world operates on fire and fury, not theirs, so for us to study them requires us to stop our furious probing and learn to hold still in the dark for a long, long time. Martz violently pulled away from him.

We own them. said Martz. We own them all! Nothing else matters about them but what they are worth to our science. You already have your fame and reputation as the man who first found life beyond Earth. Mars was yours. Titan is mine. If you won't blast them to smithereens, I will. I won't let the agency back away now and leave our craft dark, unable to gather data. I mean it, Bronson. Give me the Comm, or better yet, give the order to reactivate, now and then hand it over. said Martz

Martz stared threateningly at him again. Bronson bent his head down and slapped the back of his neck in a gesture of pained acceptance. He had crumbled. Forgetting all he stood for, he felt at the moment intimidated and humiliated. Reluctantly he pulled out the Comm.

So, said Bronson, subdued and sad, for you this is about you building a reputation, not about finding extraterrestrial life.

You have your place and I want mine. said Martz. Bronson raised the Comm to his mouth.

Darrin, I order the lights reactivated now. We shall proceed on Titan with whatever caution we can know to use. He lowered the comm to his lap and stared at Martz.

That was weak. Martz sneered. But it will work. Now hand over the Comm.

Instantly, remorse began to eat at Bronson. It turned to anger, and anger turned to hate filled rage. He held the comm out towards Martz as if to surrender it to him, then as Martz was about to grab it, Bronson deliberately dropped it.

I can't believe you really would kill me, Mike. What would you do then? How were you planning to get away with it?

I am prepared to take over at the agency Bronson, and I will because Titan is mine. As for getting away with it, who ever comes here but you? The protein digester still works; I have plenty of time to make you disappear into a vat of murky acid.

Neither men had a weapon nor much knowledge of hand to hand combat. Bronson blew open the valves to his rage and leapt upon Martz with greater might and speed than he had possessed in years. Something burst in his hands at the very moment he lost awareness. What it was that had burst was as much a mystery to him as he was to himself. When Bronson regained full consciousness he was holding the broken neck of Mike Martz. Horrified, he jerked his hands away and Martz fell to the floor, gasping for breath for a short while before he died. Bronson looked at the body with its twisted and unnaturally bent neck in disbelief for a long time, then he shut his eyes and sat with the corpse for a half hour, still with his eyes closed.

The reporters were shouting and screaming out their questions at the locked doors of the space agency. Soon the doors were being jostled to the breaking point. A man wearing an antique motorcycle helmet cautiously approached, then aggressively pushed his way through the crowd. He unlocked the doors and rushed in before anyone else, then sprinted to the stair way. Moments

later he was alone glancing down upon the confused and furious crowd twirling about in the lobby looking for anyone to attack with questions. He burst through the control room door and quickly shut it behind him.

Everyone turned from their work and stared.

Is that you, Dr. Vandertide? asked one of the members.

Sanctuary. said Bronson after he took off his helmet and set it aside.