

The Specks of Dust

By Bridget Haselbarth

It was February 17th, 2379 AD. This was the date which had been hoped for, longed for, and planned for by so many. For months space engineers, launch directors, and all the rest of the space center employees had dreamed of this happy day. For the first time in history, man was about to encounter, in person, the strange planet Mars. The new ship *Revilo* was about to embark on the first journey to Mars, taking in it four men. Some thought them lucky, others insane, but there was no doubt that they were certainly very brave and daring. The launch was set for 7:19 AM. It was now only 3:30 AM, but already dozens of news reporters and camera men were poising themselves around the launch pad, and there was a growing crowd of spectators. The hours steadily went by. By 7:00 AM, 19 minutes till the launch, the number of onlookers was in the hundreds. At 7:18 AM the muffled sound of a man's voice over the speakers could be heard, counting down the seconds. "Seven, six, five, four," the voice said without hesitation, "three, two, one." Black and gray smoke could be seen pouring out from the bottom of the rocket as it lifted off from the ground. The crowd roared and cheered as the rocket shot high into the sky. Man was on his way to Mars.

In the previous centuries, man's poor and backward knowledge and skill would have resulted in, if ever attempted, a trip to Mars being almost a year long. But by the 24th century man had progressed so far technologically that this length had shortened tremendously. Only ten hours and twenty-nine minutes from launch, the *Revilo* landed on Mars. Gregory, Pete and Lawrence, three out of the four men who came, quickly donned their spaces suits and went outside. For a while they behaved as little children who have found a hidden stash of sweets; they were exuberant over being the first humans to ever set foot on Mars. They were content with hopping and tumbling on the low-gravity planet. Suddenly Gregory stopped mid-jump and pointed to something. "W-what . . . what on earth is that?" he stammered.

Pete chuckled. "You mean what on Mars is that?" The laughter died on his lips as he saw what Gregory's shaking finger pointed to. Their running and jumping had by this time taken them on the other side of the *Revilo*, and they saw a sight which before had been blocked from their vision by the ship. They saw dozens of brownish-red buildings scattered around, some looked like houses, some like

stores, and others were undefinable. All around the small town they could see many creatures hurrying about. Every one of the strange creatures walked hunched over. The taller ones seemed to be bent over more, the shorter ones less.

“So... there really are Martians after all,” whispered Lawrence. The three men cautiously walked forward. When they were on the very outskirts of the city, an imperious looking creature—obviously a commander—came forward. He also walked bent over.

“Welcome to Elleon, Earthmen! I am Atir.”

The “Earthmen” looked around, dumbfounded. Finally Pete answered. “Thank you. I am Pete, and this is Lawrence and Gregory,” he said, pointing to his two fellow astronauts.

“I see our town and its inhabitants surprise you,” said Atir, smiling.

“They do indeed,” replied Lawrence.

From under Atir’s bent head came a laugh. “Would you like a tour?”

“That would be wonderful,” they answered.

They then began walking around the small city, Atir talking all the while. None of the other Martians paid any attention to them.

“We, as you said, are Martins,” Atir began, “The Elleons are one of the many tribes of Martians around the planet. The Elleons differ from the other tribes—the Onurbs, Sunils, Occors—in that they have one goal, one purpose, one creed. This objective is all there is to our life, so by telling you about our purpose I will be telling all there is to know about us.”

“Our intention is this: to escape the white dust for as long as possible. What, you must wonder, is the white dust? I will tell you. Long ago, in the first age of the universe, and thus of the planet, an enormous bubble filled with white dust floated just above Mars. For the short while when this bubble was intact and the dust trapped, the few Martians who lived spent their lives in peace and happiness. They had nothing to fear, no work to do and, best of all, they could stand up straight—what life could be better? How this bubble broke and the dust got loose is a long and complicated tale. To cut a long story short I will tell you this: two young Martians disobeyed their superiors and accidentally broke this fragile bubble. The white dust got loose and scattered over the planet. Wherever you go you will see this dust, floating about five feet from the earth. Any Martian who touches one of these specks of dust is instantly taken away. Legend says those who have lived life

to the fullest and have done their work well are taken to a beautiful and wonderful land unlike anything ever seen. The dust is not usually hard to avoid, as it is large, white and very visible, but of course we take every precaution to escape touching it. So now you see why our life is so difficult and labored, despite our efforts to lessen the hardships.” Atir sighed a long sigh, rubbed his bent neck, and sat down on a stone bench.

“Pardon me for asking this,” Pete said, “but why do all the Elleons walk hunched over?” Atir looked surprised. “Do you not know? To escape the dust, of course. The dust usually settles about five feet off the ground, so if we walk hunched over it should lessen our chances of touching it. Of course, the dust does happen to make its way down one way or another, but this way of walking improves our chances of living longer. Elleons are taught to walk in this manner from the time they take their first step.” As he said this, he pointed to three or four passing Martians, about half as tall as the others. They were obviously children, but they too were running around hunched over.

“I see that most of the Elleons walk very quickly and seem to hurry in everything they do,” Gregory remarked. “Is this also to escape the dust?” Atir answered him, “No, hurrying cannot help us avoid the dust, as it moves more quickly than we do. The reason for our hastening is so we can progress as much as possible in our search for ways to elongate our life. You have doubtless noticed this large site where many different types of buildings are built, and even more are under way. Many admirable and praiseworthy Elleons have dedicated their life to finding more dust efficient buildings and houses; that is, buildings which trap the particles as much as possible and separate the Martians from the dust. Due to the vast amount of research which is done on this subject—many Elleons study nothing more—new styles and forms of houses are being declared every year ‘the absolute best houses ever.’ From all I have told you about the dust and its consequence, I hope you now understand why we seem to be single-minded in all that we do.”

The three men looked rather stunned by all they had heard. Pete spoke up, “I think it all makes sense....”

Lawrence interrupted, “But why do you want so much to stay? You have said that your life here is hard and afterwards—when the dust touches you, that is—

you are taken to a wonderful place. Why then do you desire so greatly to remain here?”

“Because we will be taken away from here...to somewhere we cannot see, at a time we do not know...” answered Atir, shuddering. “But we are improving. Many professionals are and have been studying the life of Martians, and they have proved that the life time of Elleons is lengthening, even if it is only by a few days. As for me, I have avoided these particles for almost 180 years now—Mar’s years, of course. I believe in Earthly years it is about half of that time. Every action I have done for those 180 years are done with the sole intention of living as long as I can. Even now I am, I believe, only in the prime of my life. I have succeeded thus far, and I am certain that I will be able to avoid the dust for centuries to come.”

Atir spoke these words proudly. The three humans could clearly see that he truly believed every word he said. The aged Martian continued his boasting, “I have outlived leaders, scientists and experts. Why, I’ll live for mil- ” Without any warning there was a blinding white flash, and the three humans instantly closed their eyes. When they opened them they saw that Atir was nowhere to be seen. He was gone. He had been touched by the dust.