

The Red Sands

By

Zachariah Nash

“We have an important news bulletin just in from our correspondent in the Martian colonies.” Blue light bathes the faces of the people sitting in the darkness. They sit comfortably on their chairs or lounge on the floor but their eyes don’t leave the television screen for a moment. “We have just received a report about a new outbreak of the deadly Achelous disease and a new quarantine has been issued.” On the screen images of starving people and police officers holding back the masses flash before their eyes. The people still stare as the newscaster continues with his normal scheduled broadcast. Throughout the night he emphasizes the dangers of the disease and lists death tolls that wrench the viewer’s hearts.

A man wakes up with a jolt and looks around as his vision begins to clear. He lifts his numb arm and dusts off his coat. He looks to the aisle and he sees a steward with an old metal cart. The steward cleans off a syringe with a worn rag. The man wipes the grime off of his window and peers out the tiny porthole. Red light washes over his face as he stares out at the planet. The man turns his head when the steward speaks to him. “We are getting ready to land,” the steward says as he straps the syringe to the metal cart. “Be prepared for a mighty jostling when we come in.”

The man thanked the steward and the steward pushed himself towards the back of the ship. A sharp pain began to bombard the man’s head while he fastened the thin rope the pilot called a seat belt. The man looked down and pulled out the needle and tubing attached to his arm and grabbed hold of the rusty arm handles.

The ship rattled and creaked as they flew, and the man thought the shaking was tearing it apart. The man’s knuckles whitened as he griped and he stares only in front of

himself. The floor shifted below his feet only making his grip tighter. The strap on his belt loosened when they got closer to the planets surface and its gravity took affect. The man looks around at the empty seats that surround him and sees how they shifted and how a few were even askew. As soon as the shaking stopped the man got up from his chair and grabbed his small bags from the compartment below the seat.

The man quickly walked through the aisle passing faded and cracked seats. His headache grew worse as he approached the pilot's cockpit and when the rusty door swung open. A fat man with a grease-stained shirt stepped out and extended his hand. The man walked past the pilot and behind him the man could hear curse words muttered under someone's breath.

The man passed through an old fabric air lock and into the terminal. It was empty but it seemed surprisingly clean and updated. The man's feet squeaked as he made his way to the exit where a bored security guard stood in front of the door. "Cancer screening," the guard said as he slowly got out of his chair. The man was led to an old metal booth where he was told to stand absolutely still. He waited and a light passed over him and then was let out of the box. The guard then led him back to the exit and opened it with a flourish like an over zealous doorman. "Enjoy your stay," the guard said. The man walked away at a brisk pace.

The man walked farther and farther underground until he reached the residential areas. Houses carved out of the red stone lined the hall that had widened to become a street. People sat in front of their houses where harsh light bathed their faces. Eventually the man reached a cross roads with even more housing down either street. A sound of a

motor grinding and clanking accompanied an elevator as it rose to the street. The man stepped on and began his journey down.

As he rode the horrible noise caused his headache to become worse and he was holding his head in his hands by the time he got to the business district. He walked down the street towards the building in the center of town. People lined the streets, walking from store front to store front. The man walked up the steps to the largest building that he had seen. This one was completely carved from the rock on all sides and it had the look that it was made presentable in a hurry. It was quieter inside the building. The man quickly went through the hall to an unassuming office in the far corner.

The man opened the door to the office with a hand to his temple and slammed the door behind him. The man at the desk looked up and asked him what he wanted. "I want to get into the quarantine area," the man said to the clerk.

"I can certainly arrange that but I will need to take down your name and have you say the reason for your visit."

"My name is Robert Parise and I am going to get my brother."

Robert took the elevator back up to the top. He gritted his teeth through the screeching. After a night's sleep his headache had lessened but the noise wasn't helping the throbbing in his head. Robert walked again through the streets but instead went to an office that looked new and walked into their waiting area. A photographer and a journalist were sitting on old metal chairs and Robert sat down next to the photographer.

The harsh fluorescent lights increased the throbbing forcing Robert to close his eyes and hold his head. "Those injections can be a bitch right," the photographer asked

him? “I don’t see why they have to put you into a comatose state then wake you up when you’re done. I just think the side effects are too nasty for the trip out here, you know?”

Robert gave the photographer a hard stare then just shook his head and looked away. After a few long awkward moments a woman stepped into the waiting area and ushered them deeper into the building. They were led to a newer elevator and rode it up into an airlock. On the other side they could see a large white chrome truck getting fueled up. The woman showed each of them how to put on their space suits and each put their own on in turn. They then passed through the air lock and entered the truck.

“We are riding on the surface of the planet towards the city of Angel’s landing. It is well within the quarantine limit so wear your suits at all times.” As the woman spoke Robert looked out the tiny windows to the red desert outside. The passengers bounced up and down as they rode but the woman continued without missing a beat. “We leave at sundown. If you are not with us then you will have to spend the night. When we exit the city you will be screened to make sure you are not infected. If you are then you will be force to stay in the quarantined city. Do not help anyone for they could still infect you. Is that understood?” Everyone nodded his or her affirmation. “Good, then lets get this going.”

As the woman said this, the truck came slowly to a stop. The woman moved to the back of the truck and opened the hatch to let everyone out. The butterscotch colored sky greeted each of them as they stepped out onto the Martian soil. Their boots crunched as they walked to the cubic concrete dome. A small door was all that led inside and the woman opened it with a key, and she then motioned for them to get in. The door closed

behind them with a hiss. Red light filled the room as the door on the far side opened. They each walked out and went their separate ways.

Robert made his way quickly to the nearest elevator and rode it down past the houses. Once he got off he walked at a brisk pace towards the last known address of his brother. He passed house after house with chalk crosses over the door. Men moved bodies into the street while the women cried. Harsh light made the faces of the coughing people in the street look haggard and worn but Robert never looked.

Robert walked up to the house and peered in. His brother was lying on the couch. Dim light from his old television illuminated his face. His head turned when he heard the knock on the door. He walked slowly to the door and opened it seeing his face reflected in the helmet. "Dylan is that you," Robert asked as he stepped into the room. "You look horrible."

"I can't believe you came all the way out here," Dylan said as he slowly closed the door and hobbled back to the couch.

"I came to get you from this awful place."

"There is no help for me man. I'm infected and there is no stopping it now. The news keeps calling it a super virus but that isn't the case. The epidemiologists say its water born and that it can also be transmitted by blood. The stupid media on the other hand has the government in a panic and they are doing all the wrong things."

"Look at you, always the smart one. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You can let me die in peace. I came here for the opportunities and it looks like I caught them." Dylan let out a coarse laugh then went into a fit of coughing. Then Dylan began to list just staring at the wall. "A brand new mining town on a strange world but

without a country to protect us we just get bled dry. Those damn mining companies. You know how I got infected. I was mining in the H Shute when one of the infected water tanks burst. I almost drowned but I swallowed just enough water. It is that damn government's fault. They haven't done anything to help us out here." A sob escaped his helmet as Robert watched his brother continue to talk to the space on the wall. He walked slowly out and closed the door softly behind him.

Robert began to wander the streets going no direction in particular. He saw the sick stumbling around the road, walking as if they were drunk. They would hold cloths to their faces and when they lifted them from their face, the cloths would have spots of blood. Robert ran into people but he didn't care. He continued walking in the harsh light until he saw the photographer and the journalist. They were taking pictures of someone slumped against a wall.

Robert with his hands balled into fists walked over and pushed over the kneeling photographer.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"It's your fault that they are like this."

"What are you talking about? I just take pictures of the poor things."

"You use their misery to install panic. You feed off of it, making their lives into a viewership magnet. It is just plain sick. You are the ones who are stopping treatment because an easy to stop disease would be boring. Instead you spun a yarn to make everyone believe that it was dangerous. They hung on your every word."

“Hey man, if you don’t like what is happening here then go donate to a charity fund or something.”

“Maybe I will.” A sickening crunch rang down the street when the photographer fell on the floor. Glass shards were littered around him and he looked up at Robert with a look of surprise and fear. “One lying reporter for this beautiful colony.”

“You Bloody monster.” The reporter came at Robert and tackled him to the ground. The reporter kept swinging at his face but Robert blocked it every time. He looked around frantically for a weapon and found a broken bottle just out of arm’s reach. Robert dived for it and a fist collided into his helmet. There was a sickening cracking sound but no visible damage could be seen. Robert quickly grabbed the bottle and stabbed it upwards into the reporter’s stomach. He continued this assault until the reporter collapsed beside him. A red stain was growing on the white suit.

“You sick bastard. I can never go home now,” the photographer said to Robert with a look of horror. “You have trapped me with these people and have already signed my death warrant, you bitch. Don’t you walk away from me when I am talking to you.”

“You’re not talking to me. You’re trying to make me feel bad. You’re talking at me. That is all you people talk about these days, fear and pain.”

Robert stepped onto the platform in the light of the setting sun. Shadows from the rocks lengthened over his feet as he took a seat in the back of the truck. The woman waited looking at the hatch then finally closed the back of the truck. As she took her seat she signaled to the driver and they began to bounce along. “I wonder where the other guys are,” she asked as they sat there in the fading light.



“They are where they belong. Now take me home, there is nothing left for me here.”