

First Contact

by E.S. Strout

Mars Odyssey was launched April 7, 2001 and achieved Martian orbit on October 24, 2001. It has begun transmitting data . . .

NASA Website

1.

NASA Space Surveillance, Cape Canaveral, Florida. Friday, 31 October 2001. 1020 hours.

“Transmission from Hubble’s tachyon relay. It’s Odyssey’s first polar orbit,” NASA astrophysicist Adam Joyner said as he viewed the monitor screen. “Real time imagery.”

Air Force General Raymond Turner, NASA liaison, slid his chair closer and shot the CRT screen a skeptical eyeball. “Tachyon relay? Why don’t I know about this?”

“It’s still has Q-classification.”

Turner muttered a curse. “NASA and their secrets. So what am I looking at, Adam?”

“Frost and carbon dioxide crystal snow. Wind-blown topsoil, small impact craters, wind-sculpted rock formations and . . . “

“Wait one. There’s something different here.”

Joyner pressed computer keys. A detailed enlargement appeared.

“Very small, partially hidden by CO2 snow. Not a rock outcropping. The shape is too smooth and symmetrical.”

“Why is it not natural?”

Joyner adjusted his rimless glasses, peered at the enlarged freeze frame. “This adjacent rock formation is jagged and erose from natural gale force winds and sand storms. Not smooth.”

2.

Northern Peripheral Rim Outpost 15. 1105 hours same day.

Lieutenant Vorniid brushed a film of frost from his radar screen. “Look at this, Marshal.”

Communications Marshal Zorbek slapped gloved hands together and stomped his booted feet on the packed dirt floor for warmth.

“Another damn surveillance satellite, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir. It’s in a different orbit than the other one.”

Zorbek pulled a small metal flask from his uniform overcoat pocket and took a swig. “Western Alliance spy satellite.”

He offered the flask to his radar operator.

The Lieutenant took a swallow. “You think so?”

“I suspect. Supreme Headquarters won’t confirm. We’re too low on the food chain for such classified information.”

Lieutenant Vorniid unlocked a desk drawer. “I made a tracing of Corporal Zeitz’s original photo, Marshal. Graphics from the spy device we have captured.”

He unfolded the sheet of rough pulp paper on the desk top.

Marshal Zorbek’s eyes widened in surprise. “You are a good officer, Lieutenant. This is a court-martial offense, but I’m as curious as you.”

Both officers stared at the odd hieroglyphics.

MARS POLAR LANDER
NASA USA

“A Western Alliance code, Marshal?”

“Give me that, Lieutenant. You never saw this. Neither have I.”

Vorniid saluted. “Yes, sir. What do you think it means?”

Zorbek shrugged as the rendering flared to ashes in the outpost’s air-enhanced heater.

“Unknown. Corporal Zeitz’s surface battalion freed the Western spy lander from the ice and found no booby traps. They covered it with a reflective tarp to block any outgoing transmissions. It’s been here almost two annual rotations now.”

“Why so long, sir?”

“Laziness, logistics and bureaucratic red tape. Our Eastern Supreme Military’s investigators have the luxury of choosing better weather. An annual rotation or two would not be unusual.”

“They will apprise you of their findings, yes?”

Zorbek refilled his flask with clear amber root liquor from a bottle stashed in a desk drawer, took a slug.

“Not a chance. I am a lowly Communications Marshal stationed at a god-forsaken surface rim outpost. We’re lucky to have an air line this far out.”

“Usual assignment for a junior officer such as I,” Lieutenant Vorniid observed. “But you, sir?”

“Commissar Grivodt and I have a difference of opinion. I said if our world ever needed an enema, a Northern rim outpost is where they should insert the tube.”

“The Commissar accused me of being a Western sympathizer. He has rewarded me with this rim post. He first tried to assign me to an outer tunnel checkpoint. I was too old, reflexes too slow with the weapons.”

Vorniid uncovered the outpost’s sealed peephole flap and peered through binoculars.

“Supreme’s investigators have arrived. You are right, sir.”

He flipped a calendar page and counted. “Just short of two annual rotations since our report.”

He handed the glasses to Zorbek.

The Marshal rubbed the lenses against his tunic sleeve to remove their coating of frost. He twisted the focusing knob and stared.

“They have removed the tarp. Now they are attaching a solid rocket-propelled device to the Western spy lander.”

“Why, Marshal?”

“Who knows? Grivodt always has an ulterior motive,” he grumbled. “Some way to further embarrass me.”

He turned the rim post’s air intake valve up a click, lit a thin cigar with a match scratched across a thumbnail, exhaled a corrosive cloud of lichen and moss tobacco smoke.

“Perhaps you will be the next lucky officer to command this piece of shit outpost, Lieutenant Vorniid.”

3.

NASA Surveillance. 1520 hours.

The enlargement was sharp and clear. “General, This is a construction.”

Turner eyed the screen, refilled his coffee cup.

“Who could have built it, Adam? We don’t have the capability of a manned Mars landing. The Chinese and Russians sure as hell don’t.”

“A secret project?”

“I have level-four clearance. Nothing about Mars landings.”

Joyner loosened his tie and undid the top collar button. “A native presence, General?”

Turner smiled. “Martians, Adam?”

He got up, refilled his coffee cup. “Let’s not jump to any weird conclusions.”

“It was Odyssey’s first pass over the site, sir. I can give us higher resolution on this transit. Shall I report . . .?”

“Not yet. Show me the GPS location of the anomaly.”

Joyner pressed keys, pressed again. “Oh, wow. Can’t be.”

“I’ve repeated it three times, sir. This is the projected landing site of our Mars Polar Lander that disappeared during descent, December 9th, almost two years ago.”

4.

Turner drank more coffee, got up, paced, resumed his seat.

“So we’ve found Polar Lander.”

“it’s less than fifty yards from the anomaly, General.”

“What else can you tell me about the aberration?”

“Frozen mud walls. Dome shaped, about twenty feet in diameter. Probably hollow inside. Heat sensors do show some faint areas of intensity.”

Turner fumbled in a shirt pocket, located a pack of unfiltered Camels and lit up. “Can we get any closer?”

Adam stifled a sneeze. “I’ll put Odyssey in a geosynchronous orbit over the site.”

5.

Rim Outpost 15.

Lieutenant Vorniid said, “Rumor has it, Marshal, that our East Supreme’s Weapons Division has developed a projectile that can follow an incoming missile’s trajectory back to its source.”

Zorbek puffed on his cigar, nodded. “That must be what they are attaching to our mystery guest out there?”

“If so, the spy lander will be returned to its launch pad location,” Lieutenant Vorniid said.

“The West will send another, laden with explosives.”

“Suppose East Supreme Military adds one of their experimental radiation weapons to the return package, Marshal. What then?”

Zorbek smoothed his mustache with a gloved fingertip and nodded.

“Very perceptive, Lieutenant. Crippling of the Western Alliance’s underground launch facilities, military fortifications, troop concentrations and support infrastructure. Polluting of their fresh water sources. Destroying their carbon dioxide splitters. Without oxygen their entire population would be forced to the surface. Surrender, suffocation or freezing to death would be their only options.”

“Speculation founded only on rumor, Marshal.”

“True. Let me have those binoculars.”

He took in a sharp breath. “They are attaching another unit to the return missile.”

“Western Alliance continues to insist they have no satellite launch capability, Marshal.”

Zorbek puffed on his cigar, ignoring the LOW AIR warning alarm. He gestured toward the peephole with a gloved thumb. “If true, where the hell did that come from? And the two still in orbit?”

6.

NASA Surveillance:

“Look at this, General.” Astrophysicist Joyner turned his monitor screen and pointed out a jagged green spike.

“This just popped up on Odyssey’s radiation monitors. Big increase in gamma and neutron levels. Not background. Mars Polar Lander carries no radioactive material of that strength, but this emission is from its precise location.”

The NASA Liaison Officer punched up a phone extension. “Major Sandford, I need you here. Now.”

7.

The nuclear armament expert needed only seconds.

“Mister Joyner is correct, sir. Unstable uranium isotopes plus Cobalt-60. Dirty nuclear bomb. Many irradiation casualties at its target.”

Major Sandford scrolled data. “Survey of all nuclear armed nations, General. None have the capability to land such a device on Mars. Shall I report . . .?”

“Negative. We’ll keep you updated, Major.”

“Odyssey has some experimental optics, General Turner,” Joyner said. “High resolution zoom lenses. Putting them on line now.”

Odyssey’s visual track inched across the screen revealing the frozen Martian surface in exquisite detail. Time reference clicked off seconds at the bottom of the screen. Joyner typed in Martian longitude and latitude coordinates.

“Stable geosynchronous orbit now.”

8.

General Turner gaped as the new image stabilized.

“Not possible. Troops clad in winter camouflage gear, masked and carrying cylindrical air or oxygen tanks. Whose? No nation on Earth has the capability.”

“An alien presence. As you said, Adam, nothing else fits,” Turner said with a grudging nod.

“Why the hell didn’t SETI pick them up? They have that Very Large Array facility in New Mexico. Fifteen or more huge receiver dishes.”

Joyner pounded keys, emitted a soft groan. “They did, General. Off and on over four years. Intermittent low frequency signals. They believed it was a local glitch and ignored it.”

“Well, their local glitch has Polar Lander and is attaching a non oxygen dependent solid propellant booster rocket. Able to overcome gravity, and with a nuclear payload.”

9.

Northern Rim Outpost 15:

Vorniid said, “That satellite’s position has stabilized, Marshal. Right over our heads.”

Marshal Zorbek groaned in dismay. “If they can see us, they know we have captured their spy lander.”

Lieutenant Vorniid removed his knit cap and rubbed his perspiring scalp. “The West still maintains they do not have the capability.”

“If not them, who?”

“Our astronomers tell us the third planet has a warm atmosphere and could support primitive surface life.”

Marshal Zorbek turned the air input valve up half a click and lit up another cigar. “Hardly primitive, Lieutenant.”

“Perhaps they are explorers and merely curious. Their spy lander has displayed no hostile intent, Marshal. It may be just a survey probe.”

10.

NASA Surveillance:

Turner dialed an extension. The phone conversation lasted thirty minutes. “Thank you, Professor Lynch.”

“What, General?” Joyner asked.

“Her classified probe with experimental gravity drive. It may surpass light speed. A nuclear response must be a consideration for a War of the Worlds scenario.”

“Wait one. Here’s a close up view from our other Mars satellite, Global Explorer. Five thousand kilos west of the anomaly. What is this, General?”

“Good God. Retractable missile launch platform.”

“Damn.” The General massaged his temples to assuage the impending migraine.
“Another military force.”

“So we have two underground societies on a planet thought to be uninhabited. Technically evolved and at war. The folks with Polar Lander must believe the other guys sent it.”

Joyner’s eyes widened in surprise as he reacquired the Odyssey view. “There is another attached module, General, partially hidden by the nuclear package. I’ve got a better camera angle. Look.”

Turner’s voice was low, guarded. “Oh hell. It’s a return trajectory module. There’s a similar Air Force project, but only an untested prototype.”

“So the Martians have one that works.”

Joyner’s look oozed skepticism. “The Martians would need a global positioning system, General. They don’t have any artificial satellites.”

“They could have an inertial navigation system like our old Polaris Missile submarines used. It wouldn’t be dependent on satellites.”

He lit a cigarette. “It could follow Polar Lander’s trajectory in reverse and deliver that dirty bomb to Cape Canaveral instead of to their local problem.”

Turner grabbed the red phone.

11.

Northern Rim Outpost 15:

“We must warn them, sir.”

Marshal Zorbek took a generous swig from his flask. “You are crazy, Lieutenant.”

“Marshal, our radiation monitor confirms that a nuclear device has been attached to the return vehicle. What if it reaches a third planet launch facility?”

Vorniid donned his storm proof tunic, cap and breathing mask. He pushed the exit hatch open and stepped out into the rising storm, “They must see us, Marshal.”

“Damn.” Zorbek slammed the hatch shut. “Wasting our surface air allotment, Lieutenant.” He pocketed the flask, donned his breathing apparatus and followed, unlit cigar clenched firmly in his teeth.

“You may cost me my pension, Lieutenant.”

Vorniid shielded his face from the frigid wind with an upraised arm. “I will assume full responsibility at my court martial.”

Zorbek braced himself against the fierce gale force gusts. “Supreme Headquarters’s launch team is retreating. Adverse weather conditions. Let us do the same, Lieutenant.”

12.

NASA Headquarters:

Turner replaced the phone. “D.O.D. will follow the video and coordinate. A nuclear device for preemptive strike will be loaded on the Lynch gravity drive probe. It’s our call.”

“Check this out, General,” Joyner said as he viewed the screen. “Two Martians have exited that dome structure into the storm.”

“Good God. Military uniforms. Rank insignia on their overcoat collars. Faces hidden by cold weather gear and those breathing masks.”

“Hold on, what’s this?”

“The tall one is waving to Odyssey. To us.”

“Look,” Turner said. “The short one’s cap just blew off and that mask lifted. We can see his face.”

Joyner stared. “He looks like us, General.”

Turner nodded. “An alien humanoid society, developed underground in an arctic milieu. There must be warm areas, water and breathable air deep down. Our anthropologists will insist on a manned landing.”

“One is pointing vigorously to the west. Now they are returning to the structure.”

“Their mouths are moving, Adam. They have to lift the masks to communicate.”

“No sound. We’ll need a linguist who can read lips as well.”

13.

A Ph.D linguist from NASA’s ancillary staff shook her head. “Too disjointed. The air masks didn’t allow any continuity. Computer was useless. I’m sorry.”

“Lotta help that was,” General Turner grumbled. “We’re back to where we started. What now?”

“I’m no expert, but their movements and facial expressions suggest high anxiety levels,” Joyner said.

Turner nodded. “That figures.”

“One keeps pointing West,” Turner said. “Toward the other force.”

Joyner replayed the disk in ultra slow motion. “The shorter one has taken a drink from a small vial. Liquor, I’d guess, considering their increased stress factors. And there’s a dark cylindrical object held in his mouth.”

General Turner nodded. “Cigar and booze. Much like us.”

“Let’s show them who we are,” Joyner said. “We will need Professor Lynch’s experimental drone’s nuclear strike package offloaded.”

14.

Northern Rim Outpost 15:

Marshal Zorbek puffed on his cigar, threw a frozen mud ball at the screeching air usage alarm. He closed the peephole. “Supreme Military has retreated to headquarters with their return nuclear package.”

“That’s good, Marshal.”

A red flashing alert beeped from the radar set.

Vorniid's eyes widened in surprise. "Incoming bogey, Marshal. It wasn't there an instant ago. It will touch down here."

"It's the off worlders preemptive attack," Zorbek said. "This is much too sophisticated for Western Alliance technology."

He grabbed the hand-cranked field telephone. "I'm alerting Commissar Grivodt. We'd better head for our escape tunnel."

Lieutenant Vorniid laid a hand on his arm. "Wait, sir. Our radiation meter shows only background levels."

They stared as the probe slowed and descended. It vaporized the carbon dioxide surface snow in seconds. A panel on top of the tapered cylindrical module retracted.

Lieutenant Vorniid grabbed his storm proof tunic and air mask. "I'll check it out, Marshal."

Zorbek refilled his flask, took a healthy swig and followed at a safe distance. "You are crazy Lieutenant."

"You forget, Marshal. I led an Explosive Ordnance Disposal team in the last Tunnel War."

Vorniid raised a clear plastic wrapped package over his head in one hand. "No booby traps."

15.

Lieutenant Vorniid took two deep breaths of allotted air, then spread the photographic prints on Marshal Zorbek's desk. The first showed a rendering of the solar system with a red arrow indicating the third planet.

Zorbek removed his gloves, touched the image with a fingertip with reverence. "You were right, Lieutenant."

Vorniid said, "These photos, Marshal. The off worlders look like us."

"No facial hair," the Marshal remarked.

Zorbek stroked the smooth glossy surfaces. "Amazing. One wears a military uniform. The other is a civilian. They are standing next to a very large complex surface platform. It looks like . . ."

“A rocket launcher,” Vorniid said. “And look. Those inscriptions on their missile.”

MARS POLAR LANDER
NASA USA

Zorbek unscrewed his flask, took a large swallow.

Vorniid grabbed the flask, took another. “There’s more, sir.”

He stripped away the plastic wrap from two additional items. “There are color graphics on this one.”

Montecristo A
Fine Cuban Cigars

A slow grin crept across Marshal Zorbek’s face as he pried the box lid loose with a thumbnail. He lit up and took a deep drag. “Much smoother than our underground crap. Perhaps I’ll save one for Commissar Grivodt when he arrives to penalize me for excessive usage of air.”

“There are more hieroglyphics on this other item.”

Zorbek was already unscrewing the cap of the Stolichnaya bottle. He tilted it and took a swallow, gave a satisfied smile.

“I believe I will like these off worlders, Lieutenant.”

The End