



Title: THE ORBIT

Dialogue: “It’s the eyes... there’s something about their eyes.”

word count: 1079

## THE ORBIT

Phobos and Deimos aren’t all nice and round like Earth’s moon. They’re lumpy and dented and look like wads of gum that were hawked by some kind of giant cosmic teenager. They orbit Mars at different rates; Phobos close and whizzing past several times a day, Deimos far away and loping across the sky for sixty-six hours before disappearing under the horizon. It isn’t often, but sometimes I can see both of them at once out my skylight. I calculated when it’ll happen for the next fifty years so I always know when to look. Yeah, I’m cool like that.

Named for the sons of Mars (or the Greek version Ares, anyway. The fact that Mars is the Roman God of War and its moons are named for his Greek counterpart doesn’t totally drive me nuts. I mean, why would it?) they’re known for pulling their dad’s chariot into battle. They represent terror, fear and the flight of the defeated. Their names literally mean freak out and run away.

Oh God, they are me, and she is Mars. I'm orbiting her in a state of panic. My thoughts always return to Maneet. Okay, it's time to get up. I take one last look at them through my one window to the outside, then swing my legs down to the grey carpet.

It's still early so I head to the gym. The funny thing about living on Mars is that if you're not careful, it'll turn your bones into cotton candy due to the reduced gravity. The remedy is just some good old-fashioned getting swole. We're all required to lift weight and do exercises to counteract the loss of bone density. Your body truly behaves by the mantra: if you don't use it, you lose it. Lifting heavy stuff keeps your bones dense. I think the thing that surprises me the most about being here is how much I like it. I was never into being "fit" or "strong" or "going outside" but here, for whatever reason, using my body just makes me feel good. I look forward to it. Plus at the end of my workouts, I send messages to my brother on Earth that say things like, "I just lifted 200 kilos over my head. In your face. Love, A.J." He knows I can only lift so much because of the lesser gravity, but it's a way to connect with him when I know we'll never see each other again. That's another thing about living on Mars. But I don't want to think about that now. I do a few sets, grab a meal shake, and head to the laboratory wing.

I walk into our lab and she is there. Specifically, she's at my workstation.

"These... they're amazing," she says. Maneet is looking at what I did last night, after everyone left.

"They're okay. I mean, they're better than just looking at the metal frames."

"No, they're beautiful," she says. She looks right at me. "You're an artist." I feel my face get hot so I start fidgeting around with the things I left out on my bench.

“I’m not an artist, I’m an engineer,” I say. “Why make something that’s just good enough when you can fuss around with minute details until you’ve driven yourself insane.” We laugh and she goes back to her bench which is eleven feet diagonally to the south east of mine and where I can see a piece of her hair that curls around her ear and how her knee bounces up and down when she’s excited about what she’s working on.

Last night, I had my own mantra. It was, “don’t make them look like Maneet. Don’t make them look like Maneet.” We’re working on an AI project together. Turns out it’s damn expensive and impractical to have humans on Mars, I know I’m just as shocked as anyone. They’re not looking at replacing people, just “supplementing,” as they say. Maneet is brilliant and has written a program that is beautiful. It sings with life. I make its house. My robotics are pretty good, but hearing her words come out of a mass of wires and micro-spring tendons was just not working for me. So afterhours I commandeered a 3D printer and started designing a face. I printed one, figured it was pretty good, made some tweaks and printed another. I fit them on two of the heads on my bench, then went to sleep. But not before setting my Phobos and Deimos alarm, of course.

Looking at them now, I think I met my goal of making them nice, without screaming, “I’m in love with you Maneet!” Almost.

“It’s the eyes... there’s something about their eyes.” I look up to make sure she didn’t hear me.

There are 328 people on Mars. Most of them are here at the science station, a few are at out-posts. It’s natural for people to pair up, and they do. But we all know that we are here forever, there’s no going back. Even the rock band is called One Way Ticket (Why yes, we do have a band. We also have poetry nights. They are terrible. Scientists

bad at poetry? I know, you wouldn't think.). When you step onto a ship that will take you away from your home forever, it imprints a sort of finality on you. So if you tell her. If you tell her that you spend each moment she's not there waiting for her to return, and you spend every moment she's there hoping she never leaves. If you tell her and she doesn't feel that way back, well, it's going to be a long life on a very cold red rock.

I tried to make the faces not look like her, but I slipped up on the eyes. How could I not? Hers are perfect and I'm not an artist, but I am a perfectionist.

"Did you see them this morning?" I jump. I was so lost in the new bot eyes I made that I didn't notice their inspiration was right beside me.

"What?" Stupid.

"Phobos and Deimos. They were right beside each other this morning before sunrise. I know you like to see them."

"Yeah, yes. I saw them from my bed, looking through my skylight."

"That's nice. Maybe you could show me some time," she says. I feel dizzy and take a breath. I will not freak out. I will not run away.