



**Astrogator**  
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# Chapter 1

**F**rom “The Journal of Martian Archeology”, Issue 7, Volume 172: “Letter in Which Preliminary Results of Site # 391 Are Tentatively Analyzed for References to Earth Space Travel” as reported by the Primary Investigator Francine Johnson:

I am pleased to announce we’ve had a breakthrough in the translation of the main artifact to be found at Site #391, thanks in part to a generous grant by FusionCo.’s loan of several hours on their 3.5-terabit quantum computer. This artifact appears to be a journal of a major investigator within the Martian community of scholars.

As the biological remains have suggested, these sentient Martians were indeed similar to large Terran reptiles in both their anatomy and physiology. Although the biochemicals naturally vary in their structure from those found in any known Terran reptile, their functions are very similar. In all planets with macroscopic life we are aware of, the reptile-like species came to be long before any warm-blooded life forms arose. In this case, the reptiles became space faring while the mammals remained at what would be roughly the rat stage of evolution on Earth. As has been researched elsewhere (see Franklin’s classic “My Tongue, My Larynx, My Brain, My Body”), anatomy determines speech not only in the sounds that can be made, but the biases built into the language. For example, a human who is particularly unsavory may be referred to as a “cold-blooded snake”. This bias is present in the Martian’s language as well. Mammals in general, and primates in particular, are considered evolutionary upstarts, fads, silly things good only for the variety they bring to one’s diet. So while we would consider humans to be the pinnacle of evolution, the Martians considered “primate” (and thus “human”) to be a derogatory term. It is therefore necessary to keep this view in mind when reading from the discarded journal. Due to the complexities of Martian names, no literal translation is possible, thus the Martians will be named in alphabetical order as they appear in the text. We will refer to the author as Professor A. All Martian units have been converted to standard Earth units. Only those entries related to the topic

at hand are shown here. The full journal will be made available to the public next month.

**Entry 1038:** My hatchmate B reprimanded me in Space Council for again putting forth the hypothesis that a primate could make the journey outside of Earth's atmosphere without the guidance of people [Translator's note: "people" = "large reptiles"]. His suggestion is that the primates we've seen in space these past few decades are simply test animals that are being used before risking the lives of people. I must admit he has good evidence for his hypothesis as both canines and small primates were used before the larger hairless primates [humans]. Although B will admit that some similarities in the biology of humans and people (similar life span, roughly the same size, and the five digits on each hand) make humans excellent test subjects, he is unwilling to extend the similarities as far as I do.

I say that if the anatomy of the creature is at all like ours, it should be able to achieve the things as we have achieved. Nevertheless, B is quick to point out some of the reasons why humans could not travel through space as well as people. "They must always eat and defecate, eat and defecate, even when they are just sitting there! They can't go for months without eating as we can or sustain a wide range of body temperatures. The coldness of space and the limited cargo mass wouldn't allow them to travel far at all!"

I pointed out the larger brain capacity could make up for some of those other problems. B just snorted. "The creature with the biggest brain on Earth is the blue whale. And don't give me that brain mass to body mass ratio again! Dolphins have the same ratio as humans and neither dolphins nor whales have even gotten to land, much less space."

The Space Council agrees with B for now. I still think my hypothesis should be considered and not rejected out of hand without gathering additional evidence.

**Entry 1732:** We have just heard some exciting news! High Technician C tentatively reported people life signs above the atmosphere on Earth. We transmitted our welcoming signal that resonates in all people we have tested. It should stimulate the pleasure center of any people's brain from five to five thousand cubic centimeters until they respond. But we have yet to receive a reply.

**Entry 1733:** High Technician C has reported yet still more results. It seems the person in the spacecraft above Earth was transmitting a wide range of life signs and position information via electromagnetic radiation. The humans aboard the same craft did not seem to have this

complex monitoring equipment or at least not with sufficient signal strength to get the information back to Earth.

I cannot avoid the obvious implications of this data. Certainly if the humans were important at all, they would have had sensors monitoring them as well. B must have been right all along but his glee at my expense is most annoying.

**Entry 1734:** B has been made head of the Space Council for his “great insight” into the Earth space program. One should, of course, be happy for one’s hatchmate as it brings honor to our mother. I’m sure in time I will come to see it that way. Luckily, we have the communication between Earth and Mars to work on, so I still have plenty of important work to do.

**Entry 2047:** B has grown quite despondent. There has yet to be another space flight on Earth with a person, just humans. It is hard to understand why so much additional testing is happening when the first person’s trip seemed to go so well. Our signals cannot penetrate the Earth’s thick atmosphere so we have nothing to do until another person goes into space.

D spoke up in Council to mention the problems of receiving signals as we move further towards the core to keep warm and to have liquid water. B snapped at D that moving was a Home Council issue, not a Space Council one. I pointed out the signal issue WAS a Space Council one. Both D and I were dismissed for our troubles.

**Entry 2291:** My hatchmate B has passed away. He was only forty years old. We generally agree that it was the strain of the work related to the person’s signal on Earth which lead him to an early death. As was his wish, we ate him at Space Council and now he is a part of all of us.

I don’t understand why our cousins on Earth haven’t tried again. We know we are not alone in the universe, but to have no reply to our inquiries is more frustrating than knowing nothing at all. Each year our planet is growing colder.

## Chapter 2

**O**ur family is one of the oldest around. In fact, we haven't changed much since all the continents were one. In the Triassic period, when our family came to be, there were lots of other reptiles besides us and anything we could catch was good eating. Of course, the fish and insects were around long before our family. But while we didn't have to get out of the water for the fish, they were too fast to be considered easy pickings. Insects were so small that they only made good food for our hatchlings. The biggest change in the menu was when the little rat-like mammals came along. No hard outer shell, no venom! A couple dozen million years later, birds started showing up. More trouble than they're worth, if you ask me. Not much meat on most of them, but it is possible to make it up in volume.

Every now and then there would be worldwide famines. For some reason or another, many of the animals would simply disappear. Maybe it was a volcano or gamma rays. Maybe they couldn't adapt to the new environment that their continent moved into. Why my relatives in India moved from nearly the South Pole to the Northern Hemisphere! We are hardy stock and the Muggers are no different. Don't hear from them much anymore. But if news gets around the planet every ten thousand years or so, that's nearly twenty-five thousand updates over our time on Earth, so it's good enough for us.

Imagine that! These young whippersnappers thinking they can do better than a family that has been in the hunting business for three hundred million years! They can't even pick a method and stick with it for more than a hundred years or so!

They've been up to even stranger things in my homeland just within the last couple of generations. My mother saw a bright light accompanied by a noise so loud that it rumbled the earth launch a gigantic shiny rock into the sky so hard that it never came down! She told us this was an important thing to remember and to pass on the news to any family member we met.

Ahh, my mother was such a strong one! She guarded our nest and nursery pools so well that not even one of my hatchmates was eaten or lost. Every evening she would tell us stories. Sometimes it was advice on hunting or avoiding the hairless monkeys, but mostly it was family history and the news she had heard. You'd be surprised how long it takes to tell a young alligator all that it needs to know. We didn't need her for food; we could eat, swim and hunt right out of the egg. No, we stayed with our mother for protection, and for the stories. Mostly for the stories.

But soon the day came when we headed out on our own. The silvery rocks that shot into the sky fascinated me and I ended up staking my territory close to the place where they flew up. Mother warned me about staying so close to those primates, but I didn't listen.

Late last August, it seemed my mother's fears were realized. The monkeys captured me and stuck small hard objects to my head. They let me go, but it was harder to catch prey now I no longer looked like a log floating in the water. I started to lose weight and get weaker. But oddly enough the monkeys found me again, pulled me out of the water, hauled me far ashore, and placed me in a small closed up cave nearly filled with water. I put up a good fight, but it was no use.

I was kept in the small cave for days when suddenly I was forced up at a great rate. It was a terrifying experience. But after a few minutes I started to feel something pleasant. It got stronger and stronger as I went up and up. It was like falling asleep someplace safe when very tired, eating when starving, mating when in rut—all rolled into one. It was all happening in my brain; there was no external sensation. That went on for a day or two and then I started to hear my family calling to me. They told me they were far away, deep underground, and wanted to share news with us. I didn't know how to answer.

A week later I started falling down for a long time. After another day or so, I was let out of the small closed cave. The outside of it smelled like the shiny rocks that go away into the sky and returned.

I don't know how to get back into the shiny rock, but I'll tell my hatchlings and they will spread the news. One day our family will go up into the sky again. It may be a year, ten thousand years or several million. But one day we'll be there. It's just a matter of time.

# Chapter 3

The Cape is a weird place. Here you have these huge sophisticated space vessels launching up out of the middle of what is really a Florida swamp. Don't get me wrong; Florida is an important state politically speaking. It makes sense they would get a good-sized chunk of the space dollars, just like Texas and California. Plus, it tends to have good weather and if something goes wrong, it's less likely to get noticed if tons of debris fall into the ocean as opposed to a taxpayer's living room.

But when you think science, it nearly always comes from places with bad weather and long winters. From Isaac Newton avoiding the plague in the drippy regions of England to Einstein's burst of work in Switzerland, the cutting edge of physics has always seemed to require being stuck inside for long periods of time. The major colleges and universities often fit that mould too. MIT and Princeton get a fair amount of snow in the winter and are in places where you wouldn't want to spend too much time exploring off campus even if they didn't.

The Cape brings the northern nerds into the primordial ooze and Spring Break capital of the world. To say the NASA scientists don't fit in would be an understatement. It isn't much better within the place. For all its official designations to the contrary, it is a military establishment. True, the type of brass that are interested in NASA tend to be a little more research friendly than the sort who'd rather be blowing up various parts of the Third World, but they are still rather "by-the-book".

So what do the talented men and women of NASA in their time off? Well, they form their own ghettos.

There was a nearby bar-and-grill, Al's, which was one such ghetto. It started out with a few of the physicists, engineers and technicians going to lunch every other day or so. This made the indigenous population less comfortable so the cracker quota went down, which made it even more comfortable for the nerds, and so the feedback loop went. Within two months, the place was full every night. There were regular chess matches, Monty Python karaoke night on Tuesday's, open mike night with science jokes, the works. Sure, some of the locals tried to reclaim

their turf, but a couple times of sitting through a heartfelt version of “Every Sperm is Sacred” quickly put a stop to that. One day, I even ended up there myself.

The menu showed Al had adapted nicely to his new clientele. I ordered the Los Alamos Chipotle Plate with a Berry Blastoff (blackberry syrup with Coke™) and tried to relax. But I soon tired of the various versions of “The Lumberjack Song” that were blasting next to me. I moved away from the stage to the back and joined a big table that was empty except for four people. As I had sat down without asking, I thought I should probably introduce myself.

“Hi, I’m Greg. I work in shipping and receiving at NASA.”

The lone woman of the group, a short redhead, replied “I’m Mary from astrobiology. This is Frank”—pointing to the slightly overweight Asian guy to her left —“and Alan”— the vaguely German scrawny kid to her right. “We were just discussing the use of animals in space travel.”

“You mean like when they used to send up dogs and monkeys and stuff?” I asked.

“Yeah. But we were also talking about how there haven’t been any animals sent up into space for quite some time.” Mary seemed to be headed somewhere with this.

Frank started in at this point. “But at ten thousand bucks a pound, is it any wonder the American taxpayer doesn’t want to pay for a ride for Fifi or Bonzo? We can send up plenty of hardware to get the same information.”

Mary quickly retorted, “But that’s just it! Are we actually getting the same info from silicon detectors as we do from living creatures?”

Alan, somewhat disinterestedly, chimed in at this point with “Ahh, but don’t living creatures have feelings? You think PETA is going to let you launch a puppy at five gees and a hundred and sixty decibels? Ain’t gonna happen.”

“He’s got a point there,” I said through some black beans and rice. “Can’t send up anything cute.”

“What should we send up then?” Mary asked accusingly.

“There seem to be tons of alligators around this swamp. No one would miss a few of those,” I joked.

Mary’s eyes lit up.

“Don’t even consider it,” started Frank. “What good would info from a gator be, anyway? Besides we don’t have a suit for it.”

“But think about it! They can live for months between meals. They can dive deep underwater, which means they can easily handle the pressure from the high gee forces. Something doesn’t hang around for two hundred and fifty million years without having a robust design!”

“Calm down Mary. You won’t think it’s such a great idea after you’re sober,” Alan assured her.

I finished my Berry Blastoff and got up, “Well, it’s an interesting idea. See you guys around.”

As I picked my way through the parking lot of sensible imports, with an equal mix of Star Trek and tech university parking stickers, I dismissed Mary’s plan. The amount of red tape it would take would be insane. Besides, what would be the upside?

I thought about it on the way to work, but was soon distracted. You see, I didn’t exactly lie when I said I was shipping and receiving; I was just a little unspecific. I’m in charge of the payloads, so “shipping and receiving off the planet” would be more accurate. The competition among groups to get their experiment into space is intense, especially since NASA overestimates (usually around budget time) how many payloads it can do in a given year. So, when something goes wrong with the payload a week before launch, things get complicated.

A team from the University of Wyoming to study the crystallization of human DNA in zero gee had run into a problem. The team leader, who had prepped her own DNA for the mission, had died in a car wreck. Her widower, who didn’t share her views on science, refused to let them launch her DNA. Something about all of her needing to be there in case of the second coming of Christ or some such thing. Anyway, having already gotten the attention of the religious right by mentioning evolution in a pre-flight speech last year, our director knew better than to get the attention of the “700 Club” in an election year.

However, a week is too short of a time to contact one of the other groups on the waiting list to get their project set up. On the other hand, if the shuttle goes up with less than a full payload, our efficiency rates plummet and all those waiting in line get pretty annoyed. Either way, my job was on the line. You see, there are lots of people who want to work for NASA and it’s easier to fire someone than defend them to the public. I had mortgage payments, so I did what I had to.

“Hi Mary, this is Greg, from Al’s last night?”

“Yeah?”

“Meet for lunch at Al’s around one. Bring Alan and Frank if you can.”

“We have a meeting at one-thirty.”

"It's about RAP."

"Wrap?"

"R-A-P. Reptile Astronaut Program. You know as well as I do that everything has to have a TLA around here."

When I explained the situation, Alan was the first to get over being stunned. "Why don't you just send up a box of bricks or something?"

"There's a good chance the package will be inspected. If it gets out we sent up a ton of bricks at ten grand a pound, we'd really be up a creek."

Frank was next. "So we're just supposed to put this thing together in a week?" he asked incredulously.

"Actually, more like four days. The payload is packed before the shuttle is slowly run out to the launch pad, etc. etc., so to launch at day-break next Wednesday, we need to be done by Sunday evening."

Mary went straight to the point: "What's our crate's size and allowed mass?"

I grinned. "One meter by one meter by three meters. Around two metric tons."

"Plenty of room and weight for water then. I have a friend from grad school at the University of Miami who puts sensors on alligators all the time. Apparently reptiles do OK with holes drilled in their heads and hooked up to sensors. At least compared to humans. We can monitor anything you can think of that gives an electrical signal." Mary was practically bursting.

Frank and Alan just rolled their eyes.

"But what will the sensor readings TELL US??" I could see Alan was forgetting this was a dummy load to solve my problems, not an actual approved experiment.

"It will say: bored, bored, bored, launch, bored, bored, bored, re-entry, bored, bored, box opened up, released, bored. It's an alligator." Frank was waiting for us to rise to the bait about reptile versus mammal brain function, but Mary took it the other way.

"Come on! They've hooked up lie detectors to plants and gotten readings when a nearby person is angry or mean. Any animal will do better."

"It's a go then," I said. "Meet me in Hanger Twelve Sunday night at six."

After lunch, I reported to my director I had taken care of the payload problem. When he asked how, I told him "don't ask." He was smart enough not to.

I've got to hand it to those astrobiology guys. They had the crate well packed with "Biohazard", "Radioactive" and "RAP Security Clearance ONLY!" (which of course no one had) stickers and stencils all over it. Even I didn't want to come too close.

"How radioactive is it?"

"About the same as background radiation," said Alan.

"Cute", I replied. "And the 'Biohazard'?"

"More people get eaten by large reptiles than any other creature. True, it's usually crocs on the Ganges, but you can't be too careful."

I was glad to see Alan had gotten into the spirit of the mission, but he could have at least warned me. By the time we got all the sensor receivers set up, the hanger had cleared out.

A fuel cell heater with thermostat and lots of areogel insulation covering the inside of the crate would insure a safe, if not comfortable, temperature for our traveler.

As Mary went through the final system check of the sensors, she proclaimed, "I dub thee Al the Alligator Astronaut."

"After Einstein?" asked Alan.

"After the restaurant." she replied.

The mission went off without a hitch. Or so we thought. We should've remembered to clean up Mary's friend's data before it got sent out to the journal, but we didn't. Among the sensors Mary's friend had for Al was a GPS tracking device. It was handy for us when correlating travel time and gravity with the data from the sensors, but when an alligator was found to be 200 miles up in the air it caused a bit of a ruckus. As there was no NASA paperwork, there was nothing for us to cover up, but those crazies looking for alien abduction stories have now added alligators to humans and cows.

Al now lives in a ditch near the launch site. I may imagine it, but to me it looks like she is bit wistful whenever she watches a launch. Did I mention we figured out he was a she? She set up a nest and laid eggs. That was our big clue. Her name these days is officially Alice, but I still call her Al. We bring her by a chicken or two every week so she doesn't have to leave the nest. I don't know what we're going to do with eighty or so hatchlings around the launch site. Mary says we'll just have to make them part of the mission to Mars or something. We'll solve that problem when we come to it.



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