

MR. SMITH GOES TO MARS

1.

“Now, this is one of our most popular suits. There’s nothing wrong with it, nothing at all.”

The spacesuit salesman stood in front of a mannequin wearing a plain-looking suit, light gray with red accents. The vents and tubing were all of a type that had been in service for almost 20 years. The helmet was an unassuming dome of glass and graphite.

“You could do worse than the Galaxy 800, a lot worse,” the salesman continued, “and meanwhile it will save you a bundle compared to some of the higher-end suits we’ve been getting in lately. Those have some pretty interesting features, and of course they’re beautifully designed, but at heart they’re not that much different from this guy.”

Next to the salesman, his arms folded, Smith listened attentively. Just arrived on Mars, he knew he needed a spacesuit (or surface suits, if you wanted to get technical about it). It was the first thing you did when you got to Mars—everyone said so. There was no telling when the great dome that covered Utopia City, the capital of Mars, might split down the middle, causing every citizen outside to hightail it into the nearest shelter. And if you happened to be out at the edges of the city when disaster struck, a mile from the nearest shelter—well, that’s when you’d really want to have a suit handy.

But spacesuits weren't Smith's main reason for being in the spacesuit store. He was looking for clients.

Smith was an advertising executive, come to start up the first Mars office of his agency, the famous Peppercorn, Boggle and Joss, affectionately known by its acronym, PB&J. It would be the first ad agency on Mars. It was a very big deal.

"Can I have a look at one of the higher-end models?" Smith asked, pleasantly.

The salesman shrugged, but just a fraction too quickly. Smith smiled inwardly. This guy was good, he thought, really good. The higher-end suits had, of course, been the destination all along.

"This is one of the best suits we have," the salesman said, standing in front of a life-size diorama of a man and a woman picnicking on the Martian surface. The man was wearing a mauve suit with green accents that snugly fit his body. The helmet had a rakish swoop at the back that reminded Smith of the plumes ancient Roman soldiers wore to distinguish their ranks. The suit's hoses and vents, and its power system, were all cleverly concealed within the fabric. Across from the man, the woman was wearing the same suit in coral pink with white accents. She looked amazing in it.

"It's called the Daytripper," the salesman said, with a smile. "It's got all the latest advancements. Diamond heating coils, full-body airflow, complete mobility in the joints, 48-hour battery life no matter the conditions. It's integrated with the Mars nexus, so it gets up-to-the-minute reports on all weather systems and will activate an automatic emergency beacon if you run into any trouble. And of course it's fully

upgradeable. You're going to pay more for this suit, but you won't need another one for a very long time."

"Wow, that's a good-looking suit." Smith leaned in close to examine the female mannequin. She was holding up a box of gazpacho, frozen in the act of connecting it to her suit's external feed tube. The man was holding a slightly longer box of pinot noir. Both mannequins were smiling, as if one of them had just said something funny.

Smith straightened up and looked around. "This is a really nice place you have, Mr ... uh, Mr ...?"

"Mr. Finleigh," the salesman said. "But, please, call me Steve."

"Steve. Okay, cool." Smith nodded appreciatively. "Looks like you're doing amazing business here, Steve."

"Thanks, we do okay." Steve scratched his head. "After all, we're the only game in town. Anyone on Mars needs a new suit they come here. Course there's the used market—people willing to barter something they've stashed away in a closet. Others have suits sent from Earth, if they can afford the delivery cost."

"And your location, right here in the spaceport," Smith said. "That couldn't be any better."

"It does have its benefits." Steve smiled and shrugged. "Did you want to see another suit ... uh, I don't believe I caught your name, sir."

"Smith."

"Did you want to see another suit, Mr. Smith?"

“Just Smith.”

“Excuse me?”

“No mister. Just Smith. That’s what I go by.”

“Okay then ... Smith. Did you want to look around some more or have you come to a decision?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d actually like to ask you a question.” Smith pushed his smile up a notch.

“Ask me anything you like,” Steve said, raising one eyebrow.

“Have you thought about the future? Where this place is going to be five years from now?”

“The future? I’m sorry, I don’t follow, Smith.”

“So ... things weren’t always so great on Mars, were they?” Smith paused and nodded meaningfully. “In the beginning, all people cared about was surviving. But today it’s a totally different story. Mars is booming. People from Earth are pouring in by the rocket-load, and the big corporations are pouring in right behind them. And, I can tell you, Steve, I know for a fact that this trend is only going to get bigger. At this very moment, every little thing on Mars is being scrutinized by a dozen analysts back on Earth, and their data are being looked over by a whole lot of CEOs, COOs and CFOs, all trying to figure out how they can get a slice of the Martian pie. And sooner or later, do you know what’s going to happen?”

“Ah, guess I don’t.” With his mouth twisted up on one side, Steve looked mostly confused by Smith’s oratory. “What’s going to happen?”

“They’re coming here.” Pointing down at the floor, Smith paused for effect. Then he added, “I’m sure you’ve heard of Strong’s Outdoor Emporium.”

“Of course.” Steve nodded. “They’re the biggest retailer of camping equipment on Earth. They’re huge.”

“Did you know they were selling spacesuits now?”

“I hadn’t heard that. But it makes sense.”

“And,” Smith said, with a light frown, “did you also know that next month they’re going to roll out their own brand of spacesuit?”

“That does seem like a smart business move,” Steve allowed. “I’ll have to look into that.”

“Steve, how long do you think it’s going to take the clever marketing people at Strong’s to figure out that the best way to sell their suits to the growing population of Mars is to open their own retail outlet right here in Utopia City?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ll guess we’ll just have to see what happens.”

“Well, you could take it lying down, or you could do something about it.” Smith peered into the salesman’s eyes. That was the trick with these guys. Small businessman, independent operators, senior retail managers. You had to talk their talk. You had to get them fired up.

Steve stared back a moment, then slowly wagged his head side to side. “I don’t suppose I’ll be able to do much about it. Those people have a lot of money behind them. But you can’t look too far ahead on Mars. If nothing else, this planet has taught us that much.”

“I can help you,” Smith said. “If you’ll let me.”

“Help me? How?”

“Advertising.”

“Advertising?” For a moment, Steve looked pained. “I already got a boy going round with flyers, and we’re in all the weekly circulars. Everyone knows our name out here.”

“And what is your name, if you don’t mind my asking?” Smith inquired. “The sign above your door says Spacesuits and Equipment.”

“That would be it. Straight to the point. No fancy stuff.”

“How about this: Finleigh and Sons.”

“Uh, well, I’m a bachelor. Never had any kids.”

“We can work around that.” Smith waved Steve’s concern away. “What’s important is the name, the brand identity. You just need to ask yourself one question: who are you? What is it that makes you you? Once you have that, the rest is easy. Create a name, create an image, a few simple words. That’s what’ll get inside people’s heads. Finleigh and Sons.” Smith drew a hand through the air, as if the imaginary name were

passing above them on a floating billboard. “I’m not talking about local advertising. I’m talking about a global presence. I’m talking about Earth.”

“Earth? That sounds expensive.”

“Let’s not worry about the details right now.” Smith nodded reassuringly. “First step is to talk a little strategy. Strong’s a major player, but you’re homegrown. You’ve been here from the beginning. You control the spacesuit market on this planet. With a little creative advertising, a little tweak to the name, you’ll be the big guy. Finleigh and Sons, sellers of quality spacesuits and equipment. We know Mars.”

Steve grinned, a little color coming into his cheeks. “It’s all well and good,” he said. “But like I said, this sounds expensive, and we’re a small operation.”

“Steve, can I at least send you my contact information? I’d love for you to come into the agency and have a meeting. We’ll board up a few rough ideas, give you a feel for what a real campaign might look like. Would that be okay?”

Steve’s mouth opened and closed several times before he said, “I suppose that couldn’t hurt. Sure, you can send over your info.”

“That’s great. That’s terrific, Steve.” Smith patted him on the shoulder. The two men shook hands. “I’ll have my assistant get in touch with you.”

“Okay, that’s fine.” Steve smiled, and then frowned. “Now, is that all you really wanted, uh, Smith, just to talk, or did you want to think more about a suit?”

“Oh, I’m all set,” Smith said. “I’ll take a Daytripper, that nice-looking red one in the back there. I assume you can send it to my hotel?”

“Of course, once when we get you measured out. I can have it there tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks, Steve. It was great meeting you.”

“Likewise, Smith.” Steve smiled shyly. “Welcome to Mars.”

The measuring of Smith took only a few minutes to complete. Then he was out the door and walking through the long esplanade that connected the main passenger terminal to the transportation hub outside the spaceport. His luggage had already been sent along to the hotel, so all he had to worry about was the carry-on dangling from one shoulder. He walked freely and easily, feeling good about himself. Sir Robert—the famous Sir Robert Peppercorn, senior partner at PB&J and Smith’s boss—would be proud of him almost picking up a client right out of the gate. It was exactly that kind of initiative that Sir Robert advocated in his book, the classic *Manifest Advertising*. A copy of it could be found on the personal screen of every copywriter and account exec in the industry. Smith looked forward to telling Sir Robert all about Finleigh and Sons, purveyors of fine spacesuits and equipment. We suit Mars. Hey, that was actually pretty good.

The esplanade was crowded with other stores but Smith didn’t bother to stop in any of them. They were mostly food vendors and tourist shops that looked like they’d opened a month ago and would close up in weeks. Much of the spaceport had a

ramshackle feel to it, a place built quickly to service mining crews and other no-frills operations hurrying out to distant sites on the surface. To Smith's eyes everything looked old and outmoded. Compared to what people were sporting in New York, the personal tech on Mars was more like stuff Smith's parents used to wear.

He got caught in a crush of people near the end of the esplanade, a tourist group from Earth waiting for a late bus. A street performer was playing a xylophone somewhere up ahead, attracting others on their way to the taxi stand or monorail station. Smith had no choice but to wait.

Then someone jostled him from behind, and a hard blunt object poked into his ribs. A harsh voice in his ear said, "Keep moving, asshole."

"Excuse me?" Smith started to turn toward the owner of the voice but was shoved round again. Glancing down, he happened to glimpse the muzzle of a large-bore handgun pressing into his left kidney.

"Just walk, douchebag."

A large hand tightened vise-like around his bicep, and he was pushed forward, around to the side of the crowd in the direction of the passenger pick-up area.

"What's going on?" Smith said, in a panic. "You've got the wrong guy."

"Shut up. Walk faster."

A second person fell in step with them and breathed hotly into Smith's left ear.

"What's this about? I'm just an ad man," Smith said quickly, trying to appeal to his captors' humanity. It didn't work. They ignored him.

They must've made a strange sight, the tightly bound trio speeding through the spaceport, but no one seemed to notice them, least of all the two security men in orange vests who lounged in front of a bank of vending machines. They seemed far more interested in the xylophone player.

Smith tried to think. He was being abducted, which was bad. On the other hand, he didn't want to get shot—that would be worse. Maybe these people just wanted money and were taking him somewhere they could make an easy transaction. Just give them what they want, he thought. Don't fight back. He'd heard that advice somewhere. It seemed sound.

Before he could do anything they were outside, hurrying toward a long black car with off-road tires. A third person was sitting in the backseat.

Smith was shoved through the rear door, followed closely by one of his new friends. The other one got into the driver's seat.

With a low whoosh the engine fired, and the car leaped forward. In seconds it was clear of the snarl of traffic backed up on the in-ramp and was speeding along the main highway. Smith couldn't tell if they were heading toward downtown or away from it.

“Who are you?” Another voice spoke to him now, softer than the first one. Smith whirled around to see a woman seated opposite. She had long black hair tied up in a bun and blue-gray eyes that were disturbingly bright. She was beautiful, really beautiful.

“Ah, hello,” Smith said.

“Answer the question, please,” she said, sharply.

“Er, Smith,” he stammered. He didn’t know which he was more flustered by, being kidnapped by thugs or finding himself face to face with this woman. “Name is Smith.”

“What are you doing on Mars, Mr. Smith?” Her voice was like cool water poured over a bed of smooth rocks.

“It’s just Smith.”

“Sorry?”

“No mister. People just call me Smith.”

“That’s not a first a name.” The woman seemed mildly amused.

“If you knew my actual first name, you wouldn’t ask that question.” He shrugged apologetically.

“Why don’t you tell it to me?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Jeez, what an asshole.” This was the man who’d gotten in behind Smith. He was a huge bald man. His gleaming head scraped the ceiling. His neck was like a piece of limestone. “He’s obviously full of shit.”

“I’m not,” Smith said, quickly. “It’s just not something I like to talk about.”

“Your passport,” the woman said, and held out a slender hand.

“I kind of need that.”

“Give her the damn passport.” The man slapped his thigh loudly. He obviously wasn’t the patient type.

With a sigh Smith fished the slim holocard out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her. He slumped a little in his seat as he watched her swipe through it.

“Seriously?” Her eyes flashed up at him.

He shrugged.

The big man couldn't help a peek. “Queen-oh-philly-us?” he said, with considerable difficulty, and then looked up at Smith. “What the hell kind of name is that?”

“Quenophilus. Kwen-o-file-us,” Smith corrected. “I'm not very proud of it. Obviously.”

The woman smiled. The sight of it sent an electric shock through Smith's cerebellum.

“Let's start over.” She held the passport in her lap. “I asked you what you're doing on Mars. Please answer the question.”

“Who are you people?” he asked. “What is up with kidnapping someone out of the spaceport? Who does that?”

“You're not in any position to ask questions,” the woman said, frowning. “We will ask the questions, thank you. Now, what is your business on Mars?”

“I'm an ad man.” As Smith stared at her, her eyes seemed to change color. They were more violet than gray now. They looked art directed. “I'm with PB&J. I'm sure you've heard of us. The P stands for Peppercorn, as in Sir Robert Peppercorn. He's a legend in the industry.”

“PB&J is a sandwich,” the man said, with a notable tone of disgust. “An Earth sandwich.”

“The association isn’t unintentional. We want clients to feel comforted at PB&J. We want them to feel safe and secure, like they’re at home, and their mother is in the next room, making their favorite meal. It’s a powerful association.”

“I told you he was full of shit.” The large man shook his head, as if disappointed with Smith. “It’s a cover. He’s ESS for sure.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Smith countered. “Seriously, do you want money? I can get you money. I have a pretty decent expense account. I have to pay for a new spacesuit out of it, but whatever’s left over you can totally have.”

“We’d like to know who you really are.” The woman’s eyes narrowed down to slits. She was so beautiful Smith felt lightheaded.

“I just told you,” he said, sucking in a deep breath. “I’m not lying. I’m here to set up the first ad agency on Mars.”

“That’s a ridiculous story,” the woman said, her eyebrows arched. “But you could only know how ridiculous if you’d been on Mars for a very long time.”

“It’s one hundred percent true.” Smith held a hand over his heart. “Who do you think I am?”

The woman just stared at him. There was a flicker of something in her eyes. An intensity. Smith could sense an attraction. He was sure it wasn’t just wishful thinking.

“You’re really beautiful,” he said, and then couldn’t believe he’d said it.

Her reaction wasn't at all what he expected. She turned away with a half-smile and a blush. He'd caught her off-guard.

“Shut up, numb nuts.” The man seemed offended. His brow condensed and his small dark eyes glowed with anger. “Tell us who you're working for.”

“I'm sorry,” Smith said to the woman, ignoring the man. “I didn't mean to embarrass you.”

The woman turned back to him. “Tell us what you know about the Mars Business Syndicate,” she said, showing no lingering trace of embarrassment.

“The MBS?” Smith shrugged. “Well, I'm hoping to dig a lot of clients out of it. It's a coalition of all the major industry players on the planet. Heavy industry mostly, mining, metals—copper and iron ore—smelting, of course, chemicals, transportation, food service and outfitting. I have a meeting tomorrow at noon with Burt Palantir, COO of Crockett Chemical. We're hoping to sign him as our first client. Then Sir Robert can officially announce that PB&J is the first ad agency on Mars.”

“He's cooking this up.” The man spoke in a low voice into the woman's ear. “He's ESS, obviously.”

“Okay, seriously, what is that?” Smith cut in.

“My associate believes you're with the Earth Security Service,” she said. “Are you?”

“You've got to be kidding me. You think I'm a secret agent?” He smiled at each of them in turn. Maybe this was all a big joke. Okay, maybe not. “I'm just an ad guy,” he

explained. "I'm here for a year to set up a satellite agency. Then I'm going home. Seriously."

For a minute none of them spoke. Outside the car, there weren't many buildings now, just the occasional warehouse or fuel storage tank interspersed with weird mining equipment and vehicles. It was late afternoon. The sinking sun had turned the terrain blood red.

"Are we still under the dome?" Smith asked anxiously, craning his head to see the sky. "I don't actually have my suit yet."

"He's the telling the truth," the woman said to the man. "Stop the car."

"What?" The big man looked appalled. "No way. Even if he isn't ESS, we still have to kill him."

"Huh?" Smith cried.

"Did you happen to notice," the woman said, coldly, "if there was more than one Smith aboard the flight?"

"You said Smith, guy with dark hair. Youngish. Well, that's him, right there."

"I'm telling the truth." Smith leaned forward to better make his point. "Look, I don't care who you guys are. I just want to get to my hotel, and then get to my meeting in the morning. We can all forget this happened."

"I mentioned a scar," the woman continued, as if Smith weren't there. "On the chin. Did you happen to look for that?"

"Give me a break. They can laser that out."

“Stop the car,” she said. “We’re wasting our time here.”

“Marcus won’t like it. He’ll say we should’ve killed him.”

“I’ll handle Marcus.” The woman spoke with a clear note of authority. Smith had the feeling these men had to listen to her. Which was really fortunate.

“Your funeral.” The big man sat back with a scowl.

“Stop the car, please,” the woman called to the driver.

The next moment they slowed, and the woman reached across Smith, shoved the door open and slipped his passport back into his jacket pocket. For the briefest of moments, Smith could smell her hair. It was wonderful.

“You use Angelique,” he said to her, smiling. “Rose hips and thyme.”

She shot him a startled look. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I used to be on the account. Great line of products. We were able to increase market share by twenty-two percent.”

“You’re free to go now,” she said. “I suggest you take advantage of the opportunity.”

Smith decided she was right. He got out of the car, but then an impulse took him and he leaned back in. “Um, so, will I see you again?” he asked her.

“What?”

“Okay, look, I know this is insane, but I’m just going to go for it. Will you have dinner with me sometime?”

“You must be joking.”

“I’m actually completely serious.”

“Good-bye, Smith.” Her look was impossible to read. Was it mocking or amused? He couldn’t tell. “Just keep walking straight. Someone will find you, eventually.”

“Okay, but I’d really—” He never got the chance to finish his sentence. The door closed in his face, and the car shot away into the Martian desert, disappearing within a few seconds into a cloud of red dust. Smith looked after it with a mixture of relief and longing.

He wasn’t going to die after all. And, for the first time in his life, he was in love.