

STORM ON OLYMPUS

By M J McLeod

At first, I couldn't believe they'd given me the job. I was telling everyone I was the luckiest woman on Mars. But I knew it wasn't luck. It was because I'd worked hard, really hard, to get this post. I'd been up against fifteen others, including some of the best fast trackers straight from research degrees. I'm betting it was my control record that did it. Experience in the field and the statistics to prove it. I told Mum first. She said she was really pleased for me, but she seemed disappointed. I suppose it was because I was staying away from Earth for longer. And she still had her head cold, and I reasoned that was affecting her mood. I told her I missed her, and I meant it. She was my Mum, my best friend and I felt she was always with me. But it was difficult to get home often... Mars was 78 million miles when we were close... 378 million when we weren't.

My only reservation with the post (first project assistant for the Olympus Mons weather station... that sounded great!) had been the Station Leader, Kepler. She was known for being hard to work with. Having six years under my belt, I felt I'd seen every variety of boss. There were the domineering, the incompetent, the erratic, the manipulators, the callous and the occasional inspirational one too. Kepler would just need some ego-massaging like the rest of them and I'd be in, no bother.

I flew in from Maraldi Station, my home for the last four months; a cold and windy island in the southern hemisphere where we'd managed to grow the most successful local berry crop on record. It had taken long hours researching and calibrating, and we'd had to design a new paradigm for local cloud cover, but the end results were really satisfying. I flew out from the remote island, over Lowell Ocean, across the Solis Planum prairies that seemed to extend for hundreds of miles in a sea of golden corn (beautiful, but boring to control), then over the Hebes Canyon with the tallest waterfall in the solar system and onto the volcanic plane.

It's hard to see Olympus Mons as a volcano; it's difficult to see as one entity. It is, after all, the size of France. The main weather station is sited at the southeast base of the volcano and is the headquarters for MAC, the Mars Agricultural Corporation. That apparently means it's bigger, better, with superior restaurants, clubs, bars and prime accommodation. Smaller accommodation too, I quickly discovered. My rental allowance bought me a four bedroom croft in Maraldi. Here I had a small bedsit with en suite wash cubicle just large enough to squeeze into. I put it out of my mind. With this promotion I was sure to be on better money soon. The sky was the limit. The sky was also my job. Not for the first time I experienced butterflies in my stomach thinking that I'd be helping to control the weather around the volcano, the most fertile region on Mars, and the biggest money spinner in the system.

Kepler wasn't there when I arrived on my first day. Almost everyone was off on some training exercise. I met the lead programmer Haddon, a rather fat, morose man with an untidy beard who looked fifty, but who I later learned was only in his thirties. He showed me

to my desk, mumbled that tea duty fell to the newest member of staff and left for the operations suite. I was rather taken aback by his attitude. Telling me, officially his boss, to make the tea? I punched in his name to my console to look up his programming research. He had a very good record. He had a string of excellent rainfall and harvest models, and I was surprised to find the standard isobar paradigm used to control the meta-weather was his baby. That was a big job for someone who was classified as a research assistant. His on-file photograph showed a much happier man smiling out of a much thinner face.

Kepler didn't turn up all day, so I tried to familiarise myself with the station and last year's weather models. After a totally boring day I went back to my bedsit. I had that first day feeling. Lonely. Lost. What was I doing? Was this the right decision? The right job? Had I bitten off more than I could chew? I phoned round a few friends and colleagues at my old stations, but most of them were out, working late, or a little disinterested. Perhaps they felt I'd betrayed them by coming to the big station. There was always a bit of us and them about "OM". I'd experienced it more than once from the other side. Now I was getting the cold shoulder for being elitist after one crummy day. There was nothing for it but to use up some credits and phone Mum again.

I knew something was wrong straight away. Mum's housekeeper Tony answered, and he had this habit of sucking and biting his lip when he was worried.

'She's just gone for some tests that's all.'

'What kind of tests?' I asked.

'The doctor. He said. It's... she might have pneumonia!'

I told him to send me a message as soon as he had any news and left it at that. I felt even more confused. Perhaps I should catch the next cosmoplane home?

I didn't sleep very well. I kept thinking about Mum, expecting my messenger to beep, and the room was hot and stuffy compared with my cool, windy croft on Maraldi. The result was that when I walked into work the next day I was on edge and preoccupied. Kepler was there this time. She had a long, beige, formal jacket that was years out of fashion, a wiry mass of hair, and a vacant stare. She moved constantly, like a particle of dust in Brownian motion.

'Late for your first day... not a good start is it?' were her first words to me. I wasn't, strictly speaking, late. Nor was it my first day. But I let it pass. She continued talking, but her eye contact was gone. She was busy looking everywhere except at me.

'Make the tea... new staff make the tea... instructions for who has what are on the inside cupboard. Okay?'

She didn't wait to find out if it was okay, or to realise I'd already discovered this the day before. She moved off to the operations suite and left me to make refreshments. I didn't see her for the rest of the morning. Strangely enough, making the tea turned out to be a great way of meeting the staff. There was Haddon again who grunted appreciatively when I passed him a strong black coffee with three sugars; I also met Brundle, a fresh-faced research assistant; she took hot chocolate with one sugar, and Martin an aging geo-mathematician who liked Lady Grey tea with no milk or sugar, just a slice of lemon.

I introduced myself and tried to seem upbeat and happy, but none of them said much. They just got their heads down and got on with it. At lunch I still hadn't had heard from Tony. I went to the travel centre and checked on prices for flights just in case.

'3000 credits?' I couldn't believe it.

'New fuel levies and the falling price of corn bonds,' explained the console.

'That's almost two months pay!'

'Non-end of contract departures are also subject to a 200% surcharge,' it explained.

I checked my bank. Only 1200 credits available. I'd have to give thirty days notice to take out savings. That meant at least thirty days before I could book a flight, never mind get home. Then I noticed the time.

I rushed into the station control suite. Kepler was there again and spoke before I could apologise.

'Late twice in a day. Well, I don't know how you did things on Maraldi. I've never had to go to the remote stations. But here, things are run my way. Do you understand? That means you're here fifteen minutes before you are scheduled, and leave only on my authority.'

She walked out again. My colleagues were all awkwardly quiet and hunched over their consoles. They didn't talk or even seem to move. Haddon gave me a disapproving stare. Clearly I'd rocked the boat and they were on board too.

At the close of the day, we had to work on for an hour until Kepler arrived. She dismissed us and reminded me once again that I was expected in fifteen minutes early. I tried to ask about my duties, which had still not been specified, but she brushed me off. Up close I couldn't help noticing she had a small downy moustache. It made my stomach turn.

After work I went down to the main shopping centre to soak up some of the big city vibe. I wandered around, dazzled by the choices, not really knowing where to go or who to meet. The people here looked at me with a kind of wry smile. I must have looked like a female Huck Finn who'd washed into town from the sticks. I picked a bar and ordered a drink. I was just starting to forget my troubles when my messenger buzzed. It simply said, 'Pneumonia. Confirmed. Mum hospital. Call soon.'

In the following days, things went from bad to worse. Mum's condition was serious. Her head cold combined with a flu virus had left her vulnerable to a rare form of pneumonia bacteria. She was laid up and had trouble breathing, so on the two occasions we'd spoken, she'd been out of breath within a minute. I was also faced with the dilemma that the more I spoke via the Earth-Mars link, the more credits I was spending and the more difficult it would be to afford the flight. I wasn't going to ask Mum for the money either. She needed every penny she could get for her treatment. I'd gone ahead and requested the savings on the 30 day countdown. I was certain now that I'd have to go home and see Mum. Tony had intimated this was life threatening, though he couldn't actually bring himself to admit it.

Meanwhile, Kepler continued to make herself scarce and I found myself disillusioned and bored with nothing to do. One day I tried to find out where she went by following her. She kept on moving, from place to place. She'd talk on the phone for half an hour to

someone about something non-specific. She would look at this console, then that. She'd go to her office and shuffle papers, tap her touch-screen then pace down to the central power core. I took a sneaky look in her office when she'd gone. It was a midden, with files and folders strewn over her desk. I was surprised to see she'd left out her control badge and code sticks. I concluded that she had perfected making herself look busy, but without actually doing anything. I'd had a boss just like her when I started on Mars, working up North in the ice fields. He'd been promoted to the second from top job up there just because no-one else liked the place. He always had his bum crack showing from the rear of his trousers. It was a symbolic gesture that insinuated he couldn't even be bothered to keep his trousers up, never mind lift a finger to do any meaningful work. The only positive was that I started to see a more human side to some of my colleagues. I did a bit of research into Brundle and Martin. They also had exemplary records in their fields. I used my inside information to strike up a conversation one lunchtime.

'So Brundle, have you ever worked in the southern hemi?'

'Oh yes... I worked at Teneri.' For a moment their seemed to be a light in her eyes.

'I went there a few times,' I explained, 'On a few field trips from Maraldi ... it's not far you know.'

She opened up. She knew Maraldi and Kopern and Yuni Farde and all the small islands down there. Martin chipped in then. His first post twenty years ago had been on Kopern. It still seemed like home to him, even though it was a lot bigger now, he said. After a few minutes I decided to strike.

'What's with this Kepler situation?' I whispered it. 'How is she station leader?'

The silent Haddon gave me an evil look, dropped his head and looked around, presumably in case Kepler was nearby.

Martin spoke first, 'She's a leader because she's a politician.'

'She's part of the furniture round here,' said Brundle, 'And her departments have always got results.'

'But she doesn't do anything!' I said exasperated, 'I still haven't received any project information.'

Finally Haddon chipped in, anxious to stop the chit chat.

'Just make your own projects,' he whined, 'Take the initiative.'

Flight prices were still accelerating. I decided the only way to afford a flight was to have the non-end of contract departure levy waived. That would require a certificate of compassionate leave.

'I'm sorry your mother's ill,' said Kepler not looking sorry at all, 'But you're needed here. MAC is introducing a new strain of maize and we need the best people on the weather.'

'She may be dying,' I explained to Kepler, a little desperation entering my voice.

'In my department, compassionate leave is for funerals, and only then for the demise of immediate family.'

Demise? Who says demise? I thought it, but didn't say it. Then she said she was glad I'd come to see her because she had something to say.

'So far you've done very little in the department. I want results. Until I see results you'll be on junior assistant wages.'

Then she left. I was stunned. That meant a third less a month in credits.

To make things worse I didn't have that weekend free. I was scheduled for safety training. I went over to emergency headquarters and prepared to be bored out of my brains.

The EH centre was massive. It was like its own miniature city with shops, bars, a gym, cinema, and accommodation. The digs looked a lot bigger than mine, and the views over the OM lowland heather and hives were fantastic. It almost made me want to enrol. Our trainer Barabbas took us on the Evac flight-sim which changed my mind. The simulation of chaotic-level wind shear didn't bear thinking about. He gave me the flight-sim start up code, and I said next time I wanted to throw up I'd be sure to come down. He laughed and asked me if I'd like to try a ride down an evacuation tube.

After the dramatics, the training started and I and a dozen other new faces spent the weekend studying. I really warmed to Barabbas. He was like an old dragon, sturdy, strong and old, with a twinkle in his eye and hundreds of anecdotes about his colourful past. To my surprise I found I was actually enjoying myself. I think it was because it was the first challenge I'd been set since arriving. I was learning. Being pushed, but in a good way. Kepler was pushing in all the wrong ways as far as I was concerned.

The night before I went back to work I spoke to Tony. He looked thinner in the face and had dark rings about his eyes.

'When are you coming back?' he asked, 'Have you got a flight yet?'

'I should have the money in twenty days,' I explained.

'She's not well, you should be here.' He was almost pleading.

I spoke to Mum's doctor afterwards. He charged his time for the call on top of the line fee. He was circumspect about her condition and uniquely unhelpful. What I did wheedle out of him was that Mum was getting worse, not better. She was on full strength antibiotics and he was thinking of moving her to the controlled atmosphere ward.

Ironically, things seemed to be going my way at work for a change. I'd taken Haddon's advice and made up my own pet project. I had adjusted the rain-sun ratio for the OM sweet potato crop and local scans suggested the tubers were growing fatter than last year's yield. I'd also been tinkering with some of the station controls to improve things all round. This was stuff Kepler should have been dealing with. When I asked her about last quarter's ionic radiation control settings she didn't seem to know what I was talking about.

'Talk to Brundle,' she said and disappeared again.

Brundle said my predecessor had done all the work on the controls.

'And what happened to him?' I asked, not sure I wanted the answer.

'He took a desk job at one of the substations... stress related demotion,' she said wistfully. Kepler had been giving Brundle a particularly hard time lately. She'd fluffed up a calibration on the banana seedling plantations that had set them back a couple of days.

'How long was he here?' I asked.

'Three months,' she said, 'Arrived just before I did.'

'Three months?' I almost shouted it, 'Is that all?'

'That's about average for this department,' she said quietly. A single tear rolled down her cheek. I took out a fresh tissue, gave it to her and ineptly patted her on the arm trying to comfort her. I felt useless. I wanted to tell her this was ridiculous. She was the best research assistant I'd ever worked with. She could have done the job of half the station leaders I'd met.

'Martin's thinking of moving on too...' she whispered, looking around for Kepler, 'He's thinking of retiring completely.'

'What about Haddon?' I asked.

She shook her head, 'He's been here for years.'

With the winter holidays approaching I watched in dismay as cosmoplane prices soared yet again. It was going to take most of my savings to afford a flight home, but I didn't care anymore. I just wanted to see Mum. I was frightened it might be my last opportunity. I sat at home thinking about her and playing back a few of her old video letters. I took to leaving them on loop play when I went to sleep. There was one she'd recorded for me of a nursery story. She used to read to me as a girl.

'Once upon a time there was a beautiful queen. She was loved by her subjects and ruled fairly and justly. Her kingdom bloomed with flowers, and the air smelled like honey in the mornings, vanilla in the afternoon and of baked treacle sponge in the evenings. But one day she was taken by a terrible ogre to live in his underground palace under the forest. Everyone in the kingdom was full of woe. The king would not get out of bed. The princes spent their days crying in the orchard. Only the princess kept her head. She went down to the wizard's library to look up ogres in the great book...'

I had ten days before I could access my money. I wandered into work twenty minutes early to find Kepler sat in the operations suite next to Haddon.

'The sweet potato crop was picked and destroyed last night after scans revealed the entire yield was rotting,' she said.

It was the closest she'd come to looking directly at me. I felt numb and cold.

'This was your fault. Your new weather schedule was a disaster.'

'That's not possible,' I started, but she was already talking over me.

'As a result, MAC privileges suspended.'

Kepler marched out. I swear Haddon allowed himself a thin smile as she left.

I checked the computer myself. She was right. I'd accidentally entered the rainfall in an order of magnitude too high. But I was so sure I'd checked and double and triple checked.

'Amateur,' said Haddon.

I turned and gave him knives with my eyes, but he continued to smirk.

'Maybe you should quit, amateur!'

'I'm not going to quit!' I barked back at him, trying to get angry to stop myself crying.

'Well, you're not gonna see your Mum then are you? MAC privileges include off-planet holidays!'

A river of cold ice ran down my back. He was right. I was stuck on Mars unless I quit. I'd been sloppy. I'd been a complete fool. It must have been the stress.

I took the hypervator to the top level. I'd never ventured up here before. It was usually only by invitation or appointment with a resident only. The transparent dome above glittered as the small moon Phobos passed overhead. The tall weather pillar rose high above. Faint jets of electrons caught in the atmosphere and shone like false northern lights. It was truly beautiful, and for a moment I forgot the churning in the pit of my stomach. It didn't take long to find Kepler's apartment. I was let in by her housekeeper, told to take my shoes off and left alone in her enormous lounge. The view looked out towards the OM summit. I watched enviously as a cosmoplane blasted skyward and into the night sky. Kepler left me waiting for thirty minutes before I was issued into her private study by the housekeeper. She sat in an imposing chair. There was no chair for me, so I stood with my hands joined behind my back.

'I need to regain my privileges,' I stated simply.

Kepler said nothing, waiting for me to continue.

'I'm prepared to work extra shifts, take on some extra duties, anything.'

She steepled her fingers and spoke swiftly, 'In the next week you will take power core duty for four days, deliver four new moisture paradigms for the cotton, barley, cherry and north-side heather crops, read the new MAC journals, summarize the contents for me and take my dog for walks.'

I nodded reluctantly.

'Next week we will discuss your position again.'

The word from Tony was that Mum was stable, but that in itself wasn't good news. He said she'd been sleeping for twenty three hours out of twenty four and he'd not been able to speak to her for over a week. I told him to hang on, I was days away from being home. Under my breath I told Mum to hang on too.

Five nights in I was struggling to concentrate on the new paradigms. I'd had five hours a night of restless sleep and spent the days working flat out. A week to the day, I took the hypervator up to top level again. This time I was sure I'd get away. I had a back-up plan to carry on working on the paradigms back on Earth while I was gone. I'd stored them on my portable, had packed my suitcase and was ready to go. It was the same routine as before at Kepler's. I was left to wait for twenty minutes before I saw her. She was sat behind her large desk talking loudly into her conference phone, finding time for me in between another conversation with a fruit manager out on the south slopes.

'These paradigms aren't complete,' she said in a monotone.

'They're working models,' I argued knowing that this was some of the best work I'd ever done, especially the cotton-moisture programme. If I was right, it was going to almost double this year's yield. 'They need testing in the module, that's all. I can work on them as they evolve... I can do that from home... I don't need to be here for that.'

Kepler turned her chair away from me.

'I'm afraid your privileges will remain revoked for now. I'll contact you later with this week's extra duties.'

I stood there, still, but full of rage and said nothing else for a while. She went back to chatting to the fruit manager. I didn't hear what she said to him because my head was so full of noise.

'My Mum is dying. My Mum is dying.' I said. I couldn't stop myself now. I started crying. Part of me was crying because I was so angry, so upset, so afraid of losing her. Part of me was crying because I knew this was the only way to get through to Kepler. She had to be made to understand how desperate things were. How much I needed to see my Mum. How much I loved her and missed her and how much I wanted to see her in case it was the last time.

Kepler looked uncomfortable, but didn't stand or attempt to comfort me. She ended her call and talked in what she must have thought was a consoling way, but just seemed patronising.

'I think you need to calm down. I think you need to focus. You need to stop worrying and focus on the here and now. From what I understand, your Mother is in a stable condition.'

I listened in disbelief and then horror.

'How do you know she's in a stable condition?' I asked.

She didn't reply.

'You've been listening in on my communications!' I blasted out at her. I couldn't believe the cheek.

'I have the right to know if my staff are lying to me,' she said without a trace of guilt, 'And while I'm satisfied that your mother is indeed ill, I believe you are exaggerating her illness in order to be released from your duties.'

I wanted to scratch out her eyes.

'It may be you believe that she is terribly ill, but it is my assessment that you are over-reacting.'

There was nothing more I could say. This monster of a boss was a thousand times worse than the rumours. She was like the worst of the rest put together. She had no compassion, no scruples, no heart.

Later my head was still buzzing when Tony sent a message. I hurried to my apartment and opened up a link. Tony's news wasn't good. Mum was now very, very weak and hardly conscious at all. The bacteria in her lungs had been affected by the latest round of

antibiotics, but the treatment was so strong it had killed off all the symbiotic bacteria in her body too. It was touch and go. Tony went off screen. I sat for an hour with the lights off thinking what to do next. I couldn't stop thinking about the sweet potato crop. If only I hadn't ruined that, I'd be on my way home by now. I had been so sure of those figures. So sure. I felt the need to go over the paradigm again. I headed down to the lab. It was late and I knew I'd have the place to myself. But as I turned into the corridor I saw a dim light was coming from the lab. I tiptoed nearer and hovered near the door. Haddon was working at my station. I lingered and watched. After a while he got up to make himself a coffee and I saw that he had my new cotton moisture paradigm up on screen. What the hell was he doing? I stepped inside the room and hid under Brundle's desk. Haddon finished making his coffee and sat back down. I hid watching him for at least an hour before he finished his work and left. I waited another five minutes before crawling out of my hiding place to examine his handiwork.

At first glance I couldn't see any changes. I started to think that he'd just been snooping on a good idea. Creep. I even compared the programme to my backups to see if he'd changed anything, but nothing showed up. I was about to give up and go to bed when I remembered my portable. I plugged it in and compared the programmes. There was a change, a small but important glitch that would send the paradigm into a feedback loop which would undoubtedly cause significant crop damage. Haddon had been clever. This would look like a sloppy mistake... just like the sweet potato crop. He'd even changed the backups without altering their time indices to make it look like it had always been there. I thought about my predecessor, and about Brundle. I could see why Haddon had been here for years and everyone else had passed through. A thought occurred to me. I checked back to when Haddon started and found the names of his colleagues. One of them was a meta-weather expert called Jackson who had been hand picked by Kepler. But Jackson had retired early after causing a big storm over the ice caps. Soon after, Haddon had taken over meta-weather responsibility, even though he had no previous experience. Haddon had been knobbling his colleagues and stealing their ideas for a long time. Kepler probably didn't even know. She didn't know anything. I thought of all the good researchers wasted on her and Haddon. All the potential. I thought of my Mum dying half way across the solar system. I was stuck here, far from her, because of them. Instead of being with her, I was supposed to make cherry's ripen and cotton bloom. I was supposed to cow tow and care about honey and heather when my Mum struggled to breathe.

It was very late now, but I felt wide awake. I knew what I had to do. I rectified the damage to my paradigm and set to work on my own scheme. I was going home. Kepler and Haddon too.

Kepler's office was still a mess of overloaded in-tray requests and half processed climate change models. I filed through the papers until I found what I was looking for. Her control badge and code sticks were still there. I turned on her console and fed the code sticks into the acceptor.

The following morning I made sure I was in work early. Brundle and Martin wandered in and took their stations before Haddon arrived yawning and unkempt as ever. I hadn't made him a coffee. He coughed loudly in my direction.

'Make it yourself,' I said.

After a minute or so, he wandered out to the kitchen. It was eight fifty.

At eight fifty three and twenty seconds the global equilibrium detector sounded amber alert. A minute later it was red. All hell had broken loose. Reports of whirlwinds and twisters starting appearing from every station across the planet. Haddon was in a real flap. Something was seriously wrong he told us. A mega-storm was starting to form over Olympus Mons. Barabbas reported from Emergency Headquarters that this was a worst case scenario situation, just like the one in his simulation. That left only one course of action. Planetary evacuation.

As we prepared to leave the lab, Kepler arrived, her hair wild like Medusa. She ran over to Haddon and battered him with her hands in a futile gesture.

'What have you done!' she shouted, 'They'll blame me!'

Haddon was flummoxed.

'What are you on about?' he said, confused.

'The meta-weather... what did you do? What did you do?'

'What are you on about? I didn't do anything!'

Inside the hour we were all inside a cosmoplane and blasting off into the convoy as the mega-storm started to rip into the volcano. I watched through my port window as crops were lashed and battered. I saw banana plantations being ripped up and swirling. Rocks were lifted up and blasted into the orchards exposing the Martian red dirt beneath like bloody wounds. I watched as a conifer plantation burned from a lightning strike. It was chaos. Terrible and glorious. It would take a long time to re-establish some crops. But they would grow again. They would live. Mum might not. But I was going home. I was going to see her. To be with Mum.

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