

Two people sat in chairs on a raised dais, surrounded on all sides by tri-d digicameras, monitors and other equipment. A backdrop of light grey curtain had been erected behind them, and a logo placed in front of it in dark red letters proclaimed the show's title, United Earth Today.

The interviewer was slender, pretty, with dark curly hair and green hazel eyes, wearing a navy blue suit intended to highlight her face for the cameras. Her guest was a large man in a dark brown suit which only seemed to emphasize his bulk. He had large soulful brown eyes and tight short curly hair, a large nose and generous lips. His short stubby fingers kept fiddling with his tie. They sat quietly waiting for the short introductory music to conclude.

At the director's cue the woman spoke. "Good evening," she said in clear, even tones. "I'm Julia D'Amato. Since the beginning of this century, mankind has struggled to conquer poverty, disease, terrorism and persecution of varying kinds. Now, bowing to the pressure of population growth and the desire to see what's out there in the vast reaches of outer space, a series of Mars probes have been launched to determine if we are ready to colonize our nearest celestial neighbor.

"One of the unmanned probes has found something unusual. A single magnetic anomaly at the foot of Olympus Mons, one of the most prominent geologic features on Mars. To solve the mystery, the first manned expedition to Mars, a survey team consisting of specialists in a variety of scientific fields, will land near the anomaly to discover its origin and nature. If it is indeed evidence of intelligent life on Mars as many believe, it will be the most exciting discovery of the century... indeed, the most exciting discovery of the entire history of mankind."

She shifted a little to face another camera. "With me now is Doctor Robert J. Clarke, project manager and director of the Mars Exploration Program." Then she turned back to face her guest. "Welcome, and thank you for agreeing to appear on our show, Doctor Clarke."

His voice was soft but seemed to boom out from deep inside his chest. "Thank you for inviting me, Julia."

She cocked her head at him in a pretty way, but her voice was steady. "Tell me, Doctor Clarke, why this expedition was kept a secret until now?"

He shifted his large bulk uncomfortably, almost tipping the tiny chair as he did so, and cleared his throat. "It was not our intention to keep it a secret, but my colleagues on the project and I agreed that there was no room for speculation or rumor about the nature of the find. Our desire was simply to verify our data before we revealed it to the public at large."

"What was the initial data from the probe? Can you tell us something about it?"

"Only that the size and general configuration of the field at that site warranted further detailed examination, nothing more," he replied carefully.

"Did any of the data give any clue about its source?"

"Uh--we're still analyzing it, so I can't give you any specifics. We are hopeful that the Mars survey team will uncover more evidence so that we can begin to identify its origin and purpose."

Julia tried to draw him out further. "I imagine that you all are very excited right now."

"Yes. This discovery represents a milestone in space exploration. It is a great opportunity to learn more about our universe through features of this kind."

She smiled and nodded her encouragement, then asked, "Doctor Clarke, there is a rumor currently circulating among many viewers that the anomaly may be evidence of buried ruins or of the remains of a long dead civilization on Mars. Would you care to address this?"

"I can only call it wishful thinking. I would like to think so, too, but I deal in fact, not fantasy. Until we receive information that would confirm such a belief we are more inclined to accept it as something with a more natural origin, like a quantum geological feature or a deposit of various radioactive ores beneath the surface. There is no way to be certain until then."

"You mean, there is no possibility that there was life on Mars at any time in the remote past?"

The scientist made a small noise in his throat. "I believe that previous probes have served only to detect small microbes and other extremely primitive forms of life, but never before now had we considered anything beyond what we had in front of us. I am aware that several fans of UFO phenomena and other pseudoscientists have maintained in

their 'studies' that an ancient civilization similar to the legendary lost Atlantis may have existed and flourished on Mars in antiquity, but so far there has been no evidence to support their theories."

Julia leaned forward with interest. "What about the theory that alien beings may have visited our solar system in the past? Do you have any observations or insights you can give us about that?"

"As to that, it would be exciting if it had really happened," Clarke allowed, "But the probability is that if such an event had occurred, it would have occurred at a time too long ago for its impact to have been felt by early human beings or interpreted properly by ancient astronomers. Too long ago, in fact, for any data to have been observed or for any records to have been kept by any intelligent being on this planet. The newest discovery of petroglyphs in the caves of Queensland could be construed as symbology relating to aliens having visited Earth, but I am more inclined to believe that it's the overactive imaginations of modern interpreters that are painting visitations into their meaning. The facts will bear out the truth in the end."

The reporter glanced at her director, who made desperate cutting motions against his throat with a hand. Julia had drawn the discussion out too far for time to allow for. "Yes, well, thank you for coming and being with us this evening, Doctor Clarke. We hope to have you on our show again soon," Julia said, her tone final but regretful.

She turned and faced the camera again. "Next up: the fifth decade of drought in Africa and what is being done to change mother nature's mind about it."

Julia waited a few beats before moving off the dais in a more natural way, tossed her clip microphone at a stage technician as she passed him and caught up with Clarke, who was already walking down the hall toward the make-up room at a determined pace. She caught sight of his face and saw complete chagrin.

She said, "I'm sorry, Doctor Clarke, but I had to ask those questions in the order they were put to me," her tone unmasking the irritation she shared with him. "I had no chance to review them before you arrived."

He grunted, acknowledging her position, but said nothing and kept walking.

Julia doggedly kept pace. "Believe me," she insisted, "I share your disappointment. I have been in this business for almost ten years, and in that time I've had to do a lot of things to get what the producers view as the correct response from our guests. Some of the questions I have asked were a lot worse than these. I did tone the discussion down a little to help keep things real, but my viewers are a little over eager when it comes to fantasy scenarios. I am not."

Her words brought him up short of the door and he turned to her. "I'm glad you were willing to share that with me," he said. "But that doesn't change the fact that the public wants to see space monsters or mystic symbols instead of honest science." His demeanor softened a little. "Believe me, I used to be one of them."

"What changed your mind?"

"Real science, the universe itself, which is the true cosmic mystery. If only the man on the street could understand what real magic there is in mathematics, the mystic wonder of celestial mechanics, the order in chaos that....well, I'm going off again. My students and colleagues at the university are aware of my feelings on the subject and they like to tease me about it. But I am deeply committed to this project and I do not like to see it belittled in order to sell a few more cereal boxes."

Julia started to laugh, then grew serious again when she saw him bristle. "Don't worry, Doctor. Your secret's safe with me. You see, I have a degree in science myself, but I took a job in broadcasting to pay some of the bigger bills and I've been stuck here ever since. Every once in a while I beg my producer to give me an assignment I could sink my teeth into but he keeps putting me off."

Clarke's smile assured her. "Perhaps because you're a lucrative asset he can't let go of?"

Julia could not be certain but it sounded like flattery. "Well, the ratings would never be as high as they are without me," she replied with a cocky smile. "But, please keep me informed about the Mars launch and the results. I am interested, even if it'll be yesterday's news tomorrow. It's not just my curiosity as a reporter, but as a scientist as well." Then she glanced at her watch. "Oops, I gotta go do the next segment. Good luck." And she was running back to the studio without saying goodbye.