



The Martian Tragedy

A novel by Jacques Freydon

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ONE

Though never before loved on Mars, Akbari, premier of Tharsis was now revered. The high regard brought hitherto unknown delight to the leader's heart, but yet he worried that popularity could lead to popular intrusion into his exercise of power. Still, no matter how shallow, the affection of the citizenry gave spirit to the self-proclaimed premier as he hunkered down to do battle with the immense power of the solar system.

After centuries suffering from the effects of living on a planet not by nature suited for their species (despite the assurance and hopes of an earlier century), the Martian citizens, sickly, chronically depressed, and doomed to early death, now put their faith in the Martian politician who stood like a lion rampant, roaring with pride in the face of a domineering Mother Earth. During the decade of his administration, the common people had had few good words to say about the glad-handing governor, but now Premier Akbari's picture hung in taverns and homes. Although he ruled only one of the three Martian provinces, his portrait was on view across the planet. Even in Dolores Town, the skid row of Tharsis, the new hero was venerated and blessed daily in the slurred mumblings of the dispossessed.

Head up, back straight Akbari leaped down the roseate hallway of the Administration Building, the seat of his government and his home. The pink Martian adobe walls resounded with the clomping of his boots. Three tribunes (officials elected by the popular vote for oversight of the executive branch's daily doings) scurried breathlessly with their own less vigorous hops behind the premier. Adapting to low gravity, Martians hopped like kangaroos (hence the derogatory Earth slang for a Martian was 'roo'). It pleased Akbari to make the legislators hop briskly. Exhibiting physical vigor let him strike back at the smug tribunes' unspoken notion that he was a lesser man than they. However much the Tharsisian people now esteemed him, in the eyes of his governmental colleagues, the chief of state was a man of mere oratory and charm, a hack

politician. Throughout the years of his administration, the tribunes felt they had managed the realm while Akbari pranced and posed.

“We’re headed to the Second state room,” the premier’s secretary called back to the others. At 2.7 meters¹, the secretary was a tall woman, even by Martian standards. Here an average woman was 2.25 and the average man, 2.6 meters. With her long leaps, she had little trouble keeping up with the premier.

Tribune Ishihara did not hop, but glided in his “mobility enhancer”, a full body exoskeleton, which due to congenitally weak bone structures, were needed by over 8% of the Martian population. The machines strapped the legs, chest, and, in some cases, heads into a hard plastic cage that could be used to walk, stand, or sit. Tribune Ishihara said, “State room 2, that’s pathetic. The names in this building should be more meaningful. We should dedicate each room to an historic figure.” Ishihara, who could still hold his head up and look around without the aid of his mobility enhancer, was an art collector and something of a poet; on this planet of vanilla aesthetics, he was a recognized connoisseur of the arts. Ishihara’s primary political objective was to make life on Mars more gracious. Martian blandness disconcerted his spirit: numeric place names, the lack of museums, and the poor quality of native artists troubled his sleep. No one could misconstrue his sense of his place in society; Ishihara told himself he was a lone lantern of enlightenment on a dreary world.

“Should we name the first one after you?” asked the panting Tribune Dlette, a slightly overweight man with bad sleeping habits. Despite his small chin and grayish skin, there was strength in Dlette’s eyes. A former lover once told him that the dark circles around his eyes made him look thoughtful. Indeed, more than a few women had sought his attention, for on Mars, a world that stymied physical excellence, virility of mind sexed a man’s image. Dlette was renowned as a smooth ballroom dancer. He took to crowds; before a throng, he projected the image of a Martian man of power and panache. His doughy face glowed pleasingly before crowds. To the masses, he was an inspiring figure; in the inner sanctum of the Administration Building, Dlette was the peacemaker, the negotiator. He tried to understand all sides, find the common ground. He had the wisdom to overlook what needed to be overlooked if government was to function.

¹ 2.75 meters = 8’8”; 2.25= 7’4”; 2.6=8’4”

Ishihara did not reply, did not take the bait. Dlette, like the premier, frequently made jabs at the aesthete's never ending suggestions. But, while Akbari's taunts were always meant to wound, and wound deeply, Dlette's tone was playful, his heckling good-natured. Ishihara shrugged off all scoffs. His drive for growth, advancement, and honor made him feel superior to the others. The nobility of his approach to life contrasted favorably to the others' desultory meanderings through their careers and duties.

Akbari put his hand to the doorknob of Stateroom 2. His small dark eyes took the measure of his tetchy retinue. "Gentlemen, whatever ideas or ambitions divide us stop at this door. These are harrowing times. With each passing week, danger grows. For the sake of Tharsis we must be unified, voice and soul. And, for God's sake, let's not put all our cards on the table right now. Totic says the ambassador's tone is stiff, his words scripted. He's no decision maker. He'll say nothing other than what is proscribed by his political masters. The real bargaining doesn't start now; that will begin when an Earthling sits across the table." He paused, cocked his head meaningfully and looked at the tribunes with one eye. "For all that, the man we are about to meet is formidable: keen and experienced in diplomacy. No air between our positions, or he will play us to his own tune."

Totic, the premier's tall secretary, nodded her serious, gray head. She was wall-eyed, over-weight and wore a perpetual half-frown as a result of an adolescent paralysis. She was not pleasant to look at. She was about to add some background about the awaiting ambassador, but instead rushed her hand to the back of her neck, and looked away with a grimace. The pain of osteoporosis had distracted her, a common intrusion into the conversations of mature Martians. Their bones were too soft when young and too brittle by thirty.

Akbari depended on Totic to get him through official days. The premier was easily bored, his mind readily drifted towards the slightest distraction. His secretary, in contrast, eagerly undertook complex and rigorous work the way a child takes to play. Her attention was narrow and fixed. Before anything reached his desk, Totic exhaustively vetted the matter, to minimize the need for Akbari's effort. She also conducted the follow up and reassessments on the numerous civic projects that by law required the premier's oversight.

Akbari continued, with emotion in his voice, "Earth and much of Mars resent our democracy and freedom..."

“They don’t resent democracy,” said Ishihara dryly. “They are furious about our deuterium-2b monopoly! Let’s not lie to ourselves. This is not about philosophy, this is about the material world.”

Akbari’s jaw tensed and he brought his long nose close to Ishihara’s face. “It is your sport to contradict me. Have you no sense of patriotism or timing? We are about to encounter our nemesis! This is your time to support me. Like it or not, I stand for Tharsis.”

“Well, you overstate everything. I have to correct you or your inaccuracies will ruin us. Say what you will to them, but let’s try to be honest amongst ourselves.”

At that moment, the third tribune of the group stepped forward. With a patchy gray beard and a narrow rim of gray hair on his aged head, Tribune Mowbray came seemingly out of a daze to stand between his antagonistic colleagues. Through most of the day, pastoral reveries of his impending retirement befogged his large blue eyes: his fig farm, his comforting wife, and evenings spent with young prostitutes. The forty-five year old elder dreamed of a life of pleasure, far from the cares of the capital city. He said without looking at anyone, “This quaint malice is shameful. Be adults! A real enemy awaits.” Mowbray nodded and his eyes drooped with satisfaction. He had said his piece.

Together, these men had governed the province of Tharsis for over ten years, nearly a quarter of Martian life expectancy. Earth authorities appointed Akbari governor after terminating the spectacularly lazy previous administration. The citizenry had elected the three tribunes shortly after Akbari’s ascension. From the start, it was clear that the governing team lacked interpersonal chemistry. Other than Dlette, each man was a loner, neither comfortable with nor interested in collaboration. The incompatible platoon worked around a conference table (nicknamed “The War Zone”) on the onerous challenges that faced their ailing off-world province. Things went from bad to worse. Day after day, year after year, this virtual politburo argued over housing programs, appointments to piety offices, street cleaning schedules, crop distributions, and the preeminent and overwhelming issue: health services. As governor, Akbari had the upper hand, but a frequent alliance of Mowbray and Ishihara had at times caused the executive trouble or embarrassment. Mowbray was now old, and he was disinclined to make work for himself, and so had backed away from a combative stance toward Akbari. Dlette, on the other hand, had always played the fence-mender and frequently controlled the balance of power. He used his sway to keep the government on track. The waning attention of

the retirement bound Mowbray enhanced the power of Akbari and Dlette, while leaving Ishihara seething and frustrated. He could not stand alone against the unimaginative and powerful Akbari. Ishihara thought daily of Akbari's powers and his possessions. Yet, despite these leaders exhausting their days with petty enmity, the province they governed functioned. The air circulated; the water flowed; the dome held out weather and the pernicious rays of the cosmos; civic order prevailed; poverty existed only amongst the addicts of the Dolores Town, and that wretchedness was self-inflicted, therefore ignored.

The four entered a high-walled stateroom with huge windows and a panoramic view of the apricot sky. Stateroom 2 was empty other than a long conference table, covered by a burgundy cloth. Seated side-by-side at table, Raluca Akbari chatted animatedly with the ambassador from Isidis. Elegant Raluca was the premier's sister and closest councilor. Like her brother in features, but not appearance, Raluca had his long nose (although her's had been broken in a toboggan accident), small brown eyes, wide mouth, and, most striking, straight inky black hair. Martians, both male and female, tended to lose their hair; the Akbari family was among the happy exceptions. As Martians go, Raluca was athletic and athletically built; the barely visible muscle definition in her arms drove Martian men wild. She was vivacious, and apt to flirt for reasons of state. The closeness of the sibs could not be overstated. As a political team, they had become the most powerful, therefore richest, people on Mars. The strength of their alliance lay in their differences. He was suspicious of everyman's strengths; Raluca believed she was everyman's master. He was an orator, she a planner. Her attention to detail allowed him to suit his own nature by covering wide surfaces. Akbari had a cold eye, while his sister's crimson lipstick smile never waned, even when handling the murkier issues of governance. She equally charmed men of state and hoodlums—whom, for her brother's betterment, she had occasion to hire.

Talking about music with the man from Isidis, Raluca seemed enthralled; she was, after all, a master of seeming enthralled. Mr. Patel of Isidis, the eastern province of Mars, had short white hair, colorless kind eyes, and an easy smile. The deep creases in his cheeks lead Raluca to judge him to be in his forties, the decade of decline for Martians. At the moment, Mr. Patel seemed drowning in Raluca's lipid eyes. She tossed her hair and said, "The Scriabin is complex, but I can play it... not at a professional level, but the piano doesn't complain."

"Oh, but I would love to hear you," said Mr. Patel, in his high, nasal voice. "I pride myself on the breadth of my musical taste. From Gregorian Chants to the new *gas*

music out of Europa. I love it all. Music enlivens our nerves and soothes our sorrows. You know, the affect of music on the human sprit is still a mystery to science. The why of music's effect doesn't need to be answered, as long as the band plays on. Of course, we must admit that our off-world musicians are light-years behind Earth professionals, quality-wise. We're all amateurs on Mars. But again, so what? Oh, to hear live a piece of Scriabin! I have never before..." Patel fell silent aglow with joy at the thought. Then Akbari entered. Mr. Patel nodded his apologies to Raluca who nodded archly in return. Mr. Patel stood and held his hand palm up before him, bowed and said, "Thank you for receiving me on such short notice."

The Tharsisians said nothing. Silence followed. Raluca motioned with an open palm and Akbari and his contingent sat down, across from Mr. Patel. Next, she extended toward Patel her long arm and said, "Mr. Patel, the Premier of Tharsis, my brother and the chosen leader of this free people. These are the democratically elected tribunes of the new nation of Tharsis, Mr. Dlette, Mr. Ishihara and Mr. Mowbray. Gentlemen, Mr. Patel is a facilitator sent to work with us on our new relationship with the rest of the planet, which remains under Earth's rule. Today, Mr. Patel is representing the interests of the province Acidalia, as well as his native province of Isidis."

"*Provinces*," Ishihara grunted. Mr. Patel smiled placidly. This lack of rejoinder led Ishihara to shake his head. The man from Isidis ignored this, too. Compared to his inner conflicts and his self-accusation, the childish behavior of the Tharsisians hardly registered on his anguished mind. Mr. Patel grappled with the dark message he was about to deliver. Throughout his agonizing journey to Tharsis, he had worried rather than prepared. How could any Martian prepare to say what Mr. Patel was about to say?

"I am here," he began, "to voice the objections of Earth and Mars to the illegal possession of the Pavonis Mons deuterium-2b mines by yourself, sir. Earth law, which governs the solar system, is clear that the rights to off-world resources, so dear to all mankind, belong in the hands of their stockholders, and that nationalization, even if Earth recognized your nationhood, which it does not, is illegal. Your secession is void and you sirs are subject to sanctions. After you turn yourselves in to Earth authorities, and your government replaced in accordance with solar system laws, the new government of Tharsis will meet with emissaries from Earth to arrange any exceptional measures warranted by your crimes. Only after you surrender, will the new government, in conjunction with Earth authorities, be able to insure the smooth functioning of Tharsis, Mars, and the solar system.

“For two centuries, we have encouraged Martians to take a financial interest in the native mining profits. We used equity shares as the retirement vehicle for generations of Martians. And the system has worked. Free enterprise and citizen shareholders have bettered the lives of all Martians, but now you are taking that security away from the rest of us. The clearest example is your own nephew. Your late sister and late brother-in-law were the largest holders of Pavonis Mons Mines equities. Your benighted actions leave your own nephew destitute! To illustrate how misguided you are, I remind you...”

“Tharsis is a free nation making laws to rule its own resources,” Akbari said softly. “We don’t care about your recognition nor Earth’s.” He smiled wistfully as he leaned across the table toward Mr. Patel. “The people of Tharsis celebrated in the streets and the day I declared independence was the happiest day in the history of Tharsis. The news media said so! They said that on channel 6! There is no going back, sir. Besides, Mr. Patel, you must understand I speak for you and Isidis as well as for my own nation. I have the best interest of all of Mars in my heart and mind. All of Mars.”

“Your nephew, sir...”

Akbari rubbed his nose and his eyes tightened. He said in almost a hush, “Now listen to me; let me remind you of your own history. Martians and Earthlings have known for two hundred fifty years that the reality of life on Mars confounds human development and health. Generation after generation suffers transplant rejection and its related maladies. That’s a lot of generations for short living people. We are everywhere ill. Our bones break; our organs fail; our spirits veer darkly. We suffer cruel deaths as our long, exhausted bodies wither as we lie abed. We die at an age when Earthlings hit the prime of life. Eighty percent of Martians have antidepressant implants by the age of eight. Our teen suicide rate is fifteen times that of Earth. To all this, sir, Earth has averted its eyes. They call it ‘compassion fatigue’. For two hundred fifty years! Endless excuses about not having the science to alleviate our diseases or to finally terraform our planet. Nothing can be done for our miseries, yet we see breakthrough after breakthrough for Earth’s own health, energy, and food distribution problems. What kind of a leader would I be if I did nothing while my people live in a fetid bubble, worry endlessly, and die painfully? None of us can ever return to the heavy pressure, germ rich Earth. Mars is our prison.”

“If I may,” said Mr. Patel.

“No you may not!” said Akbari with a mirthless laugh. “The discovery of deuterium-2b and its extraordinary binding with tritium produced five times the fusion energy yields appearing in the form of charged particles. And no more of that icky nuclear waste. Mars fueled the Earth’s nuclear fusion revolution. Martian minerals changed the entire solar system, created the technologies to unite and exploit worlds all the way to the moons of Saturn. The discovery also changed our planet. We were a scientific outback, bound to Mars by our weakened bodies, a tragic mistake left over from the earliest days of off-planet colonization. And though the solar system admired our adaptability to misfortune, and our ingenuity in the face of the red desert, in the eyes of Earthlings, Martians are doomed, beyond hope. The science facilities disappeared and Mars became a mining zone. We are treated like some giant asteroid, and we’ll come to look like one, too, with huge mining pits all over our land. But, this is not a barren asteroid, Mr. Patel. This is Tharsis, and we have a civilization here, a civilization I love--perhaps beyond reason. We will take what’s ours: the deuterium-2b under our feet. Your provinces have opposed us at every turn. Fine. You are a Martian ruled by Earth. I am a Tharsisian, ruled by my conscience and by my nation’s self-interest.”

Mr. Patel pursed his lips and nodded. He expected this, for Akbari was known to expound on Martian history as a tactic to evade substance. The Isidisian looked at Raluca, and saw her posed: looking at her brother with admiration, she wiped a tear from her eye. He noticed Ishihara looked down at his folded hands, expressionless. After a short silence, Mr. Patel said, “But you aren’t an independent nation if nobody but you considers you to be such. People will stop taking you seriously if you keep up this pretense. You will be laughed at. And you will be punished.”

“For God’s sake!” cried Akbari, and he stood. “You cannot challenge the laws of a democracy! If any of Earth’s values are sacred, surely rule of the governed by vote and by law is the most sacred of all! That includes Mars! Do not presume...” He paused, ran his fingers across his thin lips, and then pointed at Mr. Patel. He said bitterly, “Take me lightly if you will. And, these venerable men beside me, take them lightly, too. Laugh at Tharsis. But, sir, be ready when accounts are called.”

Ishihara moved a finger and his mobility enhancer rose with a slight squeak. “I know the men that sent you here: they don’t care about the people of Mars: they’re political whores, cronies of Brussels!”

Mr. Patel now stood up. “The capital of Earth is the capital Mars. That is sacred.”

“Well, it bloody well isn’t sacred in our town,” laughed Akbari. The tribunes stood to attention on either side of the premier; the show of support, rather than comforting him, caused Akbari to feel slightly cornered, and he winced uneasily. Raluca patted Mr. Patel on the arm, but pulled back when she felt him bristle at her touch. She watched with arched eyebrow as he slowly sat back down. Mr. Patel’s colorless eyes stared back at her brother and the tribunes.

The Tharsisians returned to their seats. Mr. Patel droned calmly. “Since nationalizing the mines, you have controlled the flow of deuterium-2b in ways both whimsical and hostile to humanity. You have done so for personal profit and power.”

“Not for personal profit,” Akbari interrupted. “For the good of all Mars. You’ll understand it all eventually, Patel. You’re just slow catching on.”

Mr. Patel continued, “I have been instructed to remind you that the survival of life in this solar system requires that all the worlds and all the nations of those worlds forswear withholding natural and technological resources from the rest of humanity. This is no longer the primitive world order of the first two millennia. Just as Earth provides Mars with technology, seeds, and expertise, so must Mars send our deuterium-2b to the process plants in Angola.” He paused, wiped the sweat from his eyes. Across the table, Akbari motioned lazily for him to continue. Patel dropped his voice and leaned toward the premier. “Sir, the fallout from your actions mortifies the rest of Mars. Our world cannot survive without Earth. Don’t you realize that? And on Earth, this flare-up is causing panic; the Earth underclass and the demigods that lead them, already think too much of their world’s resources come to Mars. Unsavory politicians fuel the prols resentment toward you; they say the problems of Earth worsen while treasury is poured into the hopeless cause of Martian health. A life on Mars costs 20 times as much as one on Earth. You must know that any appearance of strife between Earth and the outer worlds only adds to the toxic anti-Martian accusations by rabble-rousing politicians.”

Akbari shrugged and lied, “I don’t follow Earth politics. But, I’ll take your word for it.” He paused, screwing his eyes up and tilting his head toward the ceiling. “My sister is an excellent judge of character and she approves of you, so I will take you as a

man of his word. I regret having lost my temper. But, that being said, I can't image that we have anything left to talk about."

Patel was stunned. He saw that these men of Tharsis were inward looking and filled with conviction. He composed himself and said with as much sincerity and good will as he could muster, "Sir, you have the attention of Brussels: be reasonable, negotiate, don't instigate. Earth will help."

Akbari nodded. His small brown eyes flashed as he said, "No deuterium 2b, no cold fusion, no cheap energy. Let me tell you, Mr. Patel: the mineral belongs to Tharsis and we, unlike yourselves, are no longer a province, but a sovereign state. Our political interests do not include watching old Mother Earth gouge out the blessings of our land! As head of state, I am also CEO of the Pavonis Mons Mines. My intentions are as simple as they are just. I want my people to control the ground below their feet, to enjoy their rightful prosperity. We will be generous, once Earth focuses its best medical technology on the Martian health crises. That's it. No empire building, no lavish plans, no dreams of personal riches." He paused, took the measure of the room. Matter-of-factly, he asked Patel, "So, will you stay for lunch?"

Patel took a deep breath and said, "Release the mines or face force."

"Force?"

"Armed force."

Akbari's jaw dropped; Mowbray groaned aloud; Ishihara shook his head. Communal violence had never touched Mars, even while it still raged on Earth, where battles raged against those termed resisters and rouge states. The history of inhabited Mars recorded nary a skirmish. The instruments of war seemed as remote as the names of medieval demons; canon had gone the way of Asmodeus, artillery with Ashmodai, bombardment with Belphegor: satanic beings and satanic battle thrown back into the muck of Earth. The dark nights of war had never polluted the red surface of mankind's new home.

Raluca said somberly, "My friend, you cannot speak like this in my presence! In Tharsis, we equate violent words with profanity!"

“Leave now, Sir!” Akbari yelled. The indignant Tribunes again leapt to their feet and hurled insults at the man from Isidis. Inwardly, Mr. Patel cursed his mission and thought, *they are within their rights to harangue me. I demean myself with words of war. But, it’s done; I have delivered the threat; it can’t be taken back. Nor can I ever be as I was before. I have threatened violence. Some things are unforgivable.* His breath shortened; he felt cold, endangered, and naked in guilt.

Dlette clamed down before the others, who for some long moments shouted over each other, each flinging filthy curses at the man who had threatened the planetary peace. He held up his hands for quiet, but was ignored. Eventually Dlette grabbed the premier by the arm to encourage the first man to rein in his bluster and his rage. Dlette said to Patel, “Your threat is as empty as it is blasphemous. If you come at us with your police force we will send ours to meet them.”

“We have,” said Patel shakily, “received fighting vehicles from Earth. You must, Premier Akbari, obey the laws of civilization. You cannot nationalize private property. You know the law, sir...”

“I know the democratic laws of Tharsis, and I care for no others.”

“From Tasmania to Enceladus, wherever man lives, we are all bound by the laws of Earth: the laws of property are sacred and universal.”

And so it was, each side viewed the other as violating sanctity. For the Tharsisians, threat of force had been cast in their faces; for those whom Mr. Patel represented, Akbari had violated the long settled separation of private and public property rights. Mr. Patel looked close to fainting; so hateful was his mission and so hate-filled were his antagonists. Wobbling, he stood his ground, for the law was firm, and in that he could believe. It was the thought of life-wasting war that turned him against himself. However, the company man did his job; he responded with reason, while the others responded to his reasoning with invectives.

Eventually, Dlette insisted there was nothing further to talk about. Mowbray, fearing for his health in the frantic quarrel, quickly nodded agreement. Raluca, seeing her brother needed to escape from the room so he might catch his breath and mull his options, took Patel by the arm and guided him toward the door. Her smile stayed, but no longer given to Mr. Patel. Dlette met her half way across the room and took the other arm of the confused Mr. Patel. Wordlessly, they ushered him out the door.

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During the walk through the long hallways, Dlette and Raluca questioned Mr. Patel about the nature of the fighting vehicles, and he answered them directly, withholding none of the frightening details. Aft and rear, these plastic beasts carried two cannons that could blow massive holes in a dome; mounted on their flanks were lasers weapons with a two kilometer range; the advanced plastic/carbon armor could withstand much more than any weapon on Mars could inflict. The Earth war wagons could even withstand and function in Martian dust storms, which, for weeks or months, brought all transportation outside of the domes to a complete standstill. Each fighting machine carried a dozen Earth troops, each man armed and armored beyond the dreams of any Martian. Each Earth soldier was a trained killer, a master of exotic and powerful weapons, and, of course, physically superior to the rest their physically superlative species. There were no professional killers on Mars; no armed men other than a few police with hand guns. After Mr. Patel's disclosure about the equipment of violence facing Tharsis, a long silence ensued. The thought of such weaponry rolling across the quiet, red plains that separated Tharsis from Isidis left the three Martians breathless. Tribune Dlette mumbled inaudibly.

“Spit it out,” Raluca said, with an edge of impatience.

“Alright, I'll say it aloud.” Dlette's eyes flashed; he faced Mr. Patel and extended his small, round chin defiantly. “Shame on you for bringing this to Mars! History will record you as the man who first announced a plan for organized killing on this planet. The greatest accomplishment of Mars has been to put organized violence behind us; even violent crime is rare, nearly always confined to domestic disputes or ornery dope addicts. And now you, our fellow Martians threaten destruction and bloodshed. Once violence is loosed, our miraculous peace is dead forever. Our greatest gift to humanity, our peace without end, will die and become history. Afterwards, we will be just like Earthlings, for whom peace is always intermittent and vulnerable.

“We Martians don't have the intuition of religion, the way Earthlings do. Perhaps it's because Mars has no Gaia-like entity, which those on the mother planet inhale with their every breath. Some say our separation from the sprit of our native planet is the cornerstone of the off-world depression syndrome. They say that out here, where we

clearly weren't meant to be, we are truly alone. In three centuries of combing the galaxy for signs of intelligent life, we've come up with nothing, not even a false alarm. Just the emptiness of space. The civilization we have built makes life worthwhile on this isolated and otherwise lifeless planet. Generations of Martians have accepted the short lives and deprivations to make this not just another world, but a peaceable civilization admired by the rest of the solar system." Unable to continue, Dlette grunted sorrowfully, and then resumed mumbling. Again, Raluca cued him, this time by shaking his upper arm. Reenergized by her touch, Dlette pointed to the man from Isidis and declared, "We will not be victims. We will resist."

When they reached to door, Raluca said, "Mr. Patel you have presented Earth's demands and heard our feelings, to which I suspect you are sympathetic. No one thinks you are a man of war." Mr. Patel nodded emotionally. He was grateful for her recognition of his personal anguish. "Of course, you are a good Martian. You just have this duty to perform. But let me ask you for something you might also consider your duty. Tell me, Mr. Patel, knowing what you know of both sides, do you see a third way? How can we avoid this holocaust?"

"You must not continue on this course," Mr. Patel beseeched her. "Convince Akbari to take your country out of jeopardy. I implore you, both of you, to see reason. Earth will never allow the deuterium 2b to stop flowing. Never! It is the blood of civilization. The colonies around Jupiter, Saturn, and the asteroids cannot survive without our deuterium 2b. The premier has driven the other colonies into complicity to bring Earth's violence to our serene planet. Isn't the greatest sin to impel others to sin?"

Dlette grunted and nodded without expression. Raluca said nothing. She leaned in and kissed Mr. Patel on the cheek, stroked his bicep, then smiled wanly, turned away, and walked back down the hall. In her black dress, the crow-haired facilitator of deals, the snowy skinned beguiler of statesmen and buyer of thugs, glided away from Mr. Patel. With sorrow, he watched her figure recede and his mouth opened slightly. Dlette moaned indifferently, then took the ambassador by the arm and briskly ushered him through the door held wide open by a young doorman. Farewells were not exchanged.

In an instant, Mr. Patel found himself alone on the rusty plaza in front of the Administration Building. He made his way to the street and looked for a cab. He stepped out onto the street and looked up and down the narrow road. (In claustrophobic Martian cities, all roads were narrow and mostly one-way.) As in all Martian cities, on

either side of the street, uniform ten-story buildings rose to form a great urban canyon, hard, bleak, and rusty red. On the upper floors, the residential levels, large bay windows gave every apartment in Tharsis the maximum amount of dusty peach sunlight. Each residence had a cantilevered patio. The terraced living quarters above perennially shadowed the lower floors. In hundreds of uniform buildings that housed the ninety-two thousand inhabitants of Tharsis, the three lower floors were considered unfit for residential use. The Martians needed light as an armament in their never-ending battle against the *off-world depression syndrome*. The ground level was given over to retail business, the second floors were used for business and governmental offices; the third floors were consumed by the city's computer, HVAC, plumbing, and mechanical infrastructures.

Mr. Patel had been in Tharsis many times, and knew he would have to hop a few blocks to find a cab. The Administration Building was one of the few stand alone buildings in Tharsis (the other unattached structures were the enormous hospital, the Power Company, and the Water Works Administration). Originally built in the sixtieth year of inhabited Mars, the building was then a vast array of laboratories, observatories, and agricultural research facilities. During the first seventy-five years of its existence, Tharsis was the scientific center of the solar system. But then, as the first generation of native-born Martians began to age badly, their children began exhibiting gigantism, and it became clear to all that to send more people to Mars would be inhumane. Colonization ceased. Late in the second century of inhabited Mars, the discovery of deuterium 2b led to the breakthrough to nuclear fusion; Mars in general and Tharsis in particular became the richest mining real estate in the solar system. The scientific center was gone, but its Administration Building continued to house administrations. A flat, desolate, red stone plaza surrounded the building. (Tribune Ishihara was in charge of all beautification programs in Tharsis; Akbari's home had never been aesthetically enhanced other than a few bamboo hedges and an old bamboo maze.)

Mr. Patel hopped down the street toward the main boulevard. He reminded himself that Tharsis was quite a pleasant city, once you got out of the halls of government. For street life, there was no place on Mars like Tharsis. The esthete Ishihara had left his stamp on the boulevard by writing and passing laws requiring all street level storefronts to meet design criteria set up by himself. Sidewalk cafes abounded, streets were lined with plastic-flowers, and cleverly designed storefronts gave the avenues of Tharsis verve unlike any other off-world metropolis. Indeed, if one didn't

look up at the red urban canyons toward the great dusty dome one would think you were in a city on Earth. No other off-world city had anything like the governmental activism and intrigue of Tharsis, nor was there anything like the land's vibrant cultural life.

When he found a cab, he asked to be taken to the City Hotel. The cab driver was chatty, telling Mr. Patel about his own visit to the sand dunes of Isidis. He loved the ever-changing grace of the gigantic dunes. Mr. Patel asked the cab driver about his feelings about his own Tharsisian government.

“Premier Akbari only does what he believes best for us. Yes, sir. We need Earth to make the medicines that will save us. It's not right, our kind dying in our fifties while Earth people live to a hundred-ten. We've begged long enough. Now it is time for strong men. Big men. Akbari will make things happen. You heard it here first. What do they say, 'He's a son-of-a-bitch, but he's our son-of-a-bitch?' He's a wily one and he'll make Earth heel before he's done.”

“Yes,” Mr. Patel agreed ruefully. “Akbari will make things happen to all of us.”

“Eh? What's that?” asked the cabbie.

#

While Dlette and Raluca whisked Mr. Patel away from the meeting room, Akbari and Ishihara slowly faced each other. Ishihara shook his head and was about to speak when Akbari turned away from him. Smiling wistfully, for everything had gone as had expected, Akbari congratulated himself on his prescience. His eyes lids dropped as though he were sated with a wonderful dinner of rare Earth vegetables and grains. When finally he turned back to Ishihara, it was as an afterthought. He said mildly, “Understand, this is not about the deuterium 2b, it is about the sovereignty and physical health of Tharsis!”

“We all agree,” said Mowbray; he then shook his head sadly and looked to the floor. He now felt obliged to remain a tribune until this crisis with Earth passed. Even worse, this conflict might take more time than he had years. Although self-pity was in his stomach, patriotism was in his heart. He said, “We can't back down.”

#

Dlette and Raluca paused before reentering the stateroom. In the heaviness of the moment, they exchanged wan smiles. The tribune's eye twitched; he set his little jaw, nodded to her, and they entered the room. By this time, the premier, Ishihara, and Mowbray had fallen into a silence. When they talked, they bickered, so at the premier's suggestion, they held their tongues until Dlette and Raluca returned to improve the social chemistry.

Dlette looked around and took the measure of the room. Shrugging with futility, he said, "They have six of these grotesque war machines! Each has more than enough firepower to blast through any dome. Even this city's. These moving fortresses can turn a city into rubble in less time than it takes to walk from here to the street."

Ishihara shook his head. "No Martian would operate such a thing."

"Of course not," said Raluca. "For that they'll get men from Earth. Men whose profession it is to kill *en masse*. The law of private property is a religion on Earth, they'll kill for the sake of land."

"Too bad. Time to share. That property is now the state's," her brother said cheerfully.

Mowbray, chin buried in nervous hand, nodded gravely. "But Earth's suzerainty doesn't extend over domestic affairs like our penal code."

"Property laws are not in the penal code," said Ishihara.

"I don't give a damn what chapbook the codes are in!"

"Their claim is," Dlette said mildly, "as it is in Brussels, so it is on Mars."

"Which I... we reject," declared the premier as he stretched back in his chair.

Grinding his teeth, head down, and sitting away from the group in his mobility-enhancing cage, Ishihara clutched his hands angrily. He was struggling with the temper that had incapacitated him in critical moments throughout his professional life. He hated bargaining with Akbari, who sought expediency above all else, whereas Ishihara sought perfection.

Nationalization could give Akbari, not Tharsis, control of the mines. Ishihara, who before voting, studied the law and got advice from outside lawyers, then cast his ballot against the Nationalization Law, was alone amongst the tribunes. Also, he that knew Akbari had the minds, if not the hearts, of the people. Ishihara wiped sweat from his forehead. While fiddling with the settings of his cage, he thought, *if I do not publicly challenge him at every point, he will find ways to steal more. He has wrapped the flag around himself and everyone has fallen in line. I have to resist. Yet, I must stand at his side, or he'll make me out a traitor, and the citizens would believe him. For now, Akbari is too strong to dislodge. I'll bide my time.*

His thoughts were interrupted when Tonic burst into the room. "You all have to see this!"

"Must we now?" snarled Ishihara.

Tonic did not answer; rather she placed a small black holograph projector in the middle of the conference table. She passed her palm over the projector to turn it on. A two-foot high image of young Robert Vardani's head bloomed from the machine. Handsome, thirteen-year-old Robert's open and fresh face could not help but to seize the attention of any room. His white cheeks glowed like those of an Earth child, and there was bounce in him. He had a strangely avuncular sparkle in his young eye.

The holo-image began to speak in a boyishly high voice. "I must speak with Mars today because of the injustice done to our planet and our people by my uncle Akbari. With his nationalization of the Pavonis Mons Mines, left penniless people like me, dependent for our security on our stock holdings. My step-mother and I are now dependent on the good will of others for our daily survival. You hard working people may say, what has this to do with me. Well, when the time comes for you to retire, you will find that the stock shares we depend on, which are rightfully ours by virtue of the Earth's enlightened Universal Free Market laws, are no longer there. As Martians, you, like my family, are particularly dependent on the mines for your nest eggs." He paused a moment, obviously in thought. Then finding the words he needed, he continued. "I have agreed to be the spokesman for this cause not only because I am one of the first victims of this illegal seizure, but also because I feel my uncle's immoral behavior is a stain on my family's honor. Neither my stepmother nor I can live silently with such a stain on our reputation. My uncle's crime will wound the lives of everyone hearing this transmission. In other words, everyone on Mars."

The speech lasted about three minutes. Robert enumerated the laws of private property in elegantly simple terms. He described Akbari's own stated position, and even suggested his uncle's motivation might indeed be a passionately responsible nature combined with a grand vision of a healthy Mars. He paused often, searching for words; his eyes were clear, his voice heart wrenching. The brave lad radiated thoughtfulness.

Akbari said, "I've explained the new retirement situation. No one is threatened. I've told everyone that."

"This is the way Earth PR works," said Raluca as the holo-display finished. "It's a choreographed commercial. And people will love this vulnerable and courageous pretty-boy. Earth will use him as the face of their psychological campaign, and Martians will fall for the sentiment. It doesn't matter if what he says is true, especially in complicated matters. It sounds true. That's how politics operate on Earth. Throw out enough *information* to swamp the *truth*. Did this show on Entertainment Channel 1?"

"Yes, ma'am," Tonic answered. "It's running four times a day, right after the top rated dramas on Channel 1. I've checked with our media outlets and they tell me that there is no way we can block the signal short of cutting off all the channels."

"Well, for God's sake don't do that," said Dlette. "That would push too many citizens out of our boat."

Again, Raluca shook her head. "Everyone on Mars will see this broadcast."

Ishihara spoke, in a loud, clear voice, "We must speak to Empacia Vardani. If she can be persuaded..."

Raluca did not let him finish. "Empacia is behind this. She is sleeping with that *generalissimo* from Acidalia. When we identify who our Martian enemies are, the *generalissimo* will be right there."

Her brother asked, "Should we deal directly with him, or with her?"

"With her," said Raluca. She paused and thought. The others waited silently. "Empacia must be bought or frightened. We need her to submit and give us legal cover. And Robert. What about Robert? You Mr. Premier, you must talk with young Robert. As I recall, you were reasonably friendly."

Akbari shrugged and wrinkled his nose, "I ruffled the kid's hair and gave him a few presents. Then he'd run off and I didn't have to pay any attention to him. If that's a friend, so be it. I can't say that I like him."

"Of course, Mr. Premier," Raluca said coolly.

"I'll talk to the kid."

"Comforting," muttered Ishihara.

Raluca went on, "We must get Empacia's ear away from the generalissimo. No matter how long he has lived on Mars, the generalissimo will always be an Earthling. He'll stand tight with them and they with him. We need the people to consider him a foreign agent."

Akbari smiled at Ishihara, reached his arm through the tribune's cage and patted his shoulder. Akbari then nodded and said with finality, "We five will meet again on this subject. Tomorrow morning at 10. Come with defensive plans; pull in whomever you must to get the best ideas. Naturally, the police force, as the only armed men in Tharsis, will make up the core of our defense. I have to leave for another meeting."

Ishihara raised his eyebrows. "What meeting are you going to?"

Dlette said, "One you should attend. A Citizens' Advocate is arguing the case for inserting a citizens' panel into the oversight of the Water Works. We'll give them a polite ear, will we not, Mr. Premier?"

"This land will drown in oversight committees," said Mowbray.

"And what do you think you tribunes are?" asked Raluca.

TWO

The Premier and his entourage hopped briskly through two long hallways, toward the next meeting in Stateroom 7. Before they entered the room, Tribune Mowbray, weary of business, which had already taken up three hours of his day, begged off with a mumbled excuse about needing to oversee the application of a growth enhancer for his precious fig orchard. He made a little speech about the day's events, the greatness of the future, and how sorry he was to leave. Dlette, with his small, friendly smile listened respectfully to the older man with murmured encouragements. He patted Mowbray's back as the elder slowly departed for the day. As Mowbray hopped down the hall, the others watched and recognized that his longtime limp was worsening. They knew his days were numbered and soon they would have a new colleague. Each one thought for a moment about how their candidate, their devotee, could be pushed to electoral victory and fill the slot. Then, they looked away and their thoughts returned to the business at hand.

Tosic took secretarial charge. Speaking rapidly and never blinking, she outlined for the others the goals of the approaching conference. Aside from deuterium 2b, the most valuable entity in Tharsis was the Water Works, the artery of life on Mars. Water pumped from the North Pole to Tharsis, was stored in underground, man-made aquifers, and then piped throughout the city and its scattered satellite domes. There had never been a breakdown in the operation or an obstruction of the flow, and no one in a Martian city had ever died of thirst, but mismanagement had, at times, forced the city into months of rationing. Unlike Earth, with its many sources of water, in Tharsis, there was only the Water Works. Fear of the process failing was yet another dark worry for Martians. Government had always run the Water Works—utilities not being subject to the universal laws of private ownership--so Tharsisian independence did not foreshadow great change in aquatic operations. However, in the past few months, workers, the media, and the Landlord League--the three estates by whose consent any government remained in power—began demanding closer civilian oversight of the Water Works. The Landlord League, owners of virtually all of the apartment space on this planet of apartments, had a profound influence on government in general and Akbari in particular. They fattened his treasury without complaint; in turn, the premier's policies fattened their wallets. These first rank stakeholders in Tharsisian independence now insisted on a "citizen watchdog

committee” to insure that the Water Works remained democratically and competently managed. Such committees were prevalent throughout Mars, and Akbari detested and denounced them as impediments to “creativity and progress.” Perhaps the landlords and their allies, seeing how Akbari had threatened Earth’s direly needed resource, deuterium 2b, wanted to insure the premier could never use such tactics against domestic opposition. Totic told the others that popular vehemence on this subject had taken on a religious fervor. The landlords and their allies declared that the social contract was at stake. Totic recommended that the landlords be reminded that their own monopoly might be re-evaluated along similar lines; so too, the media could be nationalized as an enterprise of which the communal good might be valued over private property.

“Don’t threaten them,” said Raluca. “It just reinforces their fears. Don’t make them dig in their heels.”

“I’m sure you know best, ma’am,” Totic said after a glance at the premier. “There is one other thing: the Citizens’ Advocate that has come to present their position. His name is Morak. He’s the head engineer of the Water Works and has a clearly vested interest in Water Works management. I can understand why the workers wanted a man of their own, but the Landlord League? They usually send a committee. He’s here alone.”

Akbari was puzzled: a worker speaking for rich landlords as well as labor, not to mention the ever-snooping media? It made no sense. “Who chose him as spokesman? What’s he after?”

“I’ve been told that the landlords actually chose him and the Workers Union quickly applauded. The media supports him, too. Rather unanimous about it. They say he’s quite charismatic. I have no idea of his motives.”

“Let’s see what’s up his sleeve,” said Dlette.

Raluca said, “A man who appeals to both laborers and landlords must have political talent. Let’s not underestimate this working man.”

The stone-faced premier straightened his tunic, as he always did before entering a room. He threw open the door and entered another look-alike meeting room. Seated at the far end of a conference table, was a young man, dressed in a dark maroon one-piece suit and sitting with his formidable hands, large, hairy, and blue veined, folded on the

table before him. The Citizens' Advocate sat erect and alert, primed for the meeting. His skin was dark, Mediterranean. His black curly hair was poorly cut and unbrushed. His long face was pockmarked rather badly, and his pores were oily and conspicuous. His full-lipped mouth was wide; his jaw narrow, jutting like a peninsula away from this scarred and oily face. He said nothing; his intelligent eyes glided from one face to the next, as though he were inspecting piping, piping which he understood at a glance.

Akbari and his entourage observed this strange figure with his workman's hands, his ill-fitting clothes and his brutish grooming. The premier found a smile coming to his face. *What audacity*, he thought, *coming here alone to face us. What strange courage.* When he saw discomfort on the tribune's faces—attributable, no doubt, to the bold bearing of the unkempt engineer—Akbari's pleasure redoubled.

The premier's voice was stern as he said, "If your proposal can be kept in the mind of one man, then I doubt your position is complete. The issue requires the best efforts of many minds. You see, I have with me my ablest advisors." He waved his hand at Dlette and Raluca, ignoring Ishihara. "Now, perhaps we should delay this meeting until you are fully prepared. I'm doing you a favor." The engineer smiled slightly. He said nothing. "Young man, whose name I have already forgotten..."

"Morak," the engineer said. He cocked his head and looked from one face to another. He saw his social superiors secretly quail under his the fixity of his gaze. He repeated, "Morak. And I speak for the workers and for the Landlord League of Tharsis."

The premier laughed, but Ishihara and Dlette did not. The two tribunes stood shoulder to cage, their faces cautious and hostile. The premier said, "I believe that is for me to do, Morak. To speak for the people. All of the people."

"As do I," said Morak.

"Well good! But, as I am the premier and concerned with the well being of every Tharsisian, is it not rather audacious of you to propose to inform me of their wills?"

"Sir," said Morak, speaking directly to the premier, ignoring the tribunes, "because you do love and live for the common good, I know you will agree with me. The citizenry is vitally interested in the oversight of the Water Works. Getting water to Tharsis is not easy, and maintaining and upgrading equipment more difficult still. Many contracts are issued, many legal judgments are rendered in cases of right versus right."

He went on. His speech grew technical, but never sententious; both the engineering and the finances of the Martian water flow were given extensive fleshing. He spoke to the maintenance of the hard plastic pipelines that brought the water from the North Pole, the purifying and filtering system, and the city distribution center that guaranteed no Tharsisian would ever be short of the vital fluid. He managed to slip in his own contributions to the upgraded systems, and in doing so reminded Ishihara why he thought he had heard Morak's name before. The purification system Morak had invented and installed at the Water Works dramatically cut the expense of treating Martian water. The system had been subsequently used across Mars and on most off-world colonies. Ishihara remembered clearly. The engineer's history of success agitated the suspicions of the caged tribune.

Morak then gave a short lecture on the history of Martian citizen oversight committees. He missed no opportunity to bring up examples of such committees adding ingenuity to the institutions they oversaw. He cited instances when citizen oversight had revealed managerial malfeasance, system glitches, and wasted efforts.

Since Morak was going to hold forth for some time, the tribunes finally sat down. Their posture broke down, always a problem for Martians, even those in support cages; they slid into awkward positions in their chairs, constricting the circulation of blood and oxygen. They grew bored. Because of such posture and breathing patterns, Martians had, among human colonies, noticeably shorter attention spans than the rest.

But, the premier remained alert. He noted the charisma of the engineer, the man's confidence, and his rough-hewn magnetism. As for the content of Morak's presentation, Akbari noted with amusement that the engineer never broached the politically thorny topic of the relationship of Tharsis and Earth. Morak stayed on message and never suggested he had any thoughts other than what was best for the Water Works.

Akbari interrupted the engineer. "You are an articulate and persuasive young man; your facts are credible; your grasp of detail is most impressive. But, young sir, I am responsible for the total well-being of Tharsis: so, excuse me if I ask some uncomfortable questions." Morak remained still; a slight smile grew on the left side of his mouth. Akbari said, "So, I ask, what is your motivation, Morak? You see yourself as the czar of water, the single sum of all survival?"

Morak held his arms out wide and said, “As senior engineer, I understand what must be done. Like you, I am putting myself at the service of my nation. Ponder the possibilities I’ve laid before you. That’s all I ask.”

“None of which answers the question, sir,” said Dlette.

Morak shrugged and smiled openly. “I think our motivations are the same...”

“Bollocks, man.” Akbari sighed. “No one’s motivations are purely social. Oh, perhaps on the surface, but any inner reflection will teach you that all motives are personal, deep, and simple. Our monkey brains are hard wired for personal survival. A man like yourself, who when asked about his motives seeks to hide behind public good, is either up to something or lacks self-knowledge! In either case, you’re not gaining our trust.”

“But you aim to further your own position,” said Ishihara, coming out of his stupor now that the technical rigmarole was finished. He awakened quickly; after all, accusations were the currency of tribunal debate. Tit-for-tat he fully understood and mostly enjoyed.

Morak laughed, “If that’s what you’re worried about, I don’t do anything but work. I need work like others need air. When I am not challenged I...I think maybe a bit too much. Perhaps, Mr. Premier, you and I are alike in that way. Imagine if you, the busiest of men, were on the sideline while you saw vital work going undone.” He paused, and then softened boyishly. “I don’t mean to be evasive”

During the remainder of the thirty-minute meeting, accusatory questioning and glib answers abounded. Finally, the premier grunted conclusively and stood. “You have given me much to think about. I want a written, bullet-point presentation of all that you have said...”

Morak put an information disc down on the table. He said as Tomic bounced over and picked up the disc, “I had myself tutored on you preferences, sir. You always require written petitions.”

Akbari grunted, then said at full volume, “Get me the report, we’ll decide soon. We’ll announce Friday.”

#

The Martian provincial capitals were each designed to provide a modicum of grace to urban Mars. Each city was expressive and, in a quirky way, homey. More than Tharsis, the other capital cities, those in Isidis and Acidalia, used Martian metals to give continuity and distinctiveness. Isidis was known for its polished basalt structures, with round freestanding buildings; there were no right angles on an Isidisian street map. Acidalia had its nickel-plated balconies, its configuration of neighborhood squares, patterned after the urban grids of Renaissance Italy.

All buildings in Tharsis, all streets, walkways, and plazas were made of Martian brick. As he walked across the wide bare Administration Building plaza toward the town, Morak saw this deserted and featureless plaza as an architectural waste. His mind quickly sketched a pattern of bamboo (the only ornamental flora on Mars, also the only timber); he imagined fountains and benches: an urban park that citizens would stroll through on the peaceful nights. *All people enjoy parks*, he thought. *We could create a destination for the entire city; we'd attract workers visiting from the farm and factory domes, and even Earth tourists.* But the thought lasted only a second before his attention turned to his next day's chore.

In his capacity as chief engineer, he was to make a final inspection of a new wastewater retrieval plant scheduled to open in a small dome just north of the capital city. For two hours, he would walk every inch of the plant with its managers at his side. Plant management was particularly proud of its social mission to turn sludge into high-grade fertilizer, the backbone of Martian agriculture. (Pesticides were unneeded: no bugs on Mars.) This was one area of the water system where Morak had not 'written the book', as they say; he was fascinated by his staff's accomplishments, and he would tell them so, individually. Then, in front of the workers and the media transporters, he would give a short speech about the excellence of the workmanship, the added value to the community, and the gratitude of Tharsis. To prepare for this, he would tonight spend one hour going over his notes and re-reading recent scholarly articles on waste management. However, first he would stop in at The London Bond for a beer and a cigarette.

Like many Martians, Morak smoked daily but lightly; their short lifespan gave Martians little incentive to avoid smoking and drinking: health habits were an irrelevancy for the doomed. Concern for his mental powers restricted his drinking, and for the same reason, he did not smoke marijuana, as most Martians did. He had never tried enhanced marijuana, a genetically engendered strain of indica that gave vivid hallucinations for up to three hours. He had seen many of the sad sack denizens of Dolores Town give their

lives over to the drug. They began by questioning reality, and finally lost all interest in daily life.

The London Bond was a plush pub, a watering hole. Government and downtown workers crowded the hot spot nightly. Visitors from other provinces, those in the know, made sure each trip to Tharsis included at least one evening in the London Bond. Loud talking groups of Earth people-- crews from cargo ships, business people, and tourists-- sat or stood elbow to elbow with Tharsisians and other Martians. Local residents sipped acidic, local wine, and glanced around the room, finding entertainment in the behavior of the foreigners who repelled, frightened, and fascinated Martians. Crates of the ten liquors available on Mars were stacked haphazardly behind the pub's iron bar. One long wall was gold plated, as were many Martian pubs. Large finds of gold in the asteroid belt made the metal a common ornamentation on off-planet worlds. Among its uses was to bring color to the otherwise monotonous red, black, and pewter of Mars. The other walls, un-painted Martian brick, were covered floor to ceiling with artwork. Martians were encouraged to take up the arts as an outlet, and a great many of them took up brush and palette. However, art galleries never popped up; the only Martian museums were dedicated to Earth and its bedazzling natural wonders. Only the pubs displayed native paintings and craftwork. Some of the red planet's 'pub-hung artists' became underground celebrities. Their society was sought; they were flattered, feasted, and befriended. For this life of slight glamour, as well as for the pleasure of practicing the craft, Martian artists worked and created. Sometimes a painting sold to an Earth tourist, but many Martian artists would not sell to collectors from the mother planet, for they believed Earthlings just took the art home to mock the technical inelegance and thematic sameness of the Martian artists.

Morak found a small round table toward the back of the room, and from there, he ordered a salad and ale. To take his mind off the issues that had for the past several days dominated his thinking and spirit, he relaxed into 'people watching'. He cast his eyes around the room, taking special note of the mood of the locals. A man who worked long hours and spent months at a time away from the city, Morak enjoyed people watching more than most.

The people of Tharsis held oceanic wealth. The riches from deuterium 2b seeped up through the regolith and into the red streets of Tharsis and the pockets of its people. Those with large holdings in the deuterium 2b mines (i.e. landlords) were perhaps the richest people in the inhabited archipelago of the solar system. Even middle class

workers, white collar or blue, shared in the abundance; large apartments, good salaries, free transportation and medical care were the right of every Martian. Tharsis had no poor, other than the addicts in Dolores Town, and even they had homes to go to, should they desire. No one lacked materially, and corporations from Earth and Luna longed to hang their shingles on the streets of Tharsis.

Morak ate and drank alone, invisible, for the most part. Despite trying to divert himself, he began turning over in his mind the salient points of his most recent meeting. He felt sure that the volume of his facts and the tone of his delivery had made an impression on the premier, though perhaps not on the drowsy tribunes. The nation stood behind the premier, and so his ear, heart, and self-interest were the targets of Morak's argument. *After meeting them, he thought, I see clearly. Civilian oversight is the only way to prevent disaster. These people, this "governing elite" live in permanent conflict, posturing, angling, sneaking, and destroying. The Earth bureaucracy is ossified and easily pleased; this native clique is unpredictable. I don't detect any rules. Men without patterns are apt to do anything. To leave them in total charge of the Water Works...I won't let that happen.*

For several minutes, he thought out and wrote down his impressions of the people, the issues, and the implications of the meeting with Akbari. Next, he wrote out a list of action points for himself. Morak then folded the paper and placed it in his backpack. He looked around the room. His first impression was that the heavy yellow fog, mingling marijuana and tobacco, could not be pleasant for anyone; yet, the well dressed and lively crowd packed around the bar and through the aisles between tables seemed oblivious to discomfort, except for some of the nonsmoking Earthlings, who occasionally coughed or wiped their eyes. These denizens of "Street Level", as the Thracian nightlife was called, bewildered Morak with their good-time lives. He did not understand their dress, multicolored, pseudo-cotton pants and jackets, referred to derisively by Earthlings as "leisure suits". Conformity was the order of the day. The current fashion was women in earth colors, men in air colors, cobalt blue jackets being pervasive. These Martians mingling with Earth people appeared relaxed, even frolicsome, and seemed not at all burdened by the infamous off-world depression syndrome.

Perhaps, he thought. Perhaps it is better to parcel part of the day for pleasure. Happiness seems frivolous, but in the face of life's inexorable decay is effort less vain? I worry away my life, and for what? My whole existence is spent trying to keep the water

flowing, believing all the while that in a few brief centuries, our sickly civilization will be gone, dust. Our destination is oblivion, why pretend otherwise? Why not drink and dance? Why not tell jokes and flirt? Why not relieve my brain, which has been taxed all of the day? For nearly an hour, he sat and sipped ale, mulling the importance of camaraderie, existence, and will. For it all, his conclusions were as blank as the destiny of Mars. Finally, he wondered, *is it wrong to enjoy work more than play? Is the preference a symptom of a psychological defect?*

His thoughts were interrupted when a cautious young man approached his table and abashedly asked if he were indeed Citizens' Advocate Morak. The youth had thick black eyebrows that bounced and squeezed with his every word; his voice was constricted as though to withhold as much of himself as he could. Slightly above a whisper, he said, with a questioning inflection at the end of every sentence, "The premier would very much like to see you tonight, sir. In fact, sir, I have a vehicle that will take us there now." Morak, as though coming out of a deep meditation, found himself disinclined to talk. A silence ensued. The young man added tremulously. "You will be feted."

"Well, being feted is good," said Morak mused aloud. He did not rise. "But, why the invitation?"

The young man leaned his head back and gritted his teeth as though desperately trying to remember something. "The Premier said that I was to ask you to take the invitation at face value. He said that he and his sister had nothing on their minds except to further their acquaintance with you and to share an excellent meal."

"To further their acquaintance with me?"

"Yes, sir. His precise words," the messenger said with relief, feeling certain he had now conveyed, in the exact words, everything he had been instructed to tell.

Morak thought for a moment. Of course, he must go: a private dinner was a backdoor chance to influence the premier. However, the circumstances seemed shady; he would have preferred a formal dinner with others present. However, that was not the opportunity before him. In the end, the citizens' advocate followed the young messenger out the door. In a polished black state vehicle, the two drove back to the Administration Building. Not another word was spoken between them: the young man was nervous, and Morak lost in thought.

#

Dinner increased Morak's bewilderment. The table had been set for just him, the premier, and Raluca, and the Akbaris treated him as if he were the most interesting person in the world. Raluca touched his arm and thigh throughout the meal, and told him she admired his devotion to the Martian water supply. They pleaded for the story of his life. Morak did not like talking about his past, even though his personal history was rather colorful and would have given a natural storyteller grist for a long, entertaining night. But self referential conversation was not his way, and pulling the story out of him required many questions by the Akbaris. This much they learned: he had studied engineering in school, mostly to please his adoptive parents, to whom he was grateful, and about whom he would say no more except that they were simple people, who lived quietly. He described school as a playground insufficiently rigorous for his parents' tastes. At night mother and father painstakingly tutored him at home.

"You mean that in school," said the premier, his mouth filled with cabbage, onions and beans, "you spent your time at play. Didn't see much of the library. Eh?"

"No, sir, that is not what I mean. I mean that I found the lessons easy and the competition weak. I played with the academics, getting the best marks despite little effort. I never really considered the place a major learning center. Certainly not substantial enough to teach me what my father and myself wanted me to know. But, the libraries I haunted daily. That is where I got my education, from books, not from lectures. And, of course, at home."

"And after graduation?" asked Raluca. The Akbaris had put down their silverware. They listened to him with smiles so sublime that one would think they were hearing a Mozart quartet.

"A checkered past," Morak said. "I don't put a good face on it, but I don't think traveling in poverty tainted me. I worked as a miner and an agricultural worker, tending an avocado orchard, with the circus as a barker, though occasionally, when the wrestler was ill or drunk, I stood in for him and wrestled local challengers. The job took me to all three provinces and even to the south. But, as time went on, each night I'd lie abed thinking: I've seen it all now what? Living on the fly is a young man's episode, not the way to use a lifetime. All that kicking around, living what I'd thought would be a free and rewarding life...No, I decided that a man's worth is measured by his contributions to

his society. So, I came to the city, got a job at the Water Works. I found the scientific education my father had instilled in me gave me great advantages over the other workers. Apparently, management noticed it too; my current position represents the fifth promotion I've had in eight years. There's dignity in toiling for Water Works. I'm glad of that. Very glad. Finding an honorable living that impacts the lives of Martians is not easy."

The last course was served, a mock-chocolate cake, the most delicious Morak had ever eaten. After a couple of nibbles, the premier pushed away his desert and looked at the engineer like a proud father. "You are so different from me. Don't you think so, Raluca?"

"He is strong and has vision. You don't lack those qualities, Brother."

"What I mean is, you've made your way with effort and work, answering only to yourself, to your own values. I, on the other hand, have made my way by adapting to the values of the world—and by judging people's potential. I have a gift, there. The media said so, didn't they, Raluca? I can see who'll help the causes I champion, and I can tell who will try to injure me. I place people. I see who should do what. I say, *you do this* and *you do that*. And I do that well." Through a faint twitch at the corner of Morak's eye, Akbari read the slight falseness in the man's smile. His tone turned confidential, "Despite appearances, I don't work that hard. There are days when I can do my job without touching an object. Just questioning, listening, and deciding. Perhaps a man of action like you might think mine a pale existence."

Morak shook his head. For a moment, he looked to the ceiling as he collected his thoughts. "You are the first man of Tharsis, and for that alone I give you all due. Unlike me, you have not asked yourself, 'how should I live, what suits me best'. Early in life, you saw what needed to be done and set out to do it. It's funny you call me a man of action; in my own mind, I ponder too much, and act too little. I spent years indulging my thirst for adventure, variation, and sensation, while you, my premier, went right to work."

"I'm right again," the premier beamed and looked to his sister. Then back to Morak. "What self-appraisal. I admire little insights like that! You see, those years of roaming and discovery did work for you. I could never see myself so plainly. I pay no attention to my private motivations or emotions: as you say, I see what must be done and

do it. The bitter side is, I make many mistakes. I am rash, while you, sir, are reflective. Oh, that I could learn your skills, Citizens' Advocate."

Morak pushed his empty plate away, after wiping with a finger the last speck of chocolate. He leaned back in his chair and looked at the raven-haired siblings, the most powerful people on Mars. A silence ensued, where each looked at each. After a surprisingly comfortable moment, Raluca smiled ruefully, and then said to her brother, "Citizens' Advocate Morak doesn't want our flattery. He wants to know what we want with him."

Morak opened his mouth, but said nothing.

The premier looked hurt. "I wanted to know you. You were impressive today, coming alone to present before the tribunes and me. Not many men would do that. Now here again, tonight you tell your story so plainly, so objectively. I'm most impressed."

"We've never had a Citizens' Advocate venture alone into the Administration Building," Raluca added. "They all seem to need moral support."

"I liked it," said Akbari. "There's a brave man, I told myself. A man who believes in himself. Not doubt-ridden like so many who come to see me. Talent and courage, we need more of that on Mars. And energy! My god, how much energy it must have taken for that fine education, to wend your way around the globe, and then to ascend up the latter at the Water Works. Amazing! When I see such a man, I always search for a higher purpose for him. "

"I haven't found greater purpose than keeping the water flowing," said Morak. "To argue for water takes no courage, only research and reason."

Raluca said, "We Martians are not daring folk. We are not like the sailors of the Age of Exploration or the hitchhikers of the Beat Generation. No, we like to keep a lid on things, security above adventure, even at the expense of growth. Most Martians prefer stagnation to uncertainty. But you, sir, you are a rare man on Mars. We're fascinated."

"Yes," said Akbari firmly. "We're fascinated. And I ask myself, can this man do even more for Tharsis?"

"I advocate for the Water Works, not for myself," said Morak. He folded his napkin, laid it before him. "Have you thought more about my proposal?"

“Well, oversight committees,” said Raluca with distaste. “You know, they do have their draw backs. Uneducated citizens need constant instruction about the obscure and complex processes. You’ve said yourself how insufficient our schools are. So much time is wasted. Sometimes I think Tharsis will be overrun by these committees and we’ll have governmental gridlock.”

“Then let’s create a system where they work,” said Morak. “You see, my premier, your skills are now needed more than mine. Take advice, and then you, sir, decide how the committee should operate. Let this be yet another Martian gift to civilization. Akbari, Premier of Tharsis will design citizen oversight committees that aid rather than encumber our institutions. I admit they’re clumsy as currently constituted and charged. However, they do give confidence to the people that their interests are put first, and our people need to be confident that they’re being served. Mars has done so much to eliminate the social plagues of the Earth: war, usury, and private insurance. Now, let’s design another improvement in democracy. Let’s create a successful partnership between the government and the governed. That is my main point, sir. Perhaps overseen by a board, perhaps appointed by yourself...”

“And the tribunes?” said Raluca. She now leaned away from Morak, as if to watch his body language as well as his face while she listened closely to what he said.

“As you think best,” said Morak with a slight bow of his head toward Raluca. Then he said in a softer voice, “I guess they do need to roll up their sleeves and get involved.”

Akbari pinched his nose, looked to his sister. She returned his glance by dropping her eyes to her lap and smiling slightly. The premier said with husky earnestness, “It’s always easier to apologize than to ask for permission. I’ll deal with the tribunes.” He slapped the table and grinned broadly. “I have decided: we will set up the Water Works Citizen Oversight Committee. Your suit is granted.”

Morak’s neck snapped. He had never dreamed of getting a positive resolution so quickly. He wondered how the tribunes could be so easily ignored. So, this was the way the world worked: get to the top man, speak to him one on one, speak to his own interests, and make the deal quickly. More than planning, details and statistics, personal diplomacy had changed the tide.

“You see, I keep an open mind,” said Akbari. He saw Morak’s bafflement at the sudden acceptance. “That’s right, I listen. Oh, I question too, don’t get me wrong. Questioning is an essential tool of leadership, and, I suppose, of reasoning in general. But, I’ll let you in on a secret, my friend Morak; I question differently. You saw the tribunes. They question too, at least when they were awake they did. Ha! But, they are trapped in that old philosophical canard: skepticism. It’s the only way they know how to ask questions: find something to be skeptical of and query. If you ever have the misfortune of having to work closely with them—well, if you do work with them, you’ll see what I mean. Their only intellectual propeller is skepticism. Which leads to what, my friend?”

Morak thought a moment. The premier leaned back in his chair, smiled and waited. It amused Akbari to have someone seriously consider his view of the world.

“Give up?” Akbari whispered playfully.

“Not at all,” said Morak. He ran a quick word association in his mind, skepticism, disbelief, doubt. “If skepticism is your only approach to inquiry, you tend to become a cynic.”

“Or even a nihilist,” said Raluca distantly.

“Exactly!” Akbari jumped up and applauded. “He’s wonderful, eh Raluca? After those dull tribunes, it’s such a pleasure to break bread with a sharp mind.”

His sister smiled at Morak, then said to her brother, “But don’t you have something else to say to the Citizens’ Advocate?”

“Yes, I do!” said Akbari, as he sat back down. “You see, cynicism is a physis disease. So is sentimentality. Get trapped emotionally with either of those and you’ll never understand this life. Do you see? Of course you do.” He leaned back again, narrowed his little eyes and pointed his finger at Morak. Akbari chuckled as he spoke. “You have a mind, sir. And I like it. I see great things ahead for you.”

“Let’s go have our cigarettes in the sitting room,” said Raluca standing. Taking Morak’s arm and pressing against it with her bosom, she led him away from the table. She whispered in Morak’s ear. “You’ve earned the best ally on this world. No one can cut through red tape like my brother.”

#

They moved to a warm, dark sitting room. Muted crimson carpets, soft lights, and the starry sky above converged on the scene like a pastoral dream. Six massive black recliners, each with its own side table, were arranged in a semi-circle around the sunken hologram fireplace. The ever-sore limbs and unstable spine of elongated Martians made recliners the centerpiece of every home; the premier's plush chairs were the finest available. As Morak settled in, he could not help letting forth a groan of luxury, for he had never sat in such a chair. The premier came to his side and handed him a glass of Earth whiskey called "Scotch". It was hard not to feel as if one had arrived, relaxing in the expensive chairs, holding his first Earth whiskey in his hand, and having just received the private assurances of Akbari support for his project. The premier told him he would personally usher the proposals through government. No more advocacies needed. Morak would receive written reports of every meeting and agreement. If he did not, he was told to contact Tomic directly.

Raluca said, "It's true. Your Water Works are as safe as you would want them. You should consider that challenge, that life objective, won and complete."

"Total victory," Akbari chimed.

Morak could only chuckle. *What more is there to say*, he wondered.

Akbari stretched out in his chair, sighed aloud, then rolled his head toward Morak. "It's time to move into large realms. You're a man of gravitas. A bigger arena. That's what's needed. Time to channel your growth. Life that doesn't grow withers. I think we've all agreed on that tonight."

Morak sipped his drink and waited. Ambitions had low ceilings on his forlorn planet. There were no large arenas on Mars. That was the maddening restriction faced by the few ambitious scions of their adventuresome, space traveling forbearers. On a planet reclaimed from desolation, with its people listless and chronically ill, where life support and mining were the only big industries, what could be expected? He had thought this over during his wandering days and concluded that if he were to have a rewarding life, he would have to be content with the limits of Mars. What could Akbari have to offer? What would he demand in return for his citizen committee? Now the other shoe was going to drop. Morak would not receive an offer, but rather, hear a price.

“I see,” said the premier, “that you follow my drift.”

Morak did not fully understand, but he nodded.

Akbari nodded in return; they both chuckled. Akbari made a great show of stretching. After a moment, in a barely audible, but strong voice, he intoned, “This is how we will stand. Me behind, you face out. We stand before a great threat and Tharsis will need all its strength to survive. We, you and I, must be the foundation of that strength.”

Morak looked first at the premier, then up through the ceiling at the Milky Way. *What is this man getting at? Me face out, what can that mean? I'll endure what ever he forces on me as payment for the citizen committee.*

“Our people care only about their private lives,” said Raluca. “Our people have decided to live their own lives and for the most part, they ignore. Their apathy is impenetrable.” She paused to light a cigarette. She inhaled deeply. Morak and her brother waited. She shook her head. “They groan with indifference at the medical problems. You would think that shortened life expectancy would rile them, but nothing seems to interest them besides their dreary entertainments and spectacles. You saw that when you campaigned for the public oversight of the Water Works.”

“But,” said Akbari, “Your fervor swayed the people. I saw it. So did Raluca—even Dlette I think?”

“Yes,” said Raluca. “He brought it up first.”

The premier said, “Even the Landlord League ghouls are in your pocket. Eternally conflicting factions looked to you as the key to their joint desires. That’s rare talent. That’s leadership. I believe in leadership, my friend. Show me a nation or an enterprise with first-rate leadership, and I’ll show you a success story. No other ingredient is so essential to an organization, nor to a mission. Wise and charismatic leadership: what a blessing to any plan, to any endeavor. Why do I place so much importance on this virtue? Because, in my position, I have final responsibility for many plans and many endeavors. Work and plans I have a plenty; but leaders, gifted leaders, now there’s another story. There my resources are scant. When I find a man who can galvanize others and organize the masses, I am morally obliged, by dent of my premiership, to set him to work for the good of Tharsis.”

The Akbaris waited for Morak to say something. He kept his eye on his whiskey, swirled it in the glass, and then drank it down in a gulp. Finally, he said, “May I have more whiskey?”

Akbari smiled and rose with an assist from the chair that gingerly brought him to an upright position. He walked toward the whiskey bottle. Once it was in his grasp, he paused. He held the position looking back and forth between his two interlocutors. He said with quiet solemnity, “War is at hand.”

After this astonishing pronouncement, he poured more whiskey all around. Returning to his seat, the premier presented the following scenario, frequently punctuating his speech with requests that Morak fathom the urgency of his remarks. Their neighboring provinces abhorred the new Tharsisian democracy, her physical wealth, and communal harmony. The other provinces of Mars and the tyrants of Earth had just that day demanded that ownership of the Pavonis Mons Mines be taken out of the jurisdiction of Tharsisian law. Akbari did not explain that his personal role in the new nationalized mining operations was also an issue being challenged, or that the other provinces feared being cut off from the planet’s wealth. He stated that the issue was public ownership of a vital resource and Tharsisian sovereignty. Akbari’s hitherto friendly face grew flinty. He narrowed his small black eyes and his mouth tightened into a small circle. “What is at stake is the ability of the nation to administer its own mineral resources with laws which reflect our democratic values. I, your premier, am the man to lead this country in its struggle for self-determination, but I am not the man to lead a militia. For that, Morak, I have chosen you.”

“What militia?” asked Morak.

“The force you will lead.”

Morak froze, and then laughed. “You’re taking the piss out of me, sir.”

“I am as serious as death. I mean exactly what I say.”

“My brother,” said Raluca, “is an impeccable judge of character. It’s his best trait.”

“I already told him that,” Akbari said irritably. After a quick drink of whiskey, he said to Morak. “Of course there will be little if any actually shooting. No one really

wants fighting and no one could possibly profit by death and destruction. But, we must be credible! Tharsis must demonstrate that we can defend ourselves.”

“The problem there,” added Raluca, “is we have no army and no weapons.”

“We have explosives,” Morak said off-handedly. “We have mining explosives.”

Akbari smiled and toasted his sister. “Is this the man? My goodness, perfect. Thinking like a general already.”

THREE

Although the wan Martians resented Earth's perceived indifference to their sufferings, still the people of the red planet worshiped the blue planet, the fruitful, beautiful, and magical home of this lost-in-space species. The forlorn exiles treated all things Earthen with trembling reverence. The belief grew, on both planets, that only through contact with the substances of the Mother Earth could Martians feel a sense of religion, spirit, or communion. Shortly after Mars was colonized, the Gaia theory had become settled science and Earth's orthodox religion. With biologists and physicists now sanctioning the general tenor of their world view--that Earth in its entirety was a living, conscious being—Gaia worship swept across the transnational bourgeoisie. Together science and myth were again in alignment, quickly supplanting major religions of the first two millennia. However comforting the mass acceptance of a living Earth as the spirit uniting humanity might have been for those on that planet, the parochial nature of the new god did not give much hope to those stranded on a dead planet.

From the earliest days of settlement, the off-world craving for spiritual union with the mysterious life affirming forces of Earth were catered to at church-like institutions called abbeys. These chapels were found in every city, each mining center, and in all the larger agricultural domes on Mars. Holy buildings, staffed by Earth abbots, drew Martians to meditate, to pray, and to refresh their spirits by drinking terrestrial water. When Tharsis had declared its independence from Earth, and broke away from the other provinces, there was never a question of removing its abbeys. Akbari used their presence to sell the idea that this was a soft separation from Earth's government. Godless Mars adored their abbeys.

Morak made his way to an abbey at the end of the city's main boulevard. After midnight, the outside air was turned down, leaving Tharsis in a drowsy stillness. He normally went to the abbey late at night, when the bustle of life had subsided. Walking through the empty streets and stale air, the engineer had a sense of well-being. In the dark silence of night, he was released from the thoughts and emotions of the distracting crowd; in the bustling daytimes, he was pestered by a peculiar sensitivity to the lugubrious thoughts and feelings of his kind, as if there were no filter between the raw minds of the people and the mind of Morak.

Inside the abbey, he found himself alone in a candle-lit room with pine walls. Massive holographs of Earth's natural wonders--waterfalls, reef life, the Himalayas--covered the walls with the same artistic and political intent of medieval tapestries. As was intended, the smell of wood overwhelmed and tranquilized him. Along with individual meditation cells, there were viewing stations where Martians could lie in plush recliners and the scan holograph library for favorite images of the home planet's matchless bounty. In the middle of the room, a great globe, inlaid with the Earth's impossibly varied minerals and jewels, towered and spun. This one splendid orb contained more colors than the whole of Mars. The spectrum awed and made heart-sore the Martian pilgrims. Faced with lush Earth, barren Mars could seem hellish, even to the most established and acclimated.

Abbeys were the only places on Mars where wood was to be found; each surface and piece of furniture came from the forests of Earth. Cedar, oak, and teak statuary filled the pine walls, floors, and ceilings. Martians learned from the knurls of woods, the obvious difference between organic and stone. Each day the surfaces within Martian reach, about 10 to 12 feet, were covered with the fingerprints of reverent visitors. Here Martians saw a world beyond the necessary simplicity, some said the baneful sterility, of their lives; a world of rich lands and oceans, and, most exciting of all, creatures other than man. The jewel of the solar system was not like the rest of the universe, infinite in space and silence, frigid and showered in life-destroying cosmic rays. Here exotic life teemed and the eye was blinded by variety and texture. On Earth, wonder was infinite.

Almost all Martians came to find communion in the abbeys, and Morak himself always felt cleansed and re-energized after a visit. However, he was self-conscious about being seen in the hallowed place. He felt slightly foolish, superstitious. *It makes no sense, he thought. Why should sights, sounds, and smells of a planet I've never visited bring me closer to myself? Why should I believe in this invisible thing called a soul when I can only dimly sense it, and only in here? Where is the mathematic proof? Where is the tangible benefit from it all? Yet, I come. And when I leave, I feel closer to being whole. The feeling must be a self-preserving delusion created by my neuro-system.*

As he lay back in a wooden-rimmed recliner, he grew pleasantly dizzy with the smells of trees and oceans. He always chose the ocean to meditate on. Despite having seen pictures of oceans all his life, his mind boggled at the thought of so much water, so much uncontrolled water, and water filled with life. He understood the chemistry of life and fully accepted its profusion in water, but he could never quite grasp it, even while

watching the holographs in the abbey. This night, he did not watch the holographic ocean scene, but closed his eyes, giving all his attention to the salt sea smell and the roar of waves slamming against rocks. Images filled his mind, not of Earth but of strange golden oceans washing across the northern plains of his own planet. His pulse and breathing slowed. The sense of another, greater, more compassionate life force washed over him. Now his earlier embarrassment seemed a falsity, the defense of a hardened heart against the sublime. Morak's feelings of embarrassment turned to feelings of guilt, as the vanities of his life were momentarily exposed. Eventually, the guilt paled and disappeared; he found warmth flowing from his lower belly up through his solar plexus, through his heart and throat.

Suddenly, a sour scent trickled through the pine and brine. His nose twitched. Just as quickly, he recognized the mordant scent of an Earthling carnivore. Morak looked to his right. An opening had materialized on the wall opposite. A woman stood in the aperture. She was an Earthling, short and wiry as only Earth people could be. Her blond hair was cropped close, less than an inch from her skull. Her face, like all Earth people past the age of twenty, struck Morak as creased and weathered from gravitational pressure and outdoor exposure. She wore a white cotton robe, a cloth of Earth and of prestige. Few Martians owned cotton. He realized, as he looked at the robe, how much he longed to wear the exotic fabric next to his skin. A sigh of desire escaped him.

The robe signified that the Earth woman was the abbot. One abbot manned each abbey and their position was combination of historian, physical scientist, and spiritual consular. Abbots came from Earth for two-year tours of duty, and then returned to Earth for five years before they could accept another off-world assignment. Possibilities for assignments included the Earth's dull, overcrowded moon, the ice worlds of Europa, Enceladus, and Titian, and a few other lesser-developed moons. Worst of all were the grim mining asteroids. Against these alternatives, Mars was considered a plum station, and Tharsis the sweetest fruit on the tree. Mars remained an adventure for people from Earth and competition for posts was high. Morak knew this person had overcome much to land her assignment: she wanted to be on Mars!

"Can I help you?" said the abbot. Her voice was soft, slightly hoarse; her eyes were smoky with sleep; her lips swollen and languid.

Morak rose and walked toward her. "I don't mean to disturb you. I can be alone."

“If that’s what you want, but it’s no disturbance.”

“You were sleeping.”

“And I will sleep again. But, I am here for you. Always.” Being an abbot was a twenty-four hour a day job—the Martian day is not much different than an Earth day. “If you need to talk with someone, I am here for that. Or if you want me to check your posture or ignite your chakras before you meditate.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m here to be alone.”

The abbot bowed and smiled. She said, “Good night, my friend,” and disappeared back into the paneled wall. No sooner had she gone than Morak regretted not asking her to check his meditation posture. Momentary diffidence had squandered a chance to optimize his meditation. Morak took a seat in an oaken meditation chamber. He sat erect, shoeless, feet flat on the floor. He folded his hands in his lap. He breathed in deeply, counting to six, then exhaled gently to another count of eight. He touched with his thumb, his forehead, throat, heart, solar plexus, and below his navel. He breathed in again, and then began the slow, silent repetition of the four syllable Sanskrit mantra he had been given on his thirteenth birthday in this very abbey. Sanskrit was still used for mantras because the language had evolved out of the proto-Indo-European grunts and moans. Therefore, Sanskrit was a minimally corrupted human expression of Earth’s peculiar hum, the special note that is Earth’s contribution to the gazillion-note chord of the sigh of the universe. Such were the beliefs of the day.

After twenty minutes, a small bell chimed above Morak’s head. He bowed, stretched his legs, arms, and torso for about 30 seconds, and then slowly opened his eyes. He uttered a faint prayer, “The Earth is my mother, the home of my ancestors, always and forever. Imbue me with thy spirit.” His heart beat like a radiant metronome. He was suffused with ‘the warmth’.

A few moments later, Morak left the meditation chamber, and returned to the recliner. Again, he turned on the sounds and sights of Earth’s ocean. *Now, I must think. What do I become by accepting the premier’s offer? As a water engineer, I’ve never doubted the value of my work. It’s honorable work! But now Tharsis calls me in her moment of crisis. But war? To become an agent of the most profane and wasteful activity known to humanity? Then again, to avoid personal sin and thereby let the nation*

fall...A man is judged by his contributions to mankind. I am the guardian of my own ethics. What of this short life, should I give to repugnant war?

Guardian of my own ethics. He repeated the phrase, in much the same rhythm as he had chanted his mantra. The phrase had been at the front of his mind for most of his life. It had come to the engineer in a most personal moment. One day, when Morak was nine years old, a handsome, smiling man came unexpectedly to his home. Morak's mother at first told the man to go away, but he was smiling and persistent; eventually she let him in. She told Morak, "This is your birth father." That afternoon, the smiling man spoke mostly with Morak's mother, and showed little interest in his offspring. However, at one point, while his mother was in the bathroom, the smiling man grabbed Morak's shoulder and said, "You are the guardian of your own ethics, relinquish that guardianship and no matter what else you are, you will no longer be a man of substance." Morak had no reason to defer to this man. After that day, Morak never saw the smiling man again. As the years went on, the phrase popped into his mind, his birth father's only legacy. Morak wanted to dismiss the words as a nostrum of the conscious-bitten. He held in contempt the smiling man, the deserter. As a teenager, he wished the words away, and yet, the phrase returned to him time and again. Finally, after his time of roaming ended and he became an engineer for the Water Works, Morak embraced the advice. The phrase served him well.

Guardian of my own ethics? Foreign powers sweeping across Mars, foreign values in bloody tow. The soil of my birth marauded and bruised. If I can help...great Akbari says I can. If I could ... sway the outcome...Failure is no fear of mine. The prospect of war's battered bodies and deadly sorrows don't rip at my stomach. Not a bit of it. Perhaps a man with little physical fear... at such times. But, to be an instigator of war? I would be Judas to the peace of Mars. Perhaps for the sake of the nation, but perhaps only for the interests of the powerful.

After a few moments, the abbot popped her yellow head into the amber lit room. She smiled; through her weathered coarsened skin, her cheeks and forehead glowed. She said nothing, but nodded him adieu, as though she had sensed the end of his meditation and his self-questioning, though Morak was unaware of any finality to his dilemma.

#

Evening lingered late on Mars. In these, the final days of Month Fourteen the northwest night sky was mauve, with craquelures of orange clouds, while to the south, forbidding umber dust billows roiled. From her high patio Raluca and her old friend, Tribune Dlette, saw beyond the city and its long, narrow boulevards dotted with blue street lamps and cloaked in the purple shadows of urban night. Each sprawled across a chase lounge, Raluca and Dlette looked out on the highlands of the Tharsisian bulge toward the three towering volcanoes: Ascraeus Mons, Pavonis Mons and Arsia Mons. The great dark cones lurked over the vastness of red desert like Wagnerian pyramids. Raluca loved the dead volcanoes. She had climbed Ascraeus and Pavonis, not yet taking on the taller Arsia. Not visible from the city of Tharsis was Olympus Mons, an even higher peak. An extraordinary five-mile toboggan run enwrapped the highest mountain in the solar system. Steep and rutted, light on gravity, the course was sought out and trained for by adventurers across the solar system. Tobogganing was a favorite off-world sport for Earth people, and the planet's biggest tourist attraction. Few fey Martians cared to take on the dangerous challenge, and fewer still were women. Raluca was among the most adventurous. Her oft broken nose and scarred chin were the visible signs of her battered body. Beneath her long clothes, shattered and repaired ribs, arms and legs gave testimony to her morbid bravery.

"From above, the volcanoes look like tits," she said. "Have you seen those photos? Little black nipples on a flat and rusty chest."

They did not look at one another. Close since childhood, these two had often sat alone on this wide, circular porch, watching the ever-changing sand paintings of the Martian landscape. These were tender nights for the widower tribune. Dlette enjoyed nothing more than sitting on the porch with Raluca, sipping whiskey, smoking tobacco, and watching the night sky while they talked over the day's events. He yearned to bathe in moments such as these, relaxed, clear headed, and, above all, in her presence. He reached out to take her hand. She pulled back, smiled apologetically, and then picked up her glass of Earth whiskey.

"Have you ever," she asked, "read *The Alexandria Quartet*?"

The tribune frowned. "I seemed to have muddled through some parts. What's your point?"

"Don't be cross. My point was going to be...well, never mind."

“No. Tell me. What were you going to say?”

“I was going to say, that it’s a shame Durrell never got to live on Mars. He would have loved these colors and shapes.”

“Oh, yes, that is a bloody shame.”

Raluca slapped her hand at the air, and then rolled to her side, her hip rounded up, her back to him. Dlette moved his eyes slowly down the length of her. For some minutes, room stood still and silent around them. She was thinking about affairs of state; he was thinking about her. In their youth, they had tried to be lovers, but after a few somber and unsatisfying sexual encounters, Raluca had broken off the attempt, telling the crushed young man that she was not cut out for romance or for family. Dlette never stopped trying, although sometimes it was years between efforts. While many men would have retreated in frustration and anger from a woman who wanted no sex, Dlette’s love was undaunted. He accepted a life of platonic sorrow; he married another. Yet, one way or another, he had spent his life next to Raluca.

“Perhaps tonight,” he began, and then faltered.

“Don’t. Please don’t,” she said softly.

“It would be so easy, so good. I’ve taken care of everything. I brought the injection for me, the lubricant for you.”

“Atremble with romance, are we?” she laughed.

“Please, Raluca. Let’s try.”

“You must accept that I have no desire. I haven’t. None at all.”

“But we all have desire,” he pleaded.

“No. It never occurs to me,” she said. “Never.”

“Please, its not just a craving of the flesh. I want to be deeply joined with you. I want...”

“You sound like a spiritualist. Not the way to a Martian lady’s heart. We are soulless, and a man that doesn’t know that...well, he’s not very appealing. As a mate, I

mean. That's why you've never remarried. Martian women are put off by appeals to heart. Don't you know that? Of course you don't."

He would not look at her.

"You are a great public servant, and the best friend a girl could have. That counts for so much, don't you think?"

He swilled his whiskey, stood, walked around the patio, looking at nothing but the peach-colored pavement. She watched him, smiled when she caught his eye. He hopped twice across the patio then kneeled beside her.

"Then you will?"

"I won't."

"But why?" he cried.

"If I had a libido...but, you must believe me when I tell you, I have none." Then, as on so many previous nights, silence ensued. Dlette fell back into his chair and frowned at the stars above. After many minutes had passed, Raluca slapped Dlette's hand playfully. She said, "So what do you think of my brother's new best friend?"

"He's an ugly cuss," Dlette said with a pout.

"He's smart and I think he'll be just what my brother wants: a man passionately loyal."

Dlette shook his head distastefully. "Why that man? Good God, couldn't the premier find somebody of a bit more stature?"

Raluca said quietly. "It's not like we have people trained in war making. Nobody knows any thing about organized killing. Mars doesn't even breed interested amateurs. At least this one is a quick study and he's an engineer. Weapons need to be built from scratch. People need to be motivated. My brother doesn't want a figurehead. He wants somebody to do the job."

"Well, it isn't going to go down well. The rest of us are still very unsettled by what we're hearing and fear what we're not hearing. Forgive me if I don't always take your brother at face value."

Raluca said with cool matter-of-factness, "I've told you why he hired Morak."

"There has to be more. Have you ever seen the two of them together? Before now, I mean." She did not respond. Dlette went on, "If we are really to raise an army, wouldn't it be better to recruit some Earthling with military experience? They're always having wars on Earth; why not get a man who really knows how to kill people and blow things up? I know they hire out. This ugly engineer has no more experience with weapons than you or I do. It makes no sense! Besides, the endeavor is absolutely hopeless: we can't really fight Earth..."

"We can on Mars!" she said placidly. "My brother has been reading up on military history and he says that terrain familiarity is a tremendous advantage. He cited all these different Earth battles that were won and lost because one side knew the terrain."

"I know nothing of the history of war, but I did read War and Peace."

"Which is about all any of us know about war," she admitted.

"The impression I had was that once the explosions start, any damn thing can happen. It's not like engineering where nothing fights back. Has the premier said anything about that?"

Raluca shook her head regretfully: point Dlette.

Again, they fell into silence. After a few moments, he turned to her, saw her dozing and said loudly, "They'll send as many killers as it takes. Raluca, you must've thought of this!"

She collected her thoughts, and then said, "Earth can live with an independent Tharsis. They won't get involved in a protracted disturbance up here. It makes the Brussels government look incompetent to be scuffling with a space colony. The mass of Earthlings, when they think of us at all, thinks of us either with sympathy or with irritation over their taxes. They know the human cost of settling Mars. The common people are aghast that a couple hundred thousand deformed and sickly Homo sapiens are stuck out in space because of a bad policy decision made three hundred years ago."

Dlette held up his hand, "I know very little about how Earthlings think and I'm not up on Earth history the way you are, my dear."

“No matter. You know I’m right. The good people of Earth don’t like to reflect on the victims of their history. They still haven’t done anything for Africa.”

“Ah, yes, the ‘Chaotic Continent’. I guess I know something about Earth,” he said. “But, if they can’t help tens of millions of people on their own world, why should they care about a couple hundred thousand Martians?”

She shook her head. “I’m not saying we would be a ‘cause celebre’ down there. I’m saying the common person on Earth doesn’t want war against the disadvantaged.”

“And so?”

“And so: Brussels wants the rest of the solar system to be distant, vague, and profitable. That’s their strategic plan.”

“And again: so?”

“So, Brussels does not want a military peccadillo on Mars. They want silence. And, if there are battles, there won’t be silence. Opposition media will pay off insiders and they’ll get the whole story. It’s funny, Brussels can circulate any information it wants, so much so that their propaganda becomes truth, but they can’t stop their opponents and enemies from circulating contrary information. It’s a battle over who can pour the most nonsense into the collective conscious.”

“But, your point is?” said Dlette, she did not reply. He said, “Your point is: all we need to do is show we can resist for awhile, thereby thrusting the exotic Martian tragedy across the headlines of Earth, which Brussels can ill afford. And so, they want nothing to do with fighting. Not a skirmish. If we induce a skirmish, they’ll find a quick way to settle with us.”

“Do I hear a counter argument?” she asked. Raluca’s eyes were closed, and a slight smile crossed her lips.

“Not from me.”

“My brother is a genius at such things.”

Dlette grunted dubiously, then said without conviction, “My thoughts will be led by yours.”

Raluca, laughed, stretched, and rose. “The hour’s late.”

Dlette stood slowly. He gazed at her: she was radiant in her confidence and expectations. Raluca’s glow took his breath away. Before either of them realized what was happening, Dlette had his arms around her. He hugged her as if life depended on their bodies and souls becoming one. She patted his back.

FOUR

To the east of Tharsis, across the highlands of Lunae Planum and the vast crater bedotted Abaria Terra, lay Isidis, the most populated Earth colony in the solar system. Isidis was a windy land of black-streaked sand dunes. Great mineral resources, magnesium, platinum, and especially gold fueled a successful economy. Isidis was the transportation center of the red planet, landing site for shuttles from Earth and depot for freighters traveling to the outer solar system. In the north, the other Martian province, Acidalia, was the breadbasket of Mars and the outer solar system. Domed farmlands, frequently at the bottoms of impact craters, covered more of the planet than all towns, cities, and mines combined. Acidalian territory wrapped round the polar icecap, the source of water for its immense farming industry. The agrarian province covered nearly a third of the northern hemisphere of Mars, but few people lived there. For the past two hundred years, robots had performed all menial and heavy farm work. A small population of Martians managed the robots, irrigation, and distribution. These people descended from the French farmers who had originally settled Acidalia. Poorly educated, they lead simple lives, and their labors fed the Earth's off-world archipelago. Despite a sparse population, Acidalia had the highest birthrate of any off-world settlement; big families were a farm tradition, but on Mars, a large brood meant joblessness and frustration.

Nine years before these events, the Acidalian farmers had revolted over poor health care and scarce jobs. They stopped shipping food to the asteroid belt. The mining riches of the asteroids had reshuffled the economic order of Earth by pumping into the industrial complex hitherto unknown minerals that reacted to Earth's magnetism in ways that led to cold fusion, stronger plastics, and cures for viral diseases. Because Earth now depended heavily on off-world colonies for raw materials, which in turn depended on Acidalia for food, the farmers' work stoppage quickly brought an armed response from Earth. This was the only military action ever taken on Mars, and no injuries or property damage occurred. The sight of armed and armored Earthmen badly frightened the farm families, and Acidalia dropped all protest thirty minutes after the "killers" had touched their soil. Having restored order, the Earthman who led this daring raid, then Colonel, now General Maurice Dorda, stayed on, and, with Earth's blessing, installed himself as military governor of Acidalia. He stayed and he stayed; his grip grew tighter on the

reigns of the agricultural land's government. For years, he was hated--as foreign viceroys always are by the inhabitants of the land they occupy. However, as time went on, bitterness over the crushed revolt waned, and gradually the inattentive Acidalians came to feel that Dorda was fair, he was concerned about the people's welfare, and he worked tirelessly on Acidalia's behalf. Slowly, views changed; and finally, Dorda, though never loved or even liked, was eventually accepted as the province's leader. During his energetic administration, the province closely worked with Earth governments. Acidalia soon replaced Isidis as the diplomatic center of Mars. Consequently, desiring optimal proximity to Earth government, corporate and banking headquarters on Mars relocated from Isidis and to Acidalia. Dorda's viceroy-ship brought prosperity and power to a weak people, the people noticed and appreciated his success: the good people of Acidalia swallowed their distaste for the alien head of state as he spread the bounty. Like all other Earthmen living on Mars, he had arrived middle aged and uninterested in offspring. Always mistrusted by native Martians, most of these adventurers found it hard to get a foothold on the planet, and frequently had to return to Earth within a year. However, those like General Dorda, who did find a niche on the alien world, were greatly advantaged by their physical energy and their long lives. Dorda used his grip to become one of the richest and most powerful men on Mars. To the people of Acidalia, he was an Earthling-Martian, useful and amusing in ways, but to a family, they kept their distance from him. Yet, even those who disdained him personally would have voted for him, if the general had cared to have an election, which he did not. They labeled him *the generalissimo*, and the appellation was not a term of endearment.

The fourth inhabited area of Mars, Bakhuisen, was the mostly empty southern hemisphere. Over the years Bakhuisen was slowly populated by scientists, but had yet to turn up the kind of mineral wealth which had enriched Tharsis and Isidis, making those two provinces permanent extensions of Earth's civilization. The energetic Dorda found administrating the pastoral Acidalia a puny job, leaving too much time on his restless hands. He saw a vacuum in Bakhuisen, and effortlessly filled it by taking a census and setting up a couple of health clinics in this barren zone. A year later, without the foreknowledge of anyone on Mars, General Dorda, through back channels in Brussels, became the overseer of the crater ridden southern hemisphere. After successfully gaining official sanction to administrate Bakhuisen, he lobbied Brussels to declare the land a fourth province, an issue never resolved. For it all, Dorda achieved a power he had never dreamt of on Earth. He enjoyed the exercise of power and had a stomach for much more. "The time is coming," he told the people of Acidalia, "soon the mineral wealth of the

southern hemisphere will be exploited. The time is close, and your government has been chosen to direct the development of what I like to think of as South Acidalia. The large families of the farmland will no longer have to beg for work: we have an entire hemisphere to administrate and explore!”

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Meeting in a large slate-walled boardroom with strategic spotlighting, standing while the Martians sat, Dorda’s confidence of his dominance over Bakhuisen allowed him to assert to the Governor of Isidis, “In this matter, I speak for Bakhuisen as well as Acidalia.”

“Does that mean that you assert that you have two votes?” asked Governor Kirata, leader of Isidis.

Dorda waved off the suggestion and flashed his broad smile, displaying large and bony teeth. A wiry black moustache spilled across his rubicund cheeks; his eyes, pale blue, never dilated, impenetrable blinds over the windows of his soul. He smelled heavily of colognes. Whenever Dorda went out, he drenched himself in scented waters, a luxury item he bought from Earth, intended to disguise his otherworldly odors that so repelled the hypersensitive Martians.

He said, “My friend, I have no need of an extra vote. I’m confident that you and I will agree in all particulars. I can understand why you might expect such a claim from me, but be at ease. I am not the issue. As the leaders of Mars, the theft of the mines makes quite clear our responsibilities. Akbari and his henchmen must go, and the structure of the government of Tharsis must be reordered. It would be best for all if you and I resolve this issue without relying too much on Earth. We are the Martian solution.”

The governor shook his head. He closed his eyes and remained silent for some moments. He doubted the generalissimo’s ability to conceive of any action that did not, first of all, further his own self-interest. The man’s history was a catalogue of self-serving maneuvers disguised as the public good. Yet, what could Kirata do? He had to work in close coordination with the ambitious generalissimo, for there were no other partners to be had, and the man did have skills that native-born Martians did not. Also, no matter Kirata’s judgment of the dubious messenger, the picture Dorda drew confirmed what the governor of Isidis already knew: there was no avenue out of their dilemma that did not include forcibly retaking Tharsis. The report he had received from the faithful

Mr. Patel led to that same harrowing conclusion. For the sake of Martian semi-autonomy, a strong Martian response was the only cure for Akbari's diseased action.

Kirata sat very erect for a Martian. Posture was a point of honor to him, and a family tradition. His shoulder-length black hair grayed at the temples, and was quickly receding from his forehead. His jaw was broad and firm, his eyes, green and troubled. His wrinkled brow had been ravaged by a life of heavy work and lonely responsibility; his cheeks, too, were creased with the worries of office.

He put no stock in the Tharsisian declaration of independence, but the governor of Isidis was loath to become involved in the legal problems of other provinces. Kirata believed that Dorda foresaw and understood his own reluctance to lead an attack against his neighbor; he also believed that the generalissimo had decided to direct the battle himself. After all, of all the Martian leaders, only Dorda knew the trade of organized violence.

"Don't agonize," said Dorda. "The man is a criminal. We can't let a criminal control deuterium 2b just because some phony tribunal sets him as the chief of their phony state. My dear Governor, if we don't handle this, quickly and efficiently, Earth will send their own force and that will mean..."

"I know, I know," said Kirata wearily. "Aerial bombardment of cities."

After a silent moment, Dorda said, "Well, let's not be overly dramatic."

"It's my job to consider the worst."

"But nobody is going to bomb a domed city."

Kirata said, "No. I won't let it come to that."

Another silence, then Dorda said, "No. Of course, you won't. You and I will be judged on how we undo these tensions. No matter what we have done for our peoples in the past, they and history will judge us on how we control these next few weeks."

Governor Kirata's expression did not change. His face remained stony. The Tharsisian Crisis—the nomenclature used by the media—brought only pain and bewilderment to the governor. The day Akbari declared independence for Tharsis, Kirata

told himself, *This will be my death. There is not enough life left in me to do all that must be done. And for what? Because Akbari's ego needs a spotlight.*

“Would you like to hear my plan for seizing the mines?” said Dorda with a smile. Smiles were not common among Martian men, and Dorda’s incessant grin seemed to say, *“I will live long, and it’s a pity you will not.”*

The generalissimo produced a dozen holo-maps of Tharsis; no particular was overlooked. For half an hour without even stopping for a drink of water, he explained to the sad and attentive Governor Kirata how to force Akbari to surrender the mines and abandon Tharsisian nationhood. Along with the war machines provided by Earth, the generalissimo had mustered six hundred Martian troops, mostly the idle sons of Acidalian farmers. He also enlisted the services of four former militarily Earthmen, men who like himself had settled on Mars--with the blessings of Earth--after subduing the Acidalian farmers. Earth weapons suddenly materialized, a cache of guns and ammunition, hitherto unknown to anyone on Mars except the generalissimo and his cohort expatriates. The hidden arsenal was buried beneath an Acidalian avocado orchard. The existence of the ghastly hardware alarmed Kirata almost as much as Akbari’s revolt. In a matter of days, the world had turned upside down and unspeakably ugly.

Using the strategic advantage of Isidis’ extensive transportation system, Dorda would move half of his well-equipped army by train to the mines of Tharsis. He would deploy others in an overland caravan of hover-vehicles to cross the great East-West causeway to Tharsis. “Under attack from Earth armaments, Martian domes would be as lace to fire. Of course, we won’t attack towns, only the mines themselves. Just a show of our capabilities.”

“Who can drive those things?”

“I have some experienced men, and we’ll get more help from Earth.”

Dorda went on in some detail, as was his wont. While he spoke, two questions gnawed at Kirata. First, how long had Dorda silently been preparing this little army; and secondly, had the mention of the “vulnerability of domes” been meant to intimidate him because of the architecture of his cities. (Equatorial Isidis had been settled in domes because the diabolic Martian sandstorms would bury any chthonic city in that area, whereas, in agrarian Acidalia, families lived beneath their farms.) As these thoughts passed through Kirata’s mind, Dorda abruptly broke off his elucidations. He looked up

from the map and gave a small chuckle, as if he read exactly Kirata's worries. The moment passed quickly, and in his mellow and confident voice, Dorda lovingly continued crooning the particulars of his military plan.

Kirata listened sorrowfully. He had chosen to become a leader because he believed he was good at solving problems, finding facts, and motivating workers. Social problems of this magnitude had never crossed his mind. He thought, *Of course I was caught off guard. The nature and scale of this social breakdown was the furthest thing from my mind. I was interested in economics, building infrastructure, producing public spectacle. I never expected to be in a position of leading Martians to kill Martians. I would never have entered government. What a child I've been. How lazy in circumspection...Well, that's spilt milk now! I must catch up quickly. I can't leave decision making solely to the generalissimo. What's to be done? Akbari tore the socio-economic fabric of the solar system; this precarious archipelago of life cannot exist without thoughtful social order. I have nothing in hand to tempt Akbari from his course. He's probably planning for violence right now, and probably with about as much relish as this bloody Earthling transplant.*

"Are you with us, Governor?" Dorda asked.

"Yes. Sorry."

The last stanza of Dorda's wordy song of planning enumerated the commitments of his Earth allies. He spoke of his intimate relations with "the powers that be" in full knowledge that Kirata would be irritated that he spoke to Brussels before coming to him, his fellow head of a provincial state. Dorda was emphatic: The only hope for a bloodless solution was for the Martians colonies themselves to remove Akbari. Otherwise, the response of the powerful and violent mother planet would be neither measured nor subtle.

"I sense your concern," said Dorda gently. "I honor your scruples and your distaste for state sponsored murder. But, sometimes a show of force is the only way to keep the peace. This is such a time." Goading this pacifist into a stiff upper lip would be a delightful scene when, in the future, the Acidalian bragged about his war stories.

Kirata waved him off. He had no stomach for a sermon. Nevertheless, the governor could not deny that the common moral criteria for war had been met: *a vital commodity was being held ransom by the greed of the Tharsisian elite. Sowing disorder by hoarding a vital substance from mankind could not be countenanced. I have no choice*

but to agree to and embrace the dreadful course. With this thought, Governor Kirata passed through a one-way moral portal.

“I will confront my reservations in solitude,” he said. “There is nothing you or anyone can say that will bring me to peace with this thing.”

“I understand,” Dorda almost whispered. Then, as they sat in silence for a moment, he watched Kirata closely. Dorda decided now was the time. He said in a confidential tone, “There are a couple of people I think you need to meet. They’re waiting outside.”

“Outside? Now?”

“You should meet the rightful owners of the mines: the largest shareholders.”

Kirata held up his hand. “If you planned to bring people to meet me, you should have scheduled them. I’m sorry but my calendar is...” Kirata wiped sweat off his neck. He thought, *The man’s audacity knows no bounds!* Kirata’s world was careful, measured; the generalissimo’s indifference to decorum irked and discombobulated the governor.

Dorda stood, flashed his great toothy smile and walked to the door. The next moment, the governor found himself rising and accepting into his presence a woman and her teenaged stepson. These were the Vardanis, Empacia and Robert, the widow and the son of Akbari’s deceased sister and her deceased husband, who was a legendary capitalist success story. In accordance with solar system property laws, thirteen-year-old Robert was heir to his father’s huge holdings in the Pavonis Mons Mines. Kirata could not withhold a smile when he saw Robert. He had seen the youngster’s ubiquitous commercials pleading for his orphan’s rights, and the governor relished the power of the boy’s charm. The commercials were the strongest action yet taken against Akbari’s shenanigans, so Robert Vardani was the foremost soldier against the premier of Tharsis. Although Kirata despaired in the face of war, nonviolent combat pleased him. Robert was a handsome boy, with long, shining brown hair, bright brown eyes, fine pink cheeks, and a quick, yet modest smile. The boy stepped up to the governor. Looking directly yet respectfully into the governor’s eye, he extended his hand.

“I know you are my friend,” Robert Vardani said in a high, almost girlish voice, “I know that you plan to reverse the injustice done to me. I thank you, sir, from the

bottom of my heart. Please know that I, like you, am committed to communal good, and I know that my stolen wealth must be put to the use of all the worlds in the solar system. I will make no claims that conflict with the needs of the solar system. I leave it to you two gentleman to guide me on that decision. When the time comes.”

Kirata nodded; he had heard all he could wish to hear. Dorda glided forward, bringing by a hand on her elbow, the boy’s stepmother. Kirata had known the woman in the past. Her late husband, Vardani, was the richest man in Isidis, and a man who used his wealth to gain political influence. The governor had many times courted his favor. Empacia had been almost as formidable as her husband. Prior to their marriage, she had run the largest hospital in Isidis. She resigned after the nuptials, and became a vice-president in her husband’s business empire. Kirata remembered her as an attractive, curvaceous woman, with a lovely complexion, plump pouting lips, and restless eyes. Now, Empacia Vardani’s appearance as used as the boy’s was fresh. Her thin graying hair was pulled into a tight bun at the top of her skull; her quick moving, gray eyes were streaked with yellow. Accustomed to dealing with supplicants, Kirata assumed that her general appearance, a subfusc dress, and lack of make up, were affectations meant to emphasize her victimhood.

Empacia Vardani did not merely shake his hand, but cupped it in both of hers. Her eyes watered and she exclaimed, “Oh, thank you so much, Governor. My son’s rightful inheritance and the good of us all lie in your strong hands.” Kirata feared she would try to kiss him. He looked desperately to the generalissimo. Dorda smiled a brittle facsimile of compassion. He waved his hand as though to encourage Empacia. She did not let go of the governor’s sweating hands, despite his tugs to free himself. She spoke rapidly, in incomplete sentences. She expounded on the evils of Akbari and his cronies, displaying particular spleen when her rant turned to Raluca Akbari. Empacia saw Raluca at the center of the evil web that had ensnared her son’s rightful property--and the solar system’s bounty, she never failed to add. Kirata wrested his hand from her and took a step backward. Empacia stepped forward. He moved behind a chair and plainly kept it between them. Empacia talked on; she warned that Akbari would cut off the spigot; to get his way he would strand innocent miners on gloomy asteroids and halt commerce on Earth. She spoke about secret messages, Tharsisian cabals never seen and always plotting. She told the governor that her late husband had always feared Akbari; she claimed to have evidence that his death had not been natural; whisperings on the streets of Isidis long speculated that his death was a crime, perpetrated by the Akbaris.

“My God,” Kirata said. “If you can prove he killed his brother in-law...The courts in Tharsis won’t turn their eye from murder. That’s our out! Charge him with a crime and they’ll arrest him. We don’t need military action when we have such a clear law on our side.”

Jumping back in the moment the governor stopped speaking, she discoursed further on this subject; yet, substantiation of her allegations grew increasingly elusive. Despite pointed questions by Kirata, Empacia never explained the nature of the evidence, nor did she depict how the murder was done. Her speech flowed on, ambling across a topical terrain fertile for sowing hatred for the Akbaris. Kirata squirmed; he despaired of finding value in her shaggy dog story, he shot imploring glances toward the generalissimo. The Earthling-Martian smiled back and yawned. Empacia’s tirade now seemed to have a greater life force than her mind could fetter or her soul could fathom. The others began to fear she might pass out from fervor. Robert Vardani stepped forward and softly touched his step-mother’s elbow. She tugged her arm back and snarled.

Robert said, “Mother.”

She caught herself and paused.

“Well, we’ve taken up enough of the Governor’s time,” said Dorda. He reached up (the Martian woman was well over a foot taller than the Earthman), and laid an avuncular arm around her heaving shoulders. Kirata detected closeness, either emotional or physical, between the dowager and Dorda. The idea of romance between these two repulsed the governor even more than thoughts of heterosexuality usually did.

Dorda said, “Darling, he’s a wise man, and he has heard the evidence. I’m sure he will personally accompany me on the crusade.”

“You’re ready to move?” asked the governor. *Too fast, he thought, I have no time to shape this adventure. He has planned it this way. I need Tybolt’s view!* A brawny, happy-go-lucky young man, Tybolt was the governor’s partner in marriage and his chief political advisor.

“We set out day after tomorrow,” said Dorda as cheerfully as though he were bestowing a gift. “You heard what your Ambassador Patel said: Akbari spit on our reasoning.”

“He rejected our first overture, no worse,” Kirata said. “Naturally, Akbari will look after his own interests and try to strike a favorable bargain. We can’t hold that against the man.” He paused, trying to collect his thoughts, but realized he had not time. “Now hear me. Perhaps before we jump to war, we should send Mr. Patel back with a more nuanced offer. Throw Akbari a bone. In politics, condensations work wonders.”

Dorda smiled at the governor as though admiring and pitying his naiveté. He said, “Believe me: before coming to you I sought every avenue of compromise. I have offered Earth special considerations; I have pleaded with Earth for nonviolent pressures. I have written offers to increase Akbari’s shares, legitimate shares; and I told him in writing, that if we can settle this, his other issues can be looked into without prejudice. All to no avail. The man thinks he has the solar system by the balls. So, it is down to this: men may die in this struggle, but a few deaths on Mars are better than the deaths of innocents across the solar system. Mars has been fortunate in past, but now we must make life or death choices, just as men have done throughout history. This is real; the Pax Martialis will be over within days. There are no good choices, we are in a situation where every avenue is bleak, but choices must be made or things will get a lot worse. By that I mean an Earth expeditionary force lands on Mars and attacks Tharsis. Think of the horror, the pain. Let’s not lose time inventing hope for an easy way out when realistically, there is none.”

“A dingy moment in our history.” Governor Kirata stood. “I don’t make decisions without reflection. You knew that when you walked in the door.”

“Ponderous deliberation was a lucky habit of the halcyon days,” said Dorda. “Lives will be lost if don’t gather our volition and act!”

A short silence followed. Empacia began to speak, but held her tongue and nodded after a solemn glance from her son. Kirata leaned his hands against his desk and kept his eyes tightly closed. He smiled. Then, looking up at the others, he became somber.

Dorda stepped to Kirata’s side and said softly, “I speak for Brussels and for all mankind when I ask you to accompany me on this mission. You are respected across the

planet, and if common Martians see you taking the lead, it will make our actions more palatable. Surely you see the problem with me alone heading up a war effort. They'd say I had never accepted Martian pacifism, that I was a fifth columnist. Whereas, a native Martian ruler..."

"It will be my way," Kirata said firmly. "Tomorrow, 8 AM. Meet here again. I won't be alone."

The generalissimo bowed. He said, "You are who you are, sir. Not even political urgencies can change that."

"Tomorrow then." Kirata said impatiently. Empacia hopped to him and again began pressing his hand and mumbled thanks. The governor broke her grip, took a step toward the door, but now the boy stood in his path. With his hands clasped before him, his intelligent eyes cast down, young Robert said, "I see how uncomfortable you are. I, too, feel cornered by circumstances and trapped by the actions of strangers. If our serene planet is desecrated by war...I can't...I don't sleep...I expect we are simpatico here. I hope we will be friends as well as allies."

Kirata clasped the boy's shoulder, gritted his teeth and nodded. Dorda thought, *the rest is downhill. It will be easier to fell Akbari than it is to get this effete poobah into action. But, I have done even that. I have convinced Isidis to fight. They'll be astounded in Brussels. They'll know I'm the only one who could have done it.*

#

That night, as usual, the Governor read in his gargantuan bed. Of course, owing to the gangling populace, all beds on Mars were large by Earth standards. Like all prosperous Martians, Kirata spared no portion of his exorbitant wealth on physical comfort. At his side was his husband Tybolt. Propped up by stacks of cotton-covered pillows, the two men, in their identical azure cotton pajamas, stared intently at the respective holographs that floated before them. The governor read a mystery novel with an exotic Earth setting: Lima, Peru. South America and its great jungles fascinated Kirata. In his imagination, Lima hung with vines and was prowled by tigers. He thought it odd that the author of this book mentioned neither. Tybolt played a three dimensional combat game; he kept the sound off so as not to bother his husband, still, the governor flinched each time a silent red and yellow explosion flickered across his bed. Other than the ten years difference in age and the governor's balding, the couple had an uncanny

resemblance to one another. Each man had long, oiled-back, black hair, a jutting jaw, which needed frequent shaving, and each had a large hawk-like nose dominating his face. The differences were that the governor was slightly larger than Tybolt; the younger man's features were more chiseled and aesthetic. Unlike his husband, the pressures of office had not wrinkled Tybolt's white skin.

Tybolt looked over at his partner. The governor was not reading at all, just scowling at the page before him. The younger man turned off his game with a point of his finger, and then said, "Once confronted, Akbari will relent. His kind always backs down." Kirata grunted noncommittally. A long moment later, Tybolt said, "Good God: this is Mars! Nobody wants to fight!"

"The generalissimo does. So does that woman. And, who knows what broods in Tharsis?"

Tybolt turned on his side and stared at his partner while the other gazed grimly at nothing. Several minutes passed. He said, softly, rationally, "What will they do? Fight us with broomsticks. They have no weapons. We have the Earth war machines and some Earth soldiers to guide us. I bet nobody ever fires a shot."

"Let's hope."

Tybolt bolstered himself up on his elbow. "And you can bet, if a battle shapes up and if one man falls, the Tharsisians will turn tail and run. I'll bet you anything. What do you want to bet?"

"Please, Tybolt," said Kirata, "This is too serious for parlor wagers."

"Only if you take Akbari seriously," Tybolt said. "And before now, I've never heard of anyone doing that. I've always thought the man was a clown. You can tell he never understands what's being said during meetings. Watch him some time: he hasn't a clue."

"His sister is clever," said Kirata.

"Then lets talk to her! Only an idiot could want to break away from Earth. If she's clever, she can read the tealeaves as well as we can. She might be open to reason."

“No,” said Kirata. “If things have gone this far, that means she’s behind him. And so are their tribunes. And, I believe, so are the vast majority of his people. They’re all stiffening their spines; they’re intrigued by war. Things have gone further than they appear. I feel it. I feel Mars rumbling toward a killing event.”

FIVE

The throng filled a city block. The citizens of Tharsis packed themselves tightly across the city's main drag, Rover Boulevard. Men, women, and children stood hip to hip, on tiptoe, craning their long, thin necks to catch a look at the speaker, whose voice boomed through the narrow street. The nation paid nervous attention as Morak explained the particulars and extremity of their peril. When the new Marshal of Tharsis began his speech, only a handful of idle café sitters gathered round to listen. However, his likeness and words quickly spread further than the street: the oration was broadcast on all the holographic entertainment channels--Martians spent a lot of time watching comedy and drama on the entertainment channels. When their shows were interrupted by the "state message" they switched channels; today, realizing it was this or horse racing or Earth shopping, they sat back and watched Morak. Slowly, groups of Thracians walked out of their offices, stores, and apartments to fill the city's main street. They walked and hopped in groups of three and four and five, all dressed in mauve, brown, or burgundy, women with flowing hair, men with determined faces. Office workers, mechanics, pub artists, lawyers, bankers, and landlords came together as though pulled by a magnet. At each intersection, a large circular island, made of fine ground Martian brick painted green, served as a park for the adjacent neighborhoods. On these deserted playgrounds, toys and bicycles were scattered and abandoned. On the largest such island, Morak stood on a high platform, discoursing with the passion of Thomas Paine.

"The democracy and the bounty of Tharsis are at stake. The alien enemy wants our nation and our wealth. What do we want? We want to build on what Premier Akbari brought about: the first opportunity in nearly three hundred years to force Brussels to find cures for Martian health problems. Not just Tharsis, but all of Mars will be healed. Healed! And not just the Mars of today, but also generations of Martians will be able to savor a full human life span. We have been promised: year after year, decade after decade, and century after century. But Earth only looks to her own problems. They wrote Mars off as a "Bikini Atoll" kind of problem: a small population tragically paying for everyone else's progress. Spilt milk, they say, spilt milk. My fellow citizens, Tharsis is not spilt milk! We are a magnificent civilization built by sentient beings. We are

Homo martius, and as much as our sister species, *Homo sapiens*, we deserve to live!” Applause broke out, not the viral shouting and whistling of an Earth crowd roused by a revolutionary speaker, but the slow rhythmic clapping of Martians who all badly wanted not to die young. An unfamiliar spirit of optimism swept through the people of Tharsis, as they found new hope in their new leader’s ardor. Akbari had told Morak, “After hope comes bravery.”

#

Raluca, dressed in a sheer white gown, and Dlette, still in his sand-colored work tunic, lounged on her patio, watching a two-foot square holograph of the marshal’s address. Evening was coming on, and the sky slowly turned from peach-blue to pale rose. Long, thin bruised clouds streaked across the sky from red horizon to red horizon. The night smelled of gardenia, Raluca’s strong Earth perfume. Holding herself up on an elbow, her thin, delicate-boned back arched, her sharp chin and her small breasts pointed toward the dome and to the sky. She drew deeply on a cigarette. Exhaling smoke rings, she said, “Morak has convinced them that the fourteen billion people on Earth are going to turn their heads toward little Mars.”

Dlette chuckled. “Oh, yes. Fourteen billion people, wracked with violence, shortages, and overcrowding, are going to start caring about alien freaks they’ve ignored for centuries. Pardon my skepticism, but Earth will still be a long way from caring about Mars. Our bodies were not meant to live on this planet, and Earth can’t change that. It’ll get worse, not better. Future generations will develop new infirmities, complications brought on by a weakening gene pool. Earth can’t alter the scheme of the universe. Man was not meant to live on Mars, and men that try will die young. All of us. Forever.”

“Thanks, Mr. Love-life!” She lit another cigarette, offered one to Dlette, who declined, and then she said, “We’ll see.”

For a few moments, they watched the speech in silence. When it was over, Dlette conceded indifferently “The engineer speaks well.”

“And credit goes to the premier: he picked the right man. That’s what good leaders do, surround themselves with good people.”

Dlette shot her a mischievous glance. “It seems here the dog, not the master, is hero of the hour. He mesmerized them. I could see it in their faces. What if they love him? Before this is over, we all might be working for this guy.”

Raluca shook her head; “I’ll bet you ten thousand rings² the crowd will give all credit to the premier. You’ll see in the press. If you don’t believe the press, read the reports your spies give you about cafe whispers. And, the truth of the matter is, they’ll be right: the premier found the man to lead during this problematic time. Do you know he has already sent my brother a list of easy-to-make weapons? Think that will surprise our enemies? Mind like a vice, a skilled researcher, and mystically imaginative when working with what’s on hand. Add that to his surprising talent for motivating people...well, I think my brother has chosen a young Napoleon!”

Raluca saw her friend’s small jaw tighten and his ears become slightly pink. He looked at her in disbelief, and then laughed sardonically. Through his laughter, Dlette said, “I can’t believe how readily you give your brother credit for what you do! I know he was your idea! Your brother...”

“Don’t go any further. Nobody speaks ill of him in my presence. Not even you. And you know that.”

“Of course I know! I just mean that it’s you, not him who Tharsis should thank should any good come out of this adventure. I’m not belittling Akbari; I’m praising Raluca. Praising you twice, once for the way you steer us all through the rough waters, and I praise you once more for your modesty. I admire it. I really do. However...”

“However,” Raluca exaggerated.

“However, all this depends on some good coming of this conflict. I wish I could share all this communal hope, but I do not. And please give me a cigarette.”

Raluca put out her own cigarette as though squashing a large bug (although she had never seen a live bug). “There can be only one premier of Tharsis. It is he.” She added bitingly, “That is a fact we would be wise to embrace. And never forget, my dear: the better off Premier Akbari is, the better off the rest us are. You’ve gained power and wealth throughout my brother’s rule. That will continue no matter what happens. It

² the Martian unit of currency

always has. But right now, the proverbial golden goose needs your support. Don't forget it for a moment."

#

For the next three nights, they watched from her porch as Morak's speeches won over crowd and country. The throng's size grew each night. Citizens brought with them their patriotism and their anger. After the first night, Morak commissioned a Tharsisian flag. On the second night, he raised the blood-red pennant with the four great volcanoes embroidered in black in the upper corner. The crowd loved it.

He spoke on, over their slow claps, "More unfolds! Brussels no longer merely ignores us, now they launch soldiers to crush our new nation with brute force and organized murder. They scheme to break us from the dream of self-determination, and to squelch our hopes of health. We face an enemy who deals readily in blood. He is coming; he is coming now. Worse, yet, the enemy has allies on Mars. These traitors to our species, too, are coming. And even within each one of us, there is a traitor. My fellow Tharsisians, our innate pacifism is the enemy within. But, I know. I know. War is the worst of the worst, the historic curse of mankind. War always breeds more wrongs than it cures. So, we could say 'take what you want, the sin of war is not worth it.' Fellow citizens, if we capitulate, our material lives will not change. We will have our peaceful streets, our comforts, our diversions, and our bounty. But we will have neither freedom nor hope. And, I have tasted freedom and I have tasted hope. Never will I give them up." Rhythmic applause steadily escalated. He strove to be heard over the clapping, "Now that you understand, do what I do. Do what every honorable Tharsisian must do. Stand with Premier Akbari and refuse to let our nemesis shape our fate. The time has come for Martians to stop living half-lives."

On the third night, ten thousand people filled the streets and thousands of homemade versions of the new flag flew above the massive assembly; pennants unfurled from apartment patios on either side of the Rover Boulevard. The complacent and luxury loving population became a single-minded mob under the spell of the earnest Morak. Each night, he used different words, different tones, but the points of warning and encouragement never changed: the agents of Earth amassed on Tharsisian borders, bringing new and horrible weapons. Centuries of Tharsisian culture were being menaced. Earth's covetous industrial barons were stealing the nation's right to its own natural riches. Living Tharsisians were a generation singled out by history, a people elevated by

danger to become the saviors of their race. This very week, the citizenry must act to preserve Martian peace, prosperity and democracy. Martian civilization is just beginning.

Raluca and Dlette were stunned by the transformation in the people. Their cohort of boulevard spies reported that in the cafes, normal gossiping and bickering had cease, universally supplanted by talk of speculation, of strategy, and of consequences. Before their very eyes, a common purpose was binding the citizenry ever tighter. Such feverish unity was unprecedented. After that night's speech, as the crowd dispersed, Dlette said nervously, "He froths the mob."

On the fourth night of rallying, Dlette leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees, not so much listening to the new hero's speech, but studying the holographic faces of the masses.

"Why are you shaking your head?" asked Raluca with a degree of unaccountable petulance. She had drunk much Earth whisky over the past hour.

"I didn't," said Dlette, without looking back at her. He had noticed and disliked Raluca's increasing tendency to over-drink. Of late, she had doubled her nightly intake. She was running low on Earth whisky, despite snatching a case from her brother's wine cellar. Dlette felt her harden as she drank. He felt he lost her. Rather, he lost more of her.

"You did," she said. "I saw you shake your head."

"But, I don't think I did."

"Fine! What are you thinking? It all comes to the same thing." *Perhaps, she thought, he had not shaken his head; perhaps a strong thought had radiated from him and I, sensitized by years of companionship, perceived a tremor and thought it a headshake. It's like when you can tell someone is looking at you when you can't see them.*

Dlette straightened and his eyes narrowed. "The golden boy is going to be a problem. I foresee your young Napoleon becoming an old Napoleon."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Raluca. Then she threw her head back and laughed. "Poor, guy: you're so easily threatened. Don't worry; my brother has the man's heart! Morak's values assure his allegiance. The little man loves the

prescribed order and what he thinks is democracy. Now he plays the military man, and military men obey civilian government: the little soldier will never break the rules. My brother knows what he's doing."

Dlette waved her off and focused his attention on the dispersing crowd. Raluca cocked her head and smiled sadly. "But that's not what you mean, is it?" He said nothing. Now, Raluca waved her hand, irritated at his sullenness. "You're mad because the little marshal has made my brother more powerful. Morak gives voice to our program. That voice is too popular for your liking. He slides in between the tribunes and the people. But what else could he do? With Ishihara always whispering in the halls, slandering the premier to anyone that'll listen. They're all against him. Even you, I think sometimes. If it weren't for me, how supportive of Akbari would you really be?"

Dlette leapt to his feet and walked away from her. He paced, now and then looking at her out of the corner of his small eye. She lay back into the chair and smoked luxuriously. After several moments of silence, in a very even tone he said, "I don't fear, I resent. My long service is treated like dust, while this parvenu seduces the premier and the crowd."

Raluca's face hardened, but seconds later, she smiled, "Let's be nicer to each other. I feel good. Aren't you stirred by a sense of patriotism? The excitement is electrifying. Darling, I want you to feel it, too. You have nothing to worry about. There won't be a cataclysm and Morak will not take over Tharsis."

Dlette came over to her and they embraced. Dlette could never turn away a proffered hug. Once in her arms, close to her heart and her scent, all other thoughts abandoned him. Raluca glowed as she pressed her cheek to his chest. Over her shoulder, Dlette glared blankly at the holographic image of Morak and of the throng. He then closed his eyes.

#

In those days, Morak slept but four hours each night, yet felt no fatigue. What the marshal felt, what he felt with each breath, with each pump of blood was 'momentum'. The times had taken charge of the people and of him. A tempest of self-loving nationalism swept the land, and a cadre of young men sprouted up around him. They were eager to defend their nation, their *new republic*. Their pride surged with the belief that their generation would change history. The challenge of repulsing Earth's careless

empire infused their lives with a meaning never attained under the old values of peace and prosperity, the values of their lethargic parents and ancestors. The new values of courage and self-assertion inspirited the young. And their elders watched with cautious approval. The land was united.

Using industrial equipment and chemical supplies, a battalion of workers forged weapons designed by Morak. The lower floor of the Administration Building became a loud, dusty construction site. An outer wall was knocked down so the huge agricultural machines made of lightweight plastics harder than steel could be brought inside and converted into artillery. For defense, the cabins of these machines were wrapped in additional hard plastic armor; in the center of each machine grew a gun barrow made from melted down and re-forged mining equipment. Mining explosives were packed into newly sculpted missiles. Morak supervised every aspect. He recruited a four hundred-man army, and devised the training programs for these men and women. These adventurers he sequestered in another dome, south of the city. At Morak's request, Raluca dispatched her spies to Isidis.

For several minutes each morning, Morak met with the premier. The brevity of these sessions seemed oddly inadequate to Morak, for had he been in the premier's shoes, he would focus in great depth on reports of the defensive effort. The premier's myriad oddities bewildered him. Akbari frequently talked to himself aloud, and compulsively looked out a window every few minutes; he would eye the streets of his capital with suspicion and darkness. He grunted and muttered unintelligibly; he needed to talk to his sister throughout the day, everyday. Morak assumed that if he looked closely at the tribunes, their behavior would be equally strange. However, these thoughts about the eccentricities of the upper class were swiftly shunted aside; Morak reproached himself for wasting thoughts on any matter other than the execution of his war duties: gaining intelligence, manufacturing weapons, devising strategy, and rallying both troops and populace.

In the third week of the crisis he reported, "Sir, the agents from Isidis tell me that after some initial chaos, caused by the Earthling equipment being flummoxed by our gravity, the Earth war vehicles are now in order and ready to move on our mining installations."

"How will you stop them?" said Raluca. Throughout Morak's report, she stood behind the sitting premier, listening intently.

The marshal continued, his voice echoing in the huge, empty roseate room. “Our enemy has no inkling of our lethality. We’ll destroy their war vehicles at first contact. It never occurred to the Kiratas that we could so quickly retool for belligerency. According to your spies, the public mood in Isidis is wobbly. Whereas our citizenry is ready for conflict, their people look away and hope no havoc touches them. Their first casualties will cause an uprising.”

“So the spies say,” Akbari said skeptically.

“Will they be led by Earthlings or the generalissimo?” Raluca asked.

“Nether. The generalissimo stepped aside. Governor Kirata’s husband, Tybolt Kirata, is most visibly in charge. The spies say he’s devilish in his hunger for fight, eager for mayhem.”

Neither Akbari replied. They looked briefly at one another, turned their heads to machinate on their own. Morak waited. Raluca twisted her hair; the premier drummed his thumbs on the table, but could not keep a beat. His lack of rhythm embarrassed him; he stopped drumming.

Raluca shook her head, “I don’t believe for a minute that the generalissimo would step aside for Tybolt.”

“That is the official word in Isidis,” said Morak.

“That means nothing,” said Raluca. “Our little Earthman is scheming. His ends probably have nothing to do with what’s now on the table; he’s jockeying for position with Brussels. If we could find out what he’s up to...”

Akbari smiled wanly and nodded. He reached over his desk and clutched Morak’s arm, which lay heavily on the armrest of his chair. “That man means me harm and he always will.”

Morak mumbled, “I will find out what I can.”

“Find out and stop him,” Akbari said emotionally.

“Quick, Morak,” said Raluca, “your plan in a word! To work, a military plan must be simple. And scant time means no complexity.”

Morak sat up, rubbed his hand across his mouth, then said firmly: “Ma’am, in a word: attack!”

“Attack?”

The wide-eyed Akbaris stared at their marshal in amazement. The siblings slowly looked at one another. Then, they began to smile. The premier slapped his leg. Then, with both fists he pounded playfully on the table. His eyes widened, and leaning toward his marshal, he declared, “I have done well with you! You see, Raluca: you said in a word and he gave it to you in a word.”

“It is, of course, the last thing the Kiratas will expect,” said Raluca. “In fact, it’s the last thing I expected. But, I see it clearly.”

“They no doubt have spies as we do,” said Morak.

“But what can they know?” said Raluca. “Even living here, watching your speeches and your manufacturing, I’d never have guessed you were dreaming of attacking first!”

Grinning and aglow, Akbari chirped, “And you’ve built all these lethal machines.”

Later that day Morak was being driven to the western factory where the final additions turned machinery into munitions. Sole passenger on a shuttle built for twenty, he flew fast and low in across the Tharsisian Bulge from the city towards Arsia. The marshal now understood that the premier was isolated in his great building. Akbari’s predilection for solitude prevented his full understanding of the popular will. The long, indolent peace led the people to abide his aloofness, but Morak wondered if war would let him off so easily? Then he caught himself: adrift again in thoughts not germane to duty or need! What went on in the mind of his superior should not concern him. “Step on it,” he told the driver sharply.

#

Feet on his desk after a midday nap, Akbari sipped black tea. The premier was delighted and grateful. He congratulated himself. *The tribunes are in a snit, but that’s*

their nature, never ending petty vexation. Best to now ask for their views, implement their thoughts. Make them creative stakeholders. Find ways to boost the power of Dlette, Ishihara, and Mowbray; let them administrate some pet projects; fund them, then disappear them into incessant work of their own choosing. Tie their self-interest to my ladder. Meanwhile, I'll administrate the mines and this new army.

Akbari ate well. He liked solitude for meals. Stupendous personal wealth allowed for cooks and waiters. Daily he ate lightly cooked vegetables and salads from the superb hot houses on his private farm. Akbari ate slowly, masticating like a grain mill; he rolled each bite across his tongue, savoring flavor and texture. He, too, savored digestion, sitting still as the bolus moved down his throat. He cleaned his lips daintily with a cotton napkin, poured empty his decanter of rich red wine.

The premier did work several hours a day. This day, beside the impending war, he had attended a banking meeting where the financial heads of Tharsis set interest rates for the coming six month Martian fiscal quarter. Akbari had strong views on monetary matters; he liked low interest rates, even at slight risk of inflation. The deuterium 2b wealth of Tharsis swallowed inflation painlessly, and low rates pleased and stimulated the citizenry. Akbari was sympathetic to policies that encouraged a generous middle class economy; his strategic goal was to keep Tharsisian living standards at the top of the solar system. In doing so, he further anesthetized the ambitions of his population, so that he might rule as his propensities inclined. Comfort and amusement were no substitutes for longevity, but the citizenry enjoyed and expected material solace for their unique disabilities. Akbari enjoyed providing mind-boggling spectacles.

Environmental issues, stickier than matters of state treasury, and less dramatic than the specter of international violence, also required Akbari's time and effort. Tharsis generated an enormous amount of trash, much of it toxic waste from mining operations. In environmental law, as in property law, Brussels dictated the statutes. Akbari was also leading his people to independence in this area. He insisted that in environmental matters, Tharsis would no longer blindly follow the rest of the solar system, but that a select committee (of his appointing) would recommend a new national code which he would either sign, amend, or veto before it became law. He was wont to say, "Call a spade a spade. Mars is a wasteland. It's no sin to fill a wasteland with waste. I'll put it in a crater no human will ever see." He asserted that waste acceptance from private industries would complement the mining industry. Thought it was a rich land, Akbari had plans to make Tharsis richer. The time would come when tourism expanded beyond

rich people from Earth's rich countries, so he preserved the volcanoes and Noctis Labyrinthus (a slew of deep canyons comprising the delta of Valles Marineris, the grandest gorge in the solar system). Noctis Labyrinthus was indisputably in Tharsis, and tourism there was already growing. Between waste, tourism, and deuterium 2b, he would enrich Tharsis beyond the dreams of even the wealthiest nation on Earth. He just needed more men like Morak to turn plans into revenue.

SIX

Across the Province of Isidis, amidst puddled maroon manufacturing slime, gray factories belched sulfurous greenish smokes. Martian laborers and Earth bureaucrats crammed the Isidisian dome; now Dorda's army added to the claustrophobic crowding. When Mars was first settled, the Earth's scientific community believed terraforming imminent. The colonizers assumed Isidis would someday be beside a great ocean. These visions sucked dry the treasuries of Russia, America, and Japan before all Earth lost hope of seeding a new planet. Now, aside from the grotesque atoll of factories encircling the capital city, Isidis remained an ocean only of sand dunes.

If the cities of Tharsis were rich, indolent, and smug, then it would have to be said the cities of Isidis (and those of her sister province, Acidalia) were mediocre, cynical, and overworked. The streets of the capital city were laid out in concentric circles, like the canals of Amsterdam. The city center, the first metropolis built off-Earth, was crowded, commercial, and difficult to navigate. Like its rounded buildings, these curving streets tended to disorientate newcomers and natives alike. When the "cornerless city" had been inhabited for a generation, all noted the confusion brought on by its urban planning, and no other such cities were built in the solar system. This of course made the city all the more special to its inhabitants. The outside observer would invariably notice that natives complained about everything except Isidis. They resented losing prestige and commerce to the upstart Acidalia during the generalissimo's reign. They dislike Mars, the mines, Earth people, and each other. Arguments were like sports, and Isidisian bars filled not with chatter and laughter, but with contention and debate. Even the serpentine blush-pink corridors of the Isidisian hospital hissed with the mumbled arguments of the dying and infirmed.

Governor Kirata lived in a modest building near the center of town. Beige offices filled the lower floor of his beige residence. The governor preferred to conduct business in his bare-walled home; it gave him a sense of privacy and selfhood. The home-office also gave justification to having his husband, Tybolt, always within calling distance. Tybolt had no official role in government, prior to being made Marshal of the Army, but he was the governor's closest advisor, the one person who's entire intellectual

being was dedicated to pursuing the governor's best interest. Broad shouldered and hail, looking more like brothers than married, they sat next to each other on a large black couch, dumbfounded. Draped in her customary mourning clothes and veil, Empacia Vardani paced before them. Seen through the veil, her cheeks flamed and her round eye bespoke chilling tragedy. She discomfited and confused the Kiratas. Yesterday she had wanted nothing so badly as to invade Tharsis, and today such danger was far from her mind.

"I want no deaths if other means are to be had," she said firmly. "It will neither sacrifice preparation nor forfeit advantage if we wait for Patel to take one more trip. Let it be said that we tried for a peaceful solution, not intemperate comets flying at war."

"It's too late to worry about history," Tybolt said. A silence ensued. *We will be the first to bring war to Mars, he told himself. Little else will need to be said. To be history's villains is the price of responsibility. How strange, I feel so certain of my duty no matter the cost. I will be known as the Judas of peace, the first to spill blood. So be it. Akbari is the true cause; I am the mending.*

Governor Kirata watched his mate and read his thoughts, for he was obsessed with the thought that the leaders of the first Martian War would be condemned by generations. He thought, *I pray this doesn't set a precedent that ushers in an era of blood. From all I've read, once war begins, endless conflict is likely to ensue. Millions—no, billions of years of Martian tranquility will end forever...Ever-evil mankind.* Then, he shouted, "Damn equivocation! The bloody thing is ready! Let's do it!"

"It gives you chills, doesn't it?" Empacia said.

"It does chill my blood," replied the governor. *She talks a good line, but has no grasp of today's crime. Yet, like a true Martian pacifist, she pleads to postpone battle. The same careless mind stirs the conflict, and then proposes face-saving delays. Wrong on both counts, yet she seems so sure of herself. I don't understand.* He turned to Tybolt. "If we delay, they will plan. I don't want them to plan."

"Oh, I agree," said Tybolt. He rubbed his black-stubbed chin and narrowed his eyes.

"Yes."

“At least wait,” said Empacia, seeing that she would not prevail. “Wait until Dorda and Patel come to meet us here. See what they foresee. Just one final conversation with my son’s uncle.”

The governor stirred uneasily, then said, “No waiting.”

Tybolt nodded. He knew the governor wanted to settle matters before Dorda arrived. Yet, despite his druthers, Kirata soon faced Dorda. The generalissimo flew into the room, costumed in a green military uniform, with red cuffs and collar; his chest sported medals. His face was flushed and his large eyes, normally so confident and insinuating, seemed strained with alarm. Behind him, Patel followed, head down as though crushed with worry. At the sight of these shaken men, the Kiratas eased back into their seats. They would never believe that the generalissimo’s interests include their own, and to see him unnerved suited both Kiratas.

Dorda held up his small, fat hand and declared, “Tharsis attacks!”

Empacia Vardani put her hand to her veiled mouth and stepped back, wobbling, almost tripping over her dress.

“But we were going to attack them?” cried the governor. “That’s what you all said we would do! Nobody mentioned anything about him doing it first!” He felt the blood rush from his head. “This is all wrong!”

Tybolt put his hand on the governor’s shoulder and pulled back the disquieted leader of state. “What more do you know? How many men? What weapons do they have? Where are they, and where are they headed?”

Dorda was lost. *I should have been advised*, he told himself. *They should have told me to expect something like this. We’ll need more Earth fighters. I’m vulnerable. Those Earth bastards will hang me out to dry, say I was unprepared, not up to it. But, Tybolt is in charge. He should be talking to Earth, not me. I’m not being given a doable job. I need to fix all this.* He brought out his handkerchief and, wiping the sweat from his shining forehead, he said, “They are halfway across the East-West Highway, already into your own province!”

“How many?” asked Empacia, her voice small and tight.

“What did they attack?” the governor asked.

Dorda looked back at Patel, who stood head down like a Burgers of Calais. Like the governor, the ambassador had accepted Dorda's plan at face value, as a complete enumeration of the possibilities; there had been no mention that Isidis itself might be attacked. What if the capital's dome were compromised? Everyone said that would never happen, but every Martian could remember dreams about a fractured dome. This image, the most commonly reported nightmare for both children and adults, took over the landscape of Patel's mind. He envisioned as though real the devastation that these actions, his actions, might bring down on Mars. His artistically inclined imagination ran a gambit of gruesome miseries he had brought to Isidis. Patel felt a slap across the chest. Looking up slowly, he saw the red-faced generalissimo, then the others, and all eyeing him with hard faces.

The generalissimo snapped sternly, "Did the people who brought you this news say how many men marched from Tharsis?"

"No, they drove. It's a mammoth convoy of trucks and outlandish contraptions."

"But how many? My God, man!"

"Oh, they didn't say." Patel saw the seated governor. Kirata nodded to him, and Patel walked toward him, and took a seat on the couch, then, like the governor, he sank back into his own grim thoughts.

"Have they actually fired at a person or installation?"

"We know they fired a large weapon three times," said Patel. "They blew up an agricultural dome. I think the caretaker was killed!"

Tybolt came closer to the generalissimo and spoke softly. "Are your Earth soldiers and fighting vehicles..."

"Ready? Ye..yes, ready," said Dorda. "But, I don't think there are enough of them. We need more Earth soldiers. No one thought Akbari would respond like this. I myself..."

Tybolt said, "I will have the Martian militia on the move before dusk. First, I have to give instructions to the man I put in charge of my civil defense effort. I might be able to entrust that to..."

“Please,” interrupted the generalissimo confidentially, “delegate nothing. I trust me and I trust you, but look at these others. This is how three centuries of peace withers courage and character. Believe me. We must see to everything, impossible as that sounds.”

Tybolt heard and understood; he looked to his husband. Governor Kirata nodded his head; these two would have no impediments to their will. Yet, inwardly, he grieved. He had agreed to allow the attack of Tharsis to originate from his own borders because he had believed Dorda’s assertion that the action would be simple, that Akbari would be unable to mobilize a defensive. Dorda and his Earth allies believed the tribune Ishihara would use the crisis as an opportunity to scheme, rise up, and finally push Akbari aside. Then, hoping to gain favor with Brussels, the tribune would facilitate the reuniting of Tharsis with the rest of the solar system. *But, Kirata thought, look what happened! Akbari is not cowed; he attacks my frontier. The citizens of Isidis, hardworking, orderly, and innocent, now find their homes and gardens targets for mortal assault. My weakness does so much harm. A regular person can go through life and never discover all their flaws, flaws that a leader must confront in himself daily. And each of my flaws harms others. When this is over...* The governor heard the heavy front door close and looked up from his guilt-ridden musings to see that Patel, Empacia, and Dorda had left. The rounded room now grew purple as the setting sun streamed in through massive wired and opaque windows. Tybolt stood with his back to his husband, staring distantly into a void.

Finally, Tybolt grunted, shook his head and said, “We must meet them before Akbari catches another breath.”

“Why at all?”

“I’m sorry,” said Tybolt stretching his neck, “I didn’t hear you.”

“We could meet him.... I could meet him at the border...”

“He crossed the boarder.”

“Well,” said the governor, now looking through a side table drawer for his daytime sedative, “that’s horrible. Horrible. But I could meet, apologize, and there would be no cause for fighting, for slaughter.”

“No one will be slaughtered.”

“You say that. One man has already been killed!”

“Slaughter isn’t needed, encirclement and property destruction will do.”

“You sound so sure.”

Tybolt thought a moment, and then smiled and said, “I am sure.”

#

Dorda, in the back seat of his hovercraft limousine, looked out at the timber bamboo farms that lined both sides of the causeway on the outskirts of the Isidisian capital. The edges of all domed cities were given over to timber bamboo or agriculture. The dome’s frontier, with its lower roof, was a hive of small enclosed zones, climate controlled for different agricultural products: cabbages, apples, tomatoes, zucchinis, citrus, et cetera. Dorda loved green the world of agriculture. At times he would have a driver stop, then get out and walk through the rows of vegetables, breathing the oxygen exhaled by the leaves of turnips, tomatoes, and spinach. Native Martians could not detect the extra oxygen shed by plants, but the transplant savored the familiar, earthish atmosphere. At times, alone, surrounded by vegetation, he was overwhelmed by obscure emotions, and his chest heaved heavily, his heart filled with mist. At such moments, Dorda pulled himself together; he shut down the melancholy feelings before they grew articulate.

Now he steeled himself for the task. He was on his way to meet the newly arrived military squad sent to reinforce the small Earth detachment that came with the fighting vehicles. Though an Earthman himself, years of living on Mars had left Dorda, like most Martians, uncomfortable with Earth people. Despite their small stature and awkwardness in Martian gravity, he found them harsh, cynical, and somewhat menacing. The frenetic activity of Earth people dizzied their languid Martian cousins. One lost one’s breath before these rambunctious creatures, which were always testing their strength, always laughing loudly with a brash humor that seemed to freeze the Martian soul.

For several months, he had tried from behind the scenes to protect Empacia’s interest. At first, he thought he could subvert the mine’s management, and through them make the mines unworkable for Akbari. The attempt failed: the managers were loyal to Tharsisian independence, and so to Akbari. Next, his lawyers flooded the courts of

Tharsis with appeals that would both hamper and publicize Akbari's theft. He had not foreseen the heavy hammer Akbari used in court. Judges were all compromised; Dorda, familiar with the tools of subornation, could clearly see that his case was hopeless. He recognized from his days on Earth the corrupt shadow play of false justice, as one court proceeding after another illogically and quickly issued verdicts favoring the ruler. At the media, too, Dorda had found access blocked. Even the lowest level of reporters, hungry young men and women, ambitious by Martian standards, would not touch his story. He tried computer sabotage, he bribed a system engineer to confound the mine's accounting and personnel software. However, before the man could inflict injury, he was caught by Raluca's spies, and disappeared. Finally, at the end of his tether, he involved the authorities in Brussels, and, in doing so, exposed for the first time his alliance with Empacia Vardani. He championed Empacia's cause, not for personal gain or for love of his mistress. After hearing her pleas, he judged her cause not only just, but crying for resolution. Early in these legal efforts, Dorda and Empacia's physical relationship came into being. Both middle aged and isolated by their wealth and power, they had collapsed into each other and formed a mild, pale-gray romance.

Outside the urban dome, endless sand dunes, dappled with bright and dark wind streaks, extended to the curvature of the sudden horizon. To Dorda's thinking, Isidis was the bleakest place on Mars. This monotonous plain meant to be an ocean, spoke loudly to man's failure to turn the red planet into his own world's image. Mars would never be terraformed. *So, thought Dorda, my adopted world is an end to history. In two, three hundred more years, there will be no Martian civilization. The winds and sand will bury our footprint. So, be it. The dreary future of Mars means a good life for me. Where else could I have achieved all this? Nowhere on Earth. For me, there were no openings on Earth.*

After a long ride, the transport livery arrived at a small residence dome, known as Residence 34, or just 34. This was where the newly arrived Earth soldiers and their fighting vehicles bivouacked. Residence 34 was built to house the workers in a now spent platinum mine. The facility had an oxygen environment suitable for large-scale logistical activities, such as the maintenance of certain mining and farming machinery.

As his driver approached the dome, Dorda saw again how yellow and neglected 34 was. No one needed to wear a face mask inside 34, but many people quartered there spend a little time each day in their outside helmets breathing the sweet air from their *forispulmo*, or outside lung, a surprisingly effective, backpack regenerator of breathable

air. Earthmen said about off-world adventures in breathing, “the canned air you know is better than the canned air you don’t know.”

Inside Residence 34, barren, red ground stretched for a kilometer before the village. The village consisted of Martian brick residential cubes along with a few Kevlar domes where the families of antique miners had once huddled together. The abandoned homes were surrounded by dangerous machines, silver and sleek, gun barrows the size of doorways, tires the height of two Earthmen, armor as thick as a fist. About twelve small Earth people, with their boundless energy and utile bodies, were climbing over an entomic killing machine.

The chauffer got out and quickly skipped around the car to get to Dorda’s door, which he opened with something of a flourish. All of the Earthmen stopped working and talking. Silently they watched Dorda move towards them. Dorda skipped and glided through the Martian gravity in a way that seemed a great, silly cartoon to the Earth people. An Earthman who had settled on Mars was a mystery; why, they wondered, would any sane man choose to live among the sickly and gloomy Martians; why would he choose to live in the bad smelling canned air, in the thin gravity? The grinning Dorda amazed them with his adaptation to this place that they loathed; however, his lucrative ascension in Martian society set more than one competent Earthman to mulling over like opportunities. The officers were thankful that Dorda was their contact; strong interplanetary bigotry and revulsion stirred in the Earthlings as it did in Martians. In Dorda, they found a man of order and quality; he was a man with whom the military could deal. As for Dorda’s feelings about the alien soldiers, he considered them low-level hirelings that he was to keep an eye on.

A bearded man stood atop the machine, his khaki sleeves rolled up on his muscular arms, his sweating face decked with the opera-glass-like hyper-magnification lens used to work on microcircuits. The chief on-planet project officer, a Pakistani Colonial named Cheema, took off his ocular equipment and looked around at his next in command. He wiped his hands on a towel and climbed down the ten-meter ladder aside the fighting vehicle.

Dorda and the colonial approached each other stoically. They did not shake hands nor exchange greetings. “I regret to inform you,” Dorda said stiffly, but still managing his great smile, “that Akbari has militarized his nation and has attacked Isis.”

“What a fucking surprise,” said Cheema. He looked back at his men, who had all heard the announcement. He saw them groaning and shaking their heads. Turning back to Dorda, he grinned bitterly.

“I know,” Dorda said preemptively. “You wanted to move faster.”

“No. Not faster, just move at all.”

“Things are slower here. Things just don’t get done in a day.”

“Well, Pilgrim, this is war now and some of your people may die because you folks like your politics leisurely. Somebody on the other side sure got off to a fast start. I wouldn’t wish allies like you on my enemies!”

Dorda leaned back and laughed as though he had just heard a bar room joke from an old friend. He stopped just as suddenly. “Well, what do you do now?”

“Now?” Cheema rejoined. “How about now we get moving and crush those bastards?”

They exchanged a few words about the location of the Tharsisians. Cheema was exasperated by the lack of information, but he tried to remain professional and did not further chide Dorda. Nonetheless, the other man felt very unwelcome and declined the insincere offer of dinner. He returned quickly to his craft and left. After his departure, a couple of the soldiers came up to Cheema.

“Don’t you think it’s creepy that a guy like that lives here?” said the first.

The other added, “The natives are all cripples, and this guy is exploiting the morose fuckers.”

Cheema said, “We need to treat him and the rest of them with as much respect and compassion as we can. These poor bastards have troubles we can’t image. Hey, I admit roos are creepy, always staring at you with sad, beady eyes. I have to struggle with myself every time they come around. I know their self-piety is obnoxious, but I pity them, too. They didn’t ask for this life.”

“He did,” said the soldier.

“That’s why I vent on him,” said Cheema.

“He’s a bigger freak than the roos,” said the soldier.

#

As they drove back across the unpaved field toward the dome’s exit, the driver, for the first time that day, spoke to Dorda. “Can we trust these creatures, sir?”

Dorda, gazing blankly out the window, smiled and nodded. “We have the law on our side. That means everything in this solar system. Thrive with the law, die without it. It’s our only morality, and our only social glue: the law. That’s where Akbari went wrong. He thought he could be an exception to the law, but in the system, there are no exceptions. We can trust the Earthmen because they have no choice: all their values orbit around ‘the law’. At this point, no one has any choice. The law will have its course.”

After a moment’s reflection the driver said, “I guess that’s a good thing.”

“Laws aren’t good or bad, they are the law. Now, please, I need to sleep. Soon it won’t be safe to shut one’s eyes.”

SEVEN

Beaming, Akbari rambled over the East-West highway, at the head of a caravan of rovers stuffed with his newly minted army. He was amazed at and pleased with the unexpected zeal of his legion. Until now, none of them had ever held a weapon. Morak put them through a rigorous month of training, of exercise, and of target practice. The young warriors found, to their surprise and to their parents chagrin, that guns were fun. Luckily, the Mouser Maroon, laser hand weapon, was as easy as point and shoot; a little wave of the wrist, natural in unschooled shooters, widened the ruby beam's kill field and made the weapon extremely affective, even in the smoke of battle. The danger lay in close combat, where the indiscriminate lethality of the Mouser killed not only enemies, but also friends and collaterals. The premier had expected revulsion and begrudging from the enlisted ranks. However, under Morak's hand, the volunteers had taken to their work with the ardor of children at recess. Packed tightly into double-decked transport rovers, the invading men and women sang songs and behaved with the rowdy camaraderie of an attacking army. Salaries were generous because Morak convinced Akbari that this was a time to throw money at problems; secretly Akbari, following the advice of his warlord, made each volunteer a rich man. Akbari thought, *Give them some money and some guns and they're ready to go. The people have come alive. Perhaps it's true that man, the animal, is instinctively war-like. We Martians are the aberration, not a realistic goal.* His eyes watered with joy as he thought about seeing the expressions on the faces of Dorda and the Kiratas once they faced *my army. Being underestimated is advantageous. None of them ever dreamed I could so move my nation. They thought they could walk all over Akbari.*

The black caravan stretched across the miserably endless sand dunes. Totic arranged for the premier's rover to be occupied by only a driver, Raluca, and themselves. Tribunes Dlette, Ishihara, and Mowbray journeyed in the second rover. Behind them, Morak and his ranking officers, men he had chosen based on supervisory experience and good character. Then followed twenty rovers filled with newly made soldiers and hidden artillery.

During the trek, Akbari had spent hours studying the passing landscape. Now, within the borders of Isidis, his fascination with the countryside lessened. His nation's natural wonders surpassed anything the rest of the planet could offer. The vast flat expanse of the Tharsisian Bulge, with the dark slopes of Tharsis Montes lining up north to south, made Akbari's heart swell. The great bulge in the middle of the planet, the streaked and sinuous sands, the haphazard boulders, and the peach sky thrilled the first man of the Tharsis. To Akbari, there was no other beauty, no other visual fascination to be found in life surpassing the auster grandure of the land he ruled. To many Martians, their planet was forever alien; the planet's lifeless infected their souls as its geology and atmosphere withered their bodies. But, for Akabri, Mars was Mecca, and he would nurture his City of God with every ounce of his strength. Akbari was in love with Tharsis.

#

Contrary to his custom of dining alone, this night Akbari looked forward to dining with company. He looked forward to an evening of brainstorming the battle at hand. Accordingly, he had Totic arrange a room of his rover for a semi formal dinner for his sister, Dlette, Ishihara, Mowbray and himself. He wanted to invite Morak, but Raluca and Totic advised against it. With sensitivity for felicitous dining arrangements, the women said that for the sake of morale and open discussion, the military group should dine together, as should the political group. So, in addition to arranging for the dinner for Akbari's guests, Totic also saw to it that Morak and his officers had a succulent meal. Akbari was sure that, like himself, the others would be infused with the thrill of the moment. Dinner would be scintillating!

A few moments before the appointed hour, Akbari's tall secretary came to him. "Sir, your sister and Tribune Dlette have decided to dine alone."

"Not eat with me?"

"Sir, they're quite attached, and soon we will all be in mortal danger. You understand sir, at such times couples need privacy. You remember, sir."

"Yes, yes. I do."

"Well, that said, don't you think it best to let your sister be?"

“I never thought they were that close. She told me there was no romance!”

“Danger magnifies affection, sir. It’s best to leave them.”

“Well. Well... You know best.”

“And, I’m afraid, sir, that Tribune Ishihara will not be joining us either. He isn’t back from inspecting the fighting machines.”

“Inspecting the god damn fighting machines? What business is it of his? I thought the idea of having separate tables for the politicians and for the officers was to keep those lines well drawn. Now he’s over there sticking his nose into Morak’s business!”

“Well, sir, we’ve seen before that Tribune Ishihara's attention to detail sometimes spills into other people’s affairs. This shouldn’t surprise.”

Akbari nodded uncomfortably, while his small eyes tightened. *He won’t eat with me. The arrogant son of a bitch can’t bring himself to sit down at table with me. Even with the country in jeopardy, he is too small to deal respectfully with me.*

He went upstairs and plopped himself down at the table, set for five. Akbari poured himself a goblet of wine. Salad been placed at each setting: lettuce, tomato, onion, spinach, and squash. He finished his salad alone. A serving attendant approached to take away the dish and place before the premier a potato, tomato, cabbage and bean loaf, frequent fair for the inhabitants of the barren planet. Akbari stared distantly and said nothing to the attendant. Several minutes later, Tribune Mowbray, looking exhausted and disoriented came into the room.

“I...I was told I could eat with you,” the old man said.

Akbari stood. “My goodness, yes. Please Tribune, you honor me.” The premier extended his hand indicating where his guest should sit.

“Who else is coming?” asked Mowbray, disconcerted by the empty chairs and loaded table.

“The others have had to concentrate on um...other things,” said Akbari. He stretched his neck to relieve tension. “That leaves just you and me, which pleases me.

We were friends once. I think the pressures of office have separated us. I know it's natural: our responsibilities are more important than our inclinations, so men naturally disposed to friendship, like ourselves, can be forced into opposition."

"Yes, yes," Mowbray muttered, still looking about somewhat stunned. "May I eat? I am very hungry. Couldn't eat while the rover moved."

"Please," said Akbari, again extending his hand and smiling pleasantly. "I've finished my salad, and I'll wait for you to catch up before starting on the loaf." He sat and watched in silence as Mowbray picked up his fork and began to eat. Akbari noticed the tribune's new hand tremor. Physically weary from years of work, like most Martians he showed dire signs of age by his fiftieth year: portly and gaunt, balding and liver-spotted, stooped, and cane-bound. Years as a tribune, years of bureaucratic battles had withered his will and exhausted his spirit. He was a clock-watcher, bored and distracted. Yet, once away from the office, he came alive. He excitedly played with his grandchildren--for all Martians, grandchildren were the great cause of cheerfulness. He studied his financial holdings (mostly stocks and precious metals) with the enthusiasm of an MBA student; he spent weekends directing the work on his lucrative fig farm at the dome's end. He was a domestic man who wished to be home. Yet, the tribune marched alongside the premier. Mowbray had crossed the border into Isidis with savage and honorable intent, jaw firm, resigned to war. He could not and would not abandon his duties when the nation was threatened. *Am I to die from combat or age? Shall there be no halcyon days with my family and my land? So close to that domestic serenity, and now it seems taken from me. So, be it. If I ignore this national peril, my life will have been worthless.*

"Are you eager to retire?" Akbari asked after his guest had eaten his salad and dug into the loaf.

Mowbray put down his fork and nodded gently. "I want to feel clean, to feel I am living to nourish my soul. We can't do that in office, can we?"

"I don't feel unclean."

"No, but you don't feel clean," Mowbray said cautiously. "You know, I think in some ways the lifespan issue helps us live better. You see the Earth people and you think, how can they be so healthy for so long and yet their faces, even when they're laughing, are dark with tension. I've never understood it..."

“I’ve never thought about it.”

Mowbray sighed. “My point exactly: you haven’t time or psychic energy to think about that while you’re leading a nation. Yet, the rigor of our jobs, intellectual calisthenics of politics... well, I think we could profit from a philosophic retirement. I think I’ll feel more whole once self-understanding becomes the object of my days. Organized reflection. That’s my plan. I’ll write my memoirs, I’ll keep records of my dreams, I’ll reflect on the meaning and worth of my life’s actions. I’ll have to face up to any unfortunate verdicts I may pass on myself. ”

Akbari listened carefully. A short silence ensued while the tribune gobbled his loaf. The premier mulled over what he had heard. He stood to pour more wine. Once seated again, and having passed appreciatory nods toward the loaf, Akbari said, “I’ll die in office. I understand what you are saying, but reflection never satisfies me. It feels idle. I need action.”

“We all know that,” said Mowbray ruefully.

The premier leaned toward the tribune, his eyes warming confidentially. “I love Tharsis with every atom of my being.”

Despite the intimacy that Akbari invited with his posture and tone, the tribune did not look up and did not stop eating. Eventually, he held up his fork and said, “That love doesn’t mean that you are Tharsis. We all love it.”

Akbari pursed his lips and nodded irritably. “Why speak like that here? We are just having dinner, two old friends, and you chafe me on my handling of the state.”

“It is just here, between two old friends that I particularly must tell you to be careful. Distinguish between yourself and the state. In my eyes, not doing so is your greatest danger. Listen, our enemies have assaulted you over a matter that is core to our new laws; the nation has rallied round you. We will not let Earth dictate our property laws nor will we let them arrest our head of state. But, I tell you as a friend: don’t let this instance, once it has passed, lead to self-absorbing thoughts. You are a man, not a state incarnate.”

“You think I need such a warning!”

“As your friend, yes. I do.”

Akbari smiled and his eyes watered; he patted the tribune's hand. He swallowed his anger, but he registered the moment and decided Mowbray would not survive the campaign.

#

The two armies faced off across Chryse Planitia at the confluence of the borders of Tharsis, Isidis, and Acidalia, where the plain smoothed before breaking up in the cratered highlands of Arabia Terra. The adverse sides lined up three kilometers apart. With a sense of disbelief and awe, the soldiers, Martian volunteers and Earth veterans alike, stared at the opposing army. The outlandish appearance of Morak's gargantuan erector set weapons and the compact, otherworldly Earth vehicles, amazed the men and women as they mulled menacingly on the great empty red plain. All were astounded at the situation, the scene and the weight of the moment.

The silver, cigar-shaped Earth fighting vehicles perched behind the boxy rovers of their Martian allies. In the peach sky above, a huge, shiny silver, cigar-shaped Earth cruiser circled, providing targeting and communication information for their ground forces. This was not a flying fortress, but an interplanetary communications ship, which happened to be the nearest ship to Mars when the revolt broke out. Other Earth ships would come, but the trip would take weeks, and they had been slow departing from Luna, so they were still almost three weeks away.

To serve as a view station for Akbari and for his retinue, Totic arranged a portable oxygen containment tent atop the premier's rover. A staircase lead up to the wide flat top, which had been covered by several carpets and was furnished in portable, but comfortable, chairs and tables. Attractively displayed water, food, and wine were within easy reach. The Premier, his sister and the three tribunes complimented Totic on the arrangements and toasted to her health. She waved them off and mumbled, "Amenities matter."

"And but for you, we would have none," said Raluca, with her hand resting on the older woman's arm. Totic greatly appreciated solicitude from Raluca, whom she greatly venerated. Mars was a man's world, it had been from the beginning, but Raluca defied the social pigeonholes. She overcame the bias against her sex to become, alongside her brother, the first couple of Tharsis.

Morak approached the premier. “How will I communicate with you from the field?”

Tosic overheard the question and went to Akbari’s side. “I have communicators that will give us wide-scan holographic contract. The signal is mixed so wont be easy to intercept. You can broadcast for hours if need be.”

“Excellent,” said Morak. He turned to Akbari and said, “Sir, I have no business here. I will go back to the troops.”

“Indeed,” said Akbari. He leaned into Morak’s ear and whispered, “Understand: no order I give can be countermanded. Not by the lot of them.”

#

The Earthmen were tense and surly in their dealings with Dorda. Their war vehicles could travel at 350 kilometers an hour, nearly four times the speed of the Martian rovers, which were built for industry not for assault. The slow pace and the local authorities insistence on having visual contact with the Tharsisians, squandered the advantages of the fighting vehicles’ speed and long range firing power. When Dorda told them he must negotiate with Akbari again, the already frustrated Col. Cheema threw his arms up, and his face grew redder and darker. But he bit his lip and went along with the natives. Yet, he could not help hissing at Dorda, “I don’t need this, General. I can end this whole thing in five minutes; nobody even has to get hurt—most likely. But, this on again off again bullshit must end! No wonder this planet is so fucked up. All you do is go in circles. Can’t anybody make a decision? Now, I am ready to go, and go I will. I’ll let you have one more little gab, but then it’s going to be my way.

Dorda said nothing. The Earthmen would do as the Martians wanted; they just let off steam with empty threats. Dorda’s primary thought was, *I’ll never go back to that damned blue planet!*

#

On his viewing platform, surrounded by his retinue, Akbari stood nose high, arms akimbo, and wearing a war-like frown. He radiated hatred for his enemy and disregard for his own safety. He looked down on the flower of his enemies, or at least, their real-time, holographic images, standing, literally knee high, before him. Empacia Vardani

and son stood between the generalissimo and the Kiratas. These were the very people who had instigated an army to harm him, to take his property, and to trample on his people's sovereignty. Heat rose from his heart to his face, his hand trembled with fury. He dared not look anyone in the eye, *least my spleen scorches their soul and the excess of my malice revolt all.*

Raluca's eyes were wide, as though in wonderment. Now the confrontation had been made manifest, and the images of their adversaries stood boldly before her. She was transfixed on the somewhat threadbare Vardanis, poorly dressed and looking rather ill fed, little more than tattered waifs dependent on foreign hospitality. Suddenly, Empacia gave her the finger. Raluca's head dropped to one side. "So lovely to see, you. That boy looks nothing like our late brother-in-law. Are you sure, dear Empacia, that his relationship to the Vardanis is blood? You know our family is known for taking many lovers. Perhaps your late husband was not the father of our sister's child."

The two foot high, holographic projection of Empacia Vardani stepped forward. Fury creased her narrow face, and her gray eyes flashed. "Using the Akbaris' whorish temperament to establish a pedigree? Novel. Coarse, but novel."

"And the fat fascist on your arm?" Raluca rejoined. "I suppose reasons of the heart led you to his bed? Or did you just find the nearest armed gangster willing to champion your spurious claim?"

"My claim for my son is based on all recognized law..."

"Not Tharsisian law!"

"The solar system doesn't recognize Tharsisian law. Your heretical judiciary hasn't an iota of weight: not on any world."

At Empacia's side, Robert stirred uneasily. His stepmother's unending ill temper embarrassed the boy. He looked toward Governor Kirata for help. Indeed, throughout the tense and dangerous days since Akbari had seized the mines, Kirata alone had seemed fully conscious of the stakes. Although the two never spoke in depth, he saw in Kirata's eyes and heard in his words a true man of peace. Robert believed that only he and the governor were capable of turning the other cheek, while the others with relish seized any thrown gauntlet. The overhanging sword of communal violence disturbed Robert more than any material loss of his own and, indeed, gripped his young soul with dread. At this

point, were it not for his stepmother's outrage over the theft of his inheritance, Robert gladly would have dropped the matter, and accepted his losses with relief. He felt Kirata understood this.

As though in reaction to the boy's thoughts, the governor's nature and unspoken convictions broke through the hold of his professional caution. He stepped forward, extending his hand toward Akbari and saying, "We have been and should again be friends. No two men on Mars shoulder more the burden of our peoples' future. No other men can do as much harm. Those magnificent tortures of office, the sleep-troubling responsibilities: those common yokes should bind us and urge us to resolve this legal miasma, this danger."

Akbari cocked an eyebrow, stole a glance at his sister. "I represent the rights of the citizens of Tharsis. We have the right to own what is ours. Recognize that, and we all go home safely."

General Dorda of Acidalia stepped forward. He too extended his hand. He wore, as always, polished military garb and his wide, large-toothed grin. He boomed, "It is the definition of what is yours that we must dispute. Regrettably, very regrettably."

"I'm sorry, generalissimo, that you come to dispute," said Raluca, also smiling. She curtsied and saw Empacia flinch.

Dorda snapped, "I take that sobriquet as a pejorative. No friend calls me such a thing."

"No one that knows you as generalissimo would be your friend," said Akbari. "Go back to Earth, where you belong, and take these monstrous machines with you."

Within seconds, the room was a cacophony of indignity, invectives, and threats. At one point, Morak kicked through the holograph of Tybolt. After a momentary shock, the Tybolt holograph laughed, and then taunted Morak for being so ignorant that he did not understand the immunity of holographs. Morak, bending down so as to get nose to nose with the two-foot high holograph said, "If this does come to war, your life is mine to snuff!"

"I'll see you in battle. A grubby little engineer, looking up from the dust."

Meanwhile, Raluca verbally fenced with Dorda, while Empacia stood uncharacteristically silent. Raluca and Dorda never dropped their smiles or their chatty tones, but their words were deadly threats. Empacia suspected some grotesque flirtation, but Dorda, seeing his sweetheart's insecurity, took care to put his arm around her high waist. She leveraged her weight against his Earthling strength and leaned forward to taunt her foe. Raluca ignored her, talking directly into Dorda's eyes. Occasionally, when Empacia sputtered, Raluca poked quick, succinct fun at the older woman's clumsy tongue. Soon, Ishihara, whose nature inclined him to take a side in any fight, was at Raluca's side, shouting and cursing at the miniature images of his antagonists. The room rattled with the dissonance of hatred. Robert Vardani and Governor Kirata looked at each other hopelessly. "Please end this," cried Robert. The governor could only shrug; he saw no alternative. Finally, he switched off the communication, and the holograms disappeared.

Raluca spread her hands and said, "Whaaat?" Then, the Akbaris and Dlette burst with laughter. However, Mowbray and Ishihara were displeased by the walkout of the Earth ruled provinces. Mowbray was wobbly, shocked by the ugly kerfuffle. Morak brooded. Now menace had a face, the face was that of Marshal Tybolt Kirata, his military counterpart. The man had scorned his country, his premier, and his breeding. Tybolt had taunted and toyed with him during the fray, flaunting disdain. The younger Kirata derided Morak as a functionary thrust into leadership, thrust into a role he could not possibly fill. Scorn cried out from every curl of Tybolt's lip and every black twinkle of eye. Fortifying himself for war, Morak nurtured this hatred. He turned to the tribunes and the Akbaris. "There is nothing for me here. I am going back to my troops." Stone faced, he bowed and left the room.

No sooner had the marshal exited, than the small, wavering image of Kirata's holograph reappeared. The room fell silent. The little holograph extended his open hand toward Akbari. "Perhaps, Premier, if you and I could talk alone, we could stop this avalanche of hatred before it destroys the towns and homes of our people. Won't you try?"

Akbari looked at his sister; Raluca did not return his gaze, but kept her eyes fast on the image of Kirata, studying his face, noticing that his extended hand shook ever so slightly. She thought, *He's looking into the abyss and wants to deal. He hasn't the nerve to chance battle. If we're to secure our rights to the mines, this is the time, while he's frightened, and before the habits of war inure him to common fear.* Raluca took Dlette's

arm, motioned the tribunes toward the door, whispered in her brother's ear, and then left. The others followed.

Akbari, now alone, folded his hands before him and cocked his raven's head. Eyeing Kirata as a suppliant, he waited for the governor to speak. Kirata was given to long pauses in his speech, and this was no exception. After some moments, the governor said, "No one wants this. We two can call a time out."

"The blood is up now," Akbari said grimly. He narrowed his eyes and shook his head, "My people will not let you take away our natural wealth."

"Then let the boy live in Tharsis! For God's sake, man, let's find a solution!"

"You'll give me the boy?"

"Not if you see it that way. 'Give me the boy'...can't you hear what you sound like? Avarice will lead you to cataclysm! I cannot 'give you the boy'; what I am suggesting is that he, and Empacia, return to Tharsis and live..."

"In my compound?"

"Don't be ridiculous. They'd fear for their lives under your roof. I'll arrange for their accommodations. I know you'll have them closely watched wherever they are. What difference does it make if they live in your building or down the street? The point is: the boy is not to be disinherited, nor, by my plan, will you or your nation be deprived of revenue coming from the mines. You'll teach young Vardani how to manage the mines. I know you can funnel as much money to them as you need to. Let's just muddle the ownership issues, give Earth a fair chance to bargain over the money issues, and agree to disagree about sovereignty. As long as nothing actually happens, Earth can be handled."

During a silence, Akbari mulled over Kirata's use of 'revenue' as opposed to 'the revenue'. The other's wanted a cut. Kirata proposed Tharsis garner additional income from their mines not through direct ownership, but through taxation and administrative fees. Akbari had expected such a compromise, and it puzzled him that it had taken so long. Kirata laid out a scenario whereby official ownership was so ambiguous that Akbari could keep de facto control, and not force the Earth authorities to make many concessions.

“I like your plan,” Akbari lied. “Will the Earthlings adhere?”

“Whom else should Brussels listen to regarding Martian policy?”

“And Empacia? And the generalissimo?”

Kirata closed his eyes and thought for a moment. At last, he said, “I’ll insist. They may gripe, but without my backing, they have very little leverage. I’ll have the boy make public appearances lauding the plan. First I’ll talk with Brussels, make sure the chain of command salutes, then I can present the arrangement as a *fait accompli*.”

“I think you underestimate...”

“Premier Akbari, I alone treat you as a separate state. No one else. No one on Mars, on Earth, or in any other part of the solar system recognizes your secession. The rest of the worlds consider you the rogue head of a kleptocratic coup d’état. Work with me, or be surrounded by enemies. You know I am a man of my word, and that I make things happen. Trust me to hold up my end. We’ve known each other for years, sat on committees together, and I believe, sat next to each other at more than one governmental dinner. Have you ever seen me take on a losing cause? I can sell this to Brussels. I can sell creative ambiguity as the solution.”

Akbari chuckled at the idea: how could such scant past interaction lead men with aimed guns to trust each other? He pondered this difference in his counterpart’s character with his own ever-skeptical nature. When hearing new information, the Premier of Tharsis assumed dissimulation and error. He did not question Kirata’s sincerity; in the geometry of Akbari’s worldview, Governor Kirata’s honesty was a given axiom. The premier was skeptical of the governor’s grasp of the political context; he doubted the Isidisian had the needed Earth connections to deliver the deal.

“What do you say?” asked the governor, leaning forward with quiet but genuine enthusiasm.

“I will talk to my sister.”

#

The premier met Raluca in the driver’s compartment of a troop-carrying rover. They met close to midnight, after Dlette and the other tribunes had retired. Akbari knew

his sister's wannabe paramour would insert himself into any policy conversation. Dlette used his position and his friendship to poke deeply into the premier's business; Akbari assumed the interest to be born of ambition rather than professional diligence, yet he never asked his sister's opinion of her friend's aims.

Raluca had never been in the cabin of such a rough-hewn vehicle; she looked about with great interest, touching the buttons, lights and levers, as though to touch them transmitted functional understanding. She listened expressionlessly as her brother recounted the Kirata plan.

"I don't hear any details," she said somewhat happily. She bared her teeth and turned the great, black wheel of the rover, as if she were speeding along an Italian corniche.

"What do you expect of Kirata?"

"I expect him to gloss over the hard parts," she said, "and try and do anything to stop another attack. I expect him to make any sacrifice to stop war. I expect him to grasp at straws. I expect him to believe that you are as skittish of battle as he is. I expect him to be mildly imaginative when coming up with compromises. And I expect he does have clout with Brussels."

#

At breakfast, Akbari announced the truce and its sketchy terms. No one was happier with Kirata's woolly accord than old Mowbray, who leapt to his feet and said, "Bless you Akbari! You've blocked the dark road. You've pulled Mars back from hell."

"And kept what is ours," Raluca declared.

Akbari eyed old Mowbray, and briefly, the two men were silently caught in each other's gaze. Seeing that Mowbray had felt the fear, Akbari thought, *He's a good old sort. It was just my mood.* And he patted the man's bent shoulder.

The others cheered. Ishihara said to the premier, "We must treat the Vardanis well. I'll insure that they've got opulent quarters."

“The state thanks you,” said Akbari. “If we can finance this all ourselves without taking from the treasury, that gives even more *raison d’être* for our rule. We pick up the bills.”

Raluca added nonchalantly, “I never cottoned to the prospect of a war. It could’ve riled up public interest in governance.”

“Yes,” breathed Akbari, his hands folded before him, his head reverently bowed as if he were in the presence of an unseen overlord, “We can tell the people that this generation will be able to pass down *Pax Martialis* to the centuries, just as we inherited the blessings from generations past, *et cetera, et cetera.*”

Raluca stood up, leaned against the table, and looked around the room, into each eye. “This breakfast calls for champagne!”

Though all cheered, not all understood. Morak knew that peace was better than war. But he could not ignore the immense personal changes he had been subjected to by this brief, empty flutter of bedlam. One conversation with Akbari, had led him to sacrifice so much, led him to change his ethical relationship with the world. In a few speeding weeks, he had abandoned his beloved profession, steeled his heart for merciless battle, and taught himself to hate. Worse still, he had convinced so many others to do the same. And for what? These vain leaders only doled out solutions when it fit their moods and petty interests. He suddenly felt he saw them for what they were, these men of station, privilege, and tenure. Akbari, who just last night had provoked his hatred of the enemy and worked into a lather the malice of the fighting force, now, with just a word, called the whole thing off. Morak felt like going back to his quarters and taking off his uniform with just such flippancy. He had made himself a soldier. His heart had metamorphosed into a thing that did not fit in his old world. Preparing for war had degraded his values, had reduced all to kill or be killed; he had force fed himself with hatred. But, now not. The crises had evaporated, and the smug political leaders had what they wanted. He thought, *They look to themselves. Self-interest is all they treasure. And, blind self-interest served them well. They have all anyone could want. So, I learn. These masters of Mars will be my teachers. Like them, I’ll look to my own benefit and follow the heartless math of the horizonless professional ladder. No goal, only expansion. And, I’m well placed for the betterment of my self-interest.* Morak’s thoughts went on this way for some hours. His mind went back and forth between anger and bitter ambition. All the while he came back to a single thought. *The thing is clear; my self-*

interest means the army stays on alert. This army is mine, and it's ready. I won't give that up. Tonight, I'll congratulate Akbari because his country now has a standing army.

EIGHT

“They’ll kill the boy, and they’ll kill me, too!”

Empacia’s voice trembled, as did her heart. On hearing that she was to be returned to Tharsis, terror swept through her like an electric charge. Her stomach surged; she nearly hyperventilated; a whirling in her head nearly threw her into a faint. Her son held her tightly with his arm around her waist, as though to wrap her within his own inexhaustible serenity. She pushed Robert away; he shrugged and sat down on a plush tan sofa. She wavered, put her fingers to her forehead, and silently began to cry. She petitioned fate with her wretchedness.

Dorda of Acidalia was not smiling. Somber of countenance and stiff of bearing, he mulled over the implications of this deal he had no hand in. Now and then, despite his lover’s calamity, his eye twinkled. Even in her moment of duress, he seemed to be saying, “*Come on. It’s all a game, play it better and, like me, you’ll be a winner.*” He was careful not to be condescending to her fear, which he considered a symptom of hysteria, a trait of her’s he found somewhat sexy. Sometimes, she cried when they made love, and he liked that.

Empacia looked sharply at Dorda. “You have to do something! Save us or betray us.”

“Listen, old girl, we don’t want bodies piling up,” Dorda said. He shook his head sadly, and wished she were capable of at least a little detachment. “If there’s a way out, we need to take it. You must accept that this is for the greater good. The return of harmony to Mars. The contentions that scare you have evaporated, and we can live anywhere in peace, even in Tharsis. I will be with you. You’ll be safe. I’m telling you, you are safe.”

Empacia threw up her hands, then dropped them to her side. “To Akbari there’s no difference between truth and lie. Words are only words. Damn, I can’t believe you’re so gullible! What did he do, sign a document? Oh, my goodness, that’ll bind him like a string around a boulder.”

“If he violates the agreement,” countered Dorda, “then it’ll be out of Martian hands. That’s written in the settlement: Brussels will adjudicate any further disputes.”

“Which is where he wants us,” cried Empacia. “You all said he could never raise an army, and then he raised one. He stood you down. You misjudged that, didn’t you? You and your Earth fighters. You sure miscalculated that. You overestimated the usefulness of Earthling artillery on Mars. You misjudged the approach to Akbari...you never dreamed he’d attack you! Then you sent that milk-sop Kirata...”

“The man is doing all he can for you!”

“And now,” Empacia went on, “you want me to trust your judgment. On a mere exchange of promises, I’m to go live in that fiend’s grasp? Are you an idiot or actually mad?”

Dorda rolled his eyes as he sat down quietly. He looked to the boy, who kept still, fixing his eyes on his mother. After a short silence, Dorda said, “Empacia, I may have been mistaken, but nothing I’ve done has cost anyone their life. And isn’t that the most important thing: life? No matter how short, how out of place, life on Mars is all that matters. I’m trying, as are the Kiratas, who are your friends whether you believe it or not...we are trying to manage this situation so that no one, particularly you and Robert, will be risking their safety over an issue of property law. You’d think the damned things would have been better written. It’s that sordid and ineffective legal system! All systems, no products. No laws.”

“Oh, they do it on purpose,” Robert said suddenly. Still watching his mother, he lay back on the sofa, draping his feet over its arm. “The hazier the laws, the easier for the lawyers to find loop holes for the rich, which we used to be. This Kirata compromise is typical: nothing too definite.”

He had said nothing throughout the argument taking place in Dorda’s luxurious Isidisian apartment. He saw that his stepmother had again fallen into an exorbitant rage--now a daily occurrence. In the evening, she took tranquilizing pills, but during the day, Empacia was insistent on remaining clear headed, even if that particular state of mind made her susceptible to quaking fury. Robert had lost his birth mother and father; his fears for his stepmother’s health overwhelmed him day and night, as he clung to her as a last vestige of family. He was certain these events, whatever their outcome, would shorten her life. He said to Dorda, “Then you’ll come with us? You, your soldiers, and Earthling fighting vehicles. Insure our safety with your arms.”

“I will move with you to Tharsis.”

“Stand by us until we all agree we are safe?”

“Yes, I will, forever if need be. But no soldiers, no weapons,” said Dorda. He stood and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We are going to reestablish peace and acceptance of each other. I know it requires bravery on the part of your mother and you, but the importance of reestablishing tranquility can’t be overstated. Your presence in Tharsis will be the first step to the return of Pax Martialis. You’ll inspire mankind.”

“And you won’t leave us?” Robert asked.

“Yes, yes. But, remember I have a province to run. I am still the military governor of Acidalia. We must be flexible, but my presence will surround you and all of Tharsis will know that. And we are at peace! There’s nothing to fear from your uncle.”

“You see, Mother?” Robert said as though it settled everything. “Our protector is truly a Martian to the core. A pacifist in his deepest heart.” Seeing in her ever-anxious eyes that the other did not quite share his view, he elaborated. “If my uncle harms us, Earth’s havoc will engulf him. Uncle Akbari won’t risk imprisonment or death. If this is taken out of Martian hands, those dangers become outcomes. He’s a sane man; Akbari wants to live, and he wants to keep what he’s got.”

Empacia smiled through her tears. She said, “You see how special he is? So mature, so brave.”

“Indeed,” said Dorda, “Governor Kirata was saying the same thing, just the other day. The whole camp admires him.”

Robert said, “You’ll have to explain to your people why my protection matters to your province. I doubt you want them to feel neglected while you move to Tharsis. They appreciate your connections with Earth, and bringing Bakhuisen under your aegis was a great boon to Acidalia; they might not like sharing their autocrat with an advanced and attractive land like Tharsis.”

Dorda gave his widest smile, nodded, and said, “No matter what happens here, you will go far my boy. I think you can see around corners. Now, you take care of your mother while I take care of everything else.”

#

Akbari saw no need to explain anything to anyone, yet he condescended to do so. Upon returning to Tharsis, he addressed an assembly of rich Tharsisians: scientists, landlords, and shipping moguls. He was treated both as a war hero and as a diplomatic hero who had averted war. Never had he felt so well liked. He basked in the strange popularity as a lottery winner bathes in their new fortune, though perhaps with more caution. In his speech, the premier colorfully recounted his private negotiations with Governor Kirata, shading events when suitable. He depicted in detail the resistance to reason exhibited by the coalition of forces lined up against him, their blind fear of Tharsisian democracy and freedom. He described Tybolt as perhaps deranged, certainly violence prone, and without any regard for life. In the Akbari version, the Earth soldiers were eager to avoid a battle with the Tharsisian militia. The three tribunes, along with Marshal Morak, sat on a dais behind the podium while the premier expounded flamboyantly. They remained expressionless and inscrutable throughout the speech. After Akbari finished, Dlette and his comrades led the room in a standing ovation.

“That was wonderful,” Akbari told Raluca when he saw her in the hall afterwards.

His sister nodded and gave her brother her broad crimson smile. Then she put her hand on his bicep and said, “You delivered well. Let’s have more of it.”

“More speeches?”

“And more visibility. I think you and your battling engineer should take a victory lap around the city. And you should travel to the larger towns outside the capital dome. Let’s make the most of this happiness.”

“Oh, God! Leave the capital again?”

“I think it wise,” Raluca said. “Opportunities to celebrate don’t come that often. And in the people’s minds, you were victorious over Earth. Let them celebrate; let them love you. Let the event linger, become a nationalist myth.”

Akbari smiled; he glowed. Then in a serious tone, he said, “Well, as long as I don’t have to leave Tharsis again. I hate it out there. The meaningless bleakness of dead lands. I don’t like to go out there again, Raluca.”

She laughed, “But this will just be Tharsis, and Akbari loves Tharsis. And now, after all these years, Tharsis loves Akbari.” After looking questioningly into her

brother's eyes, Raluca bit her lip, and then turned and disappeared into the crowd. Akbari watched after her for a few seconds, but soon several congratulating plutocrats set him upon. A news cameraman snapped pictures of the premier, who radiated benevolence and power. A very happy man. Champagne glasses clinked.

#

Two days later, the premier found himself ambling about the city, meeting with neighborhood counsels, artisan guilds, and business groups. The city had a surfeit of meeting rooms and interest groups. Each room looked the same, each group was entirely different, renters, low wage workers, owners; architects, artisans who provide the small Martian brick trinkets which sold so well on other worlds, especially Earth. He explained the story of "The Almost War," as the incident was known in Tharsis. He extrapolated with relish the story of his manipulation of the many-headed enemy. As his story unfolded, Akbari depicted himself as a diplomatic matador, taunting, and then subduing the solar system's bullyboys. Morak stood elbow to elbow with the premier wherever he spoke. Although not minding Akbari's specious descriptions of The Almost War, he grimaced notably whenever the tale flirted with the borders of credulity. When Akbari got worked up, he would describe the Earthmen as tearful with fear, or recount imagined praises lavished on him by his defeated adversaries. The premier was keenly versed on the nuances of each audience, whether their concerns were economics, health, or morals. He marched up to each podium and delivered accordingly. He always foretold good fortune to match and allay the specific gripes of each audience. The city campaign further raised the land's devotion to Akbari; people enjoyed the moment and wondered at Akbari's victories. Tharsis now occupied a great place in the solar system.

Morak was glad to see the joy of the people; he agreed that the leadership owed the nation this celebration. At each stop Akbari paid ornate homage to his general, nearing tears in his adoration. In fact, his speeches consisted mostly of lionizations of Morak the visionary manager. Contrary to his reputation for dishonest dealings, Akbari believed in paying his debts, and he owed Morak a great debt. He freely told the young man that nothing would have been possible without his unique talents. Morak's proposal to keep the army intact charmed Akbari, and he assented in a second. By the end of the, victory lap, the people's ostentatious adoration of both premier and general had become comic fodder for late-night programming on Earth.

#

Then the whirlwind began. Besides the capital, there were six other domed villages in Tharsis. Akbari and Morak toured them all. Like the capital, the outlying settlements were several stories of Martian-brick with bay windows and v-shaped balconies so that every apartment got maximum lighting. Narrow roads encircled the small hamlets, but very few vehicles were used inside the enclosed areas. The farms, large domed units in close proximity to the population centers, had few structures other than a caretaker's cottage and a power station. The workers lived in the nearby villages and went to the vast fields via the ancient but reliable maglev trains which zipped across the nation's several causeways.

The initial reaction to the premier's tour and brief speeches was riotous joy. The small town public was relieved that there would be no war and proud that their new country had stood up to the solar system, successfully defending their rights and laws, about which they knew little. As the days wore on, the initial fear past, and the populace slowly reverted to its natural state: unmitigated apathy. By the end of the two-week tour, only a few citizens showed up to mill around while Morak and Akbari speechified. The apathetic public miffed Morak, who had been somewhat sullen since the crises had past, despite the praise and encouragement Akbari rained on him. His eyes narrowed as he told Akbari, "These people don't deserve your leadership. It's a lazy, self-indulgent generation. A sad sack nation."

Akbari assumed a solemn air and replied, "They trust us to do what's best. We mustn't ask for their thanks, only their continued faith in our decisions."

"Like apathy, faith requires no effort. They signed away their lives to us and don't want to hear about where their world is headed."

Akbari licked his lower lip and said, "We have the honor of serving; we can't ask for more, can we?"

#

Meanwhile, Raluca stayed in the capital and oversaw the day-to-day operation of government. She signed executive orders, attended the opening of a new school, made decisions on production quotas for a factory whose budget came due while her brother was away. No one thought it strange that during his absence, Akbari's sibling should take his place at the helm. In fact, there was more gossip about her superior verbal and intellectual skills than about her nepotistic path to power. As Akbari well knew, his sister

had no interest in the unremitting obligations that came with the highest office in the land. Raluca's love of sports, particularly mountain climbing and tobogganing (what could be more exhilarating than racing prone down a mountain?) made her jealous of her time. An official position meant an official schedule, and free-spirited Raluca loathed the thought of a life tethered to schedules. Acting as her brother's chief advisor satisfied all the need she had for power, and she had no need for acclaim; after all, no accolades from a crowd could surpass the thrill of a five kilometer run down a 40-degree Olympus Mons slope on a souped-up toboggan.

#

In a bare green room with a pink cement floor, a clerk trembled under Ishihara's impatient gaze. The caged tribune slapped his hand on the paymaster's counter and hissed, "Tell them."

The paymaster looked between the bewildered, inquiring faces of Dlette and Mowbray. "Well, sirs," he said, keeping his head high and his eyes fixed on theirs as if to stand up to any accusation of impropriety on his part, "the marshal tells me that the agreement is 40,000 rings per man. In the army that I'm in, there's no higher authority than the marshal. So, although I don't remember hearing anything about it before, we credited those men's accounts..."

"The paymaster hadn't heard of it," punctuated Ishihara. "That's because there was never any agreement on this huge payout to foot soldiers that never fired a shot!"

Mowbray asked for a glass of water and a place to sit; the paymaster brought a goblet and a stool. The old tribune propped himself up against the stool, so as still to give the appearance of standing—after all, Ishihara had that bloody cage to help his feeble structure. Mowbray for a moment thought about getting one.

Dlette huffed, "Did Morak do this on his own, or as part of an Akbari scheme?"

"That's what we find out next," said Ishihara. "The intention is clear. A standing army has been bought and paid for. The question is, whose army is it?"

Dlette nodded. "Akbari's, Morak's, or for Tharsis?"

Mowbray looked up and said, "Tharsis doesn't need an army. We all know that."

#

Raluca's desk, made of burnished plastic and covered with leatherette, sported two holographic monitors, a music station, even paper and pens. It was the desk of a busy person, somewhat disorderly and laden with office machinery. She labored on both monitors, reading from one, speaking into the other, making notes by hand; Totic sat in a side chair, taking notes as Raluca had instructed. They were analyzing the expenses of the city's sewage system. Raluca, after reading some literature from Earth, was determined to transform human waste into energy. None of the tribunes supported her. Dlette could not fathom why his friend would spend her time and so much effort on such a humdrum subject. He thought Raluca's determination to upgrade the Martian infrastructure was work in vain. For Dlette the country was rich, the planet was mostly empty; why disturb Tharsisian indolence by changing the way human waste was pumped into otherwise useless craters, as was now done? Raluca saw the future and knew that as decades and centuries passed, Martian indifference to efficiency would eventually come back to haunt society. Whereas Dlette, the tribunes and her brother were governed by following the line of least resistance, thinking the whole civilization would crash soon anyway, Raluca wanted to reverse the society's passivity, lest entropy sink the Martian experiment. She hoped that a wise rule while the planet was still manageable could extend the life of Martians and Mars. She did not, as the others did, accept that inhabited Mars would only last a few more centuries. She believed that Mars, like Earth would eventually face population pressures and scant resources. It was a lonely belief, shared by no one she had ever met.

As she did with Akbari, so Totic served Raluca with dour devotion. With no family, no outside interests, and no personal ambition, this gray-faced, wall-eyed woman served the Akbaris' interests without distraction. Long after the powerful siblings were asleep, Totic sat at her desk, proofreading, checking all math, and updating their calendars. When they awoke in the morning, she had been in the office for an hour. Raluca loved work and her interest in people extended no further than work. Though no misanthropic, her life aside her brother left her skeptical about the worth of humanity. Perhaps for this reason, she embraced her brother's need to rule over degenerate masses. She transferred all her dreams and all her energy into perpetuating Akbari power. Their furtherance was the cornerstone of her values, the needle of her moral compass. This obsessed votary well served the sibling's voracious ambitions.

The two women were hard at work, examining the holo-libraries for books and articles about converting waste to energy. The industrious two worked long, quiet hours, cutting and pasting, not yet studying, but only accumulating and organizing information. After compiling a bibliography of the available published work on the subject, Totic would pore through the readings, and then distill the main ideas for Raluca.

They did not hear the gentle rap on the door. Nor did they hear the door open or see Tribune Dlette enter the room, his round face twisted with worry. Dlette stood silently for a moment, watching with admiration as the woman he cherished slaved over the glittering holographic information retrieval machine, researching human shit. Whenever he saw her like this, working with the silent intensity of an artist, he felt a mixture of pride and shame; pride that she had chosen him as her dearest friend, and shame that he, a state official, gave so little of himself to duties of governance.

“Raluca,” he said with a tenderness that, as always, betrayed his love.

Raluca and Totic looked up alertly. Raluca smiled widely, changing in an instant from a researcher into a society hostess. She beckoned her friend with a wave and pointed to a chair near her desk. One quick glance at Totic, and the veteran secretary wordlessly shut down her holograph, stood, and left the room.

“What worries are chasing you?” Raluca asked maternally. She leaned back in her chair and pressed her fingers to her eyes, which were sore from hours of reading. “My poor Dlette, you look as though you’d lost your best friend.”

With his hands flat on his knees, Dlette leaned forward and said, “It’s Morak! He tapped the treasury to pay those soldiers 40,000 rings each. 40,000 rings! The man is building his own military, and paying for it with the state’s money! He has kept the army together, which is contrary to the resolution we agreed on. We clearly said that the army was to disburse as soon as the threat of hostilities was past.”

“How did you find out about this?” she asked calmly.

“We interrogated the paymaster.”

“Who is ‘we’? Who knows about this?”

“If you mean does Ishihara know, the answer is yes. He discovered it, how I don’t know. But, he’s always asking questions. He led Mowbray and me to the paymaster and forced the pathetic man to give us the whole story.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

Raluca nodded. “I wonder who Ishihara has told by now.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt, he’s using this to his own ends. The people don’t know of course, but Ishihara is very articulate in private, and you can be sure that powerful people will be told that this entire affair resulted from the premier’s cupidity and incompetence. And now, he has an army.”

“He can’t do anything,” she said unconvincingly.

“Morak or Ishihara?” asked Dlette.

“Ishihara, Silly.” After a longish pause, she said, “He’s changing our story, and we need our story to be the legend.”

Dlette shook his head. “There’re more people than just Ishihara who are weary of the premier’s handling of fiscal affairs. It’s getting to the point where a day doesn’t pass when I’m not approached by a landlord or a banker asking if things are under control. From out of nowhere, there are rumors of a financial embargo! That would instantly destroy our economy. It’s not like we use specie. They cut us off electronically, and this land is broke.”

“And you tell them it’s all nonsense that we are in harmony with Earth?”

“Of course. But, Raluca, it’s growing. Important people are looking closely at the treasury and when this particular expenditure comes up things could explode. It wasn’t lost on these people that Morak was able to rally the public into war frenzy. They saw an impassioned and persuasive leader. That genie is out of the bottle. Next, Ishihara may find his own advocate, somebody to raise the hackles of the public and turn them on the premier. This grows dangerous, Raluca. We must control your brother and Morak before they alienate Tharsis. And what is Brussels going to say when they hear our army is still mobilized? My god!”

“What do you recommend?”

“Well, to start with, we have to reign in Morak. We can’t let him keep an army!”

Raluca folded her fingers across her tummy, nodded, and considered. Dlette waited, watched. Finally, she grunted, as though agreeing with herself. She said, “It’s too early to decide whether Morak aids or threatens our incumbency. I’ll talk with my brother and make sure this engineer-general remains as devoted to him as we believe he now is.”

“His actions,” said Dlette, reddening, “speak volumes. The man is assembling his own power base in the name of your brother! Unless you are telling me the premier is behind this.”

“No.” Raluca shook her head, and smiled. “You assume he thinks like you, or I, or Ishihara. But, remember, Morak is like the rest of the populace: they have no background in Earth history; all they know is Mars, and on Mars, the government has always ruled; the people accept that and I think Morak does too. He doesn’t know any other way.”

“Raluca, you must understand, I...I...”

“You are a tribune,” she finished for him. “You have a loyalty to the electors. We understand.”

“You are frightening me, Raluca. Tell me what’s going on!”

“I promise, I can control everything. Don’t worry; there will be no military junta in Tharsis. Just keep me up to date. Okay? Now, I really have to get back to work.” He shook his head. She said softly, almost pleadingly, “Okay?” Dlette stood, again shook his head and then took his leave, slamming the door behind him.

NINE

After their exhilarating tour of the nation, Akbari and Morak returned home to the capital city, which was, in Raluca's words, "roiling with irritation." She recounted the tribunes' discovery of Morak's remuneration for and retention of the army. The premier and the marshal were untroubled; in fact, they smiled at each other with bashful pleasure. During their two-week sojourn, they had become ever closer; along with Raluca, they were now the sole members of the political party running Tharsis. Akbari quickly dismissed Raluca's warning that Ishihara was determined to parley the united anger of the tribunes into a play for the premiership.

"That hardly matters," the premier said drowsily, "We have an army; the people see us as the defenders of the nation. Let the tribunes howl and moan. All true and usable power is ours." His sister seemed to accept this dismissal of danger, and she moved on.

Next, she told them that Empacia, her son, and the generalissimo had taken a large apartment in town, which, as agreed, the state paid for. Thus far, she had had no word of trouble. Next, she told the premier a high-ranking Earth emissary had been sent to inspect and report on the settlement of the mine dispute, and that he was staying with the Kiratas in Isidis. She finished by announcing that now that her brother had returned, she planned to take two weeks away, going to her favorite getaway, a lodge on Olympus Mons, where, along with other outdoorsmen, she would toboggan and decompress at one of the most exclusive resorts in the solar system.

Akbari blessed the vacation. "That's a wonderful idea. Between Totic and I, we'll cover while you're gone. We've all had a lot of stress lately..."

"I can always be reached if you need me," she interrupted. "Do call."

"Relax," said her brother. "There shouldn't be any problems now."

"If the Earth emissary wants to meet while I'm gone, put him off."

"Of course. No need to hurry, all is calm."

#

After another restless night, a lonely breakfast--her food intake limited by chronic dyspepsia--Tosic dressed, covered her face in heavy make-up, and then took a cab to the Administration Building. During the short cab ride, through the empty streets of the late rising capital, the black thoughts of the nighttime pessimism and temptations to self-destruction, common nocturnal tortures for average Martians, blessedly gave way to the exigencies of her official duties. Like most of the inhabitants of this world, she did not much fear death, but fretted endlessly about the three or so years that preceded it. When that time came, her bones would no longer support her weight; her inner organs would shrivel painfully; life would become a bed-ridden struggle to breathe, to eat, and to hold one's bowels. For people like Tosic, unmarried, without family, the final months or years were generally spent in a hospice dome, outside the city, away from life, where none, especially the young, would witness the undignified end that met all Martians. Even those with families were frequently shuttled away, particularly if there were children in their homes. At forty-eight, Tosic was nearing the time when Martians began the rapid slide into decrepitude and early death.

The Administration Building was, as always before 11 AM, quiet. The two guards at the entrance leaned sleepily against the door, barely nodding to the premier's secretary as she passed inside. The long pink hallways of power were, as always, empty. The great windows let in the streaming orange-tinged sunlight, suffusing the rooms with a peach fuzz haze; dust swirled away from the ventilation shafts; dust was never in short supply on Mars. Tosic felt her hop quicken and her spirits lift. She was buoyed by being consumed with tasks of greater importance than loneliness and age.

As she was about to open her office, Tosic heard the clatter of other feet in the empty early hour hallways. She stopped, looked around, and saw approaching from another long corridor, perpendicular to the one she traversed, none other than young Robert Vardani.

"What are you doing here?" she asked briskly.

The boy smiled and said, "I was told that this is where all the great decisions are made, that this is the nerve center of Tharsis."

"And what business would a young man like yourself have in such a distinguished hall?"

“To educate myself. I was told that citizens could come here, that this was the people’s building.”

“Theoretically.”

The boy nodded and smiled knowingly. “I wanted to see for myself.”

“The guards should not have allowed you in. There is a time for visitors. This is not that time.”

“Ah, but it never really is, is it? I mean what’s the point of waiting for the announcement of visiting hours when they are only announced after they are over.”

“Who told you that?”

“The generalissimo. He knows how things are done here.”

“Is that what he told you? He thinks he understands, does he?”

“So far he’s been right about most things. He said that it would cost me twenty rings for the guards, and that even then I’d have to tell them that the premier himself had suggested I come. He said, to get along in official Tharsis, I’d need to give money and a plausible lie in case they got caught. He also said they won’t ever need the lie, because nobody keeps track of anybody else’s work in Tharsis.”

“No matter what that man says, you shouldn’t give bribes. It degrades the briber as well as those who sell their honor.”

“I wish appeals to honor were useful in Martian societies. Rings are very useful.”

Tosic eyed the boy, and he smiled at her. He believed her moment of appraisal would conclude in their friendship. The moment went on, his smile widened; he tossed his long hair from his face. “Go ahead, take me in, I’ve nothing to fear from scrutiny.”

“You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you,” she said with a failed tone of scolding.

“I’m sure that I mean no one any harm, including the premier. I know you are close to him, and that he listens to you.”

“You don’t know anything,” she interrupted. “You are a very presumptuous young thing,”

“The generalissimo told me that if I wanted to win over Premier Akbari, I should first win you over.”

Tosic laughed. “That man... well, I would not take everything he says as gospel.”

“Oh, I don’t. His restaurant suggestions have been dismal. But, I reckon his observations regarding influence are close to the mark. That’s his stock and trade. Besides, it’s not as though he told me directly; he told my mother and I overheard. I think he gives her his best advice.”

“Their interests are tied,” Tosic remarked.

“For now,” Robert said, as though thinking aloud. Then, again locking eyes with Tosic, he went on. “The generalissimo devotes himself wholly to his interests. But, I don’t hold that against him. I never liked him—who but my mother could—but he has tried to help me when few others would.”

Tosic nodded grimly, “Against the Akbaris.”

“That choice is not ours; certainly not mine. I want us all to get along.”

Tosic nodded thoughtfully, then looked at her watch. “Perhaps you do. Perhaps you are well intended, but...” she stopped short: she would not criticize the child’s mother to his face. She stiffened and said, “I can’t spend anymore time prattling with you, boy.” The premier’s secretary unlocked her office and entered without another word. She resolved to henceforth avoid young Robert Vardani. If he was an enemy of the premier, it was imperative that she develop no affection for him. However innocently, the child was the cause around which Akbari’s enemies rallied. She well knew that the little charmer could easily win her neglected affection.

Perhaps this awareness of her own weakness led her to speak harshly when some moments later she warned the premier of the machinations of his domestic political antagonists. She detailed Ishihara’s interrogation of the paymaster before the other tribunes and his malicious conclusions regarding Morak’s (and by association, the premier’s) motivation. She declared, “Sir, you must stop the tribune from muckraking re: this financial irregularity. He means to use it hard against you.”

Akbari listened carefully, but without making any eye contact. Although Raluca had not painted so dire a picture as his secretary, the reactions of the tribunes to the standing army finally grabbed his attention. He walked over to a window that looked down Rover Boulevard. Traffic was picking up. The brown hover-taxis filled the roads. He said, "We'll just keep things quiet until Raluca gets back. Then we'll talk things out. I think it's time we decide what to do about Mr. Ishihara."

#

As Morak walked the streets, dressed in his sage-green uniform, a black sash across his chest signifying his military rank, the people in the ubiquitous sidewalk cafes stopped playing backgammon and lifting wine. They waved, smiling with pride at the city's hero. Parents pointed out the Tharsisian champion to charmed and awestruck children. If the masses were indifferent to Akbari and the tribunes, they loved Morak. He alone among the leadership was of the people. Akbari and the tribunes had always been there, their government on top of everything and everyone, like a vast but hardly noticed shadow engulfing the land. Morak, however, was a worker like themselves, a man of the cafes, of the streets, and of labor. And it was he, their peer, who had been the leading actor in the defense of the realm.

Did he enjoy notoriety and adulation? He developed a slight wave to reply to the cheers, using the back of his hand, papal-like. For the sake of posterity, he hired a secretary to keep a journal of his meetings and his thoughts. When he awoke each morning, he reminded himself that his life was not his own, that with every breath he must consider the good of Tharsis: had been chosen by fate.

He strolled for nearly an hour, as was his habit, canvassing the capital, seeing, as it were, that the city lie in order. Turning back on to Rover Boulevard, after passing down a dark, defile side street, Morak encountered an unusual sight. A crowd that had gathered at a café spilled over into the street. Although it was common for people to gather around a café to watch a particularly exciting game of backgammon or a ferocious electronics contest, this group was not circled around one of the gaming tables, rather the throng swelled out the open front wall of the café. As Morak drew closer, he was noticed by a couple of particularly somber men standing on the perimeter of the crowd. Seeing him, their faces whitened; they spoke quickly to those around them, and then pushed through the crowd towards its center. They whispered as they wended their way toward whatever magnetic event had drawn the crowd. Several people left hurriedly, somewhat

furtively, hopping not walking; others stared at the approaching marshal. Rather than the eager and grateful expressions that usually greeted Morak, the faces of the crowd were filled with anxious curiosity. Some heads with mischievous smiles swiveled from Morak toward the front of the crowd. Wondering what would come next, they parted, and made a path for the marshal. Morak looked each person in the eye as he slowly cut through the swarm. A woman's voice came from the front of the crowd. Though he could not see the speaker, he knew the voice.

“And though you may not believe it,” she was saying, “on Earth, state leaders are elected, not by a group of rich and mysterious electors, but by the entire population! Every adult gets a vote. That's right, they are chosen by the people. There's no mystery about how they came to office, or what they do in their chambers. Ask the abbot, she is here with us to tell you how it is on other worlds, to tell you what has been obfuscated by our leaders so that they...”

Empacia stopped cold as her eyes met Morak; the silent crowd fell, if possible, even more silent. Empacia, dressed in a flowing saffron sari, looked to her right. Dorda stepped up to her side.

“Well, the little engineer has come to hear your stories of Earth,” Dorda said cheerfully.

“What is going on here?” demanded Morak, looking around at the frozen faces of the crowd.

The cafe owner, a thin old Martian, hobbled toward him, his face pale and his eyes wide. “I endorse nothing of what is being said, I am just selling drinks and cakes to the listeners. Anyone can come to my cafe as long as they drink and pay. I'm not a censor!”

“What is going on here?” Morak asked as civilly as possible.

No one spoke for a moment, and then the generalissimo said, “The people want to hear Ms. Vardani's words. Apparently, this province became a democracy without letting the people know what that word meant. Ms. Vardani is providing a public service by explaining alternative forms of government.”

“Sedition!” Morak barked. “Are you raising the people against the law? My God... you’re our guests; you’re persons protected at Premier Akbari’s own cost; you’ve been given opulent housing; we feed you; and we allow your foreign legal teams to waste our court’s time with laws not binding to our nation. And, you return our hospitality by spreading propaganda! You disrupt our domestic tranquility by poisoning the minds of our people.” He turned to the crowd, “I don’t know or care who you folks are or what brought you here, but these people are not friends of Tharsis. Beware their every utterance!”

“I’m no guest,” Empacia shouted to the crowd. “I’m a prisoner. The words of Morak and Akbari are twisted so that night is day and day is night. Akbari laws are tyranny. He wants you to remain ignorant: they say history is propaganda. Day is night and night is day.”

Morak grabbed Empacia’s arm and pulled her toward him. Dorda’s smile dropped and he lunged at Morak. “Leave her alone.” The force of his lunge pushed Morak back against the wall of people, which gave way, leaving him to fall to the ground. The generalissimo stood over him, arms akimbo, his grin in place. “Perhaps for today, you might get your drinks at another establishment.”

Morak leapt to his feet. His right arm swung at Dorda, but the older man, with an audible laugh, merely grabbed the field marshal by the arm and by the back of the hair, swung him around in a circle, and let him fly into yet another section of the crowd. Morak got to his hands and knees, shook his head and began pushing himself up. The generalissimo kicked him in the seat of pants and again sent him sprawling. The crowd, wholly unused to violence, pulled back, gasping. Quickly, some left the scene, covering their eyes and shaking their heads as they hopped. Still others were fascinated by the fighting and, though falling back, fixed their wide eyes on the fray. They saw the generalissimo pick the Martian up by the scruff of the neck, then toss him into a wall. The younger man no longer moved. Dorda shrugged good-humouredly toward the remaining crowd. “I guess it’s a good thing for the little engineer that there wasn’t a war. I don’t think he would have done so well.”

After seeing their champion so readily dispatched by the transplanted Earthman, the disheartened remainder of the crowd murmured and fell back in confusion. A few stayed behind and tried to help their nation’s hero rise from the floor. The generalissimo went to Empacia. Her eyes shinned with joy. He took her in his arms and kissed her

passionately. The remnants of the throng, seeing the long, inter-species kiss as a further contempt for their fallen leader and the pride of their race, groaned, and continued dispersing. By now, all that was left was a handful of men with absolutely no place else to go.

Once back on his feet, although stunned, Morak shook off his helpers. His bleeding face was purple with rage and indignation, his eyes wide and red. Without a thought, he flung himself on the embracing couple, knocking them both to the ground. Empacia struggled to free herself from the weight of her lover. The generalissimo, unhurt laughed aloud; but in an instant, Morak had his antagonist by the hair, pulled him up, and then smashed his head down against the pink brick floor of the cafe. He did this again and again. A dark pool of blood spread halo-like around the generalissimo's head. Morak did not stop and no one intervened. Empacia watched in horror. She was the first to realize that the back of Dorda's head had been pulverized. Generalissimo Dorda was dead.

Morak stopped. His opponent's skull had been annihilated. Morak looked from his hands to the body, from the body to the small crowd, from the crowd to Empacia. The woman held her hands to her mouth, her eyes narrowed. Morak's first thought was, *this doesn't look like a woman who just lost a lover; she's planning her next move.* He could not fully read the crowd, but he was sure they were more afraid of him than he of them. He held out his hand and said, "A bad business, but the man was an enemy of Tharsis. It is for me to trample the enemies of Tharsis, and, as you see, good citizens, I have done so."

No one moved; no one spoke. A man in a military uniform walked over to the body, squatted down, and then glanced back at his fellow onlookers. "The foreigner is dead. We all saw that the marshal fought in self-defense against a strong Earthman. Someone call the medics to remove this body."

Seeing that Empacia was about to speak, Morak grabbed her and pulled her head close to him. He whispered, "One word, and I'll have you killed before nightfall." He turned to the crowd, "She is coming with me."

"Take me," she cried, "to the Earth abbey. I plead for sanctuary!"

At these words, the abbot stepped out of the crowd. Morak had not seen the small alien until that moment—Earth people hide easily amongst the lanky Martians. The

abbot was the woman with short blond hair he had seen on his last visit. "I will take her," said the abbot in a soothing voice. "She will be safe with me, in the sanctuary of Earth."

Morak shook his head, "If she were within your walls already, I wouldn't challenge her sanctuary, but this criminal is on Tharsisian land, and on this soil I am the keeper of the law."

"What crime?" cried Empacia.

"Renegade law," cried the abbot. Immediately she saw that the intemperate accusation lowered her standing with the crowd, made up of vagrant and dour Martian men with nothing else to do. Morak smiled slightly. An Earth abbot was perhaps the only person who could call on more allegiance from the man in the street than he could. As fortune would have it, this peculiar abbot, this pretty, for an Earthwoman, abbot, had by misstep given the crowd back to the marshal.

"You," he barked at two young men who watched the scene with the rapt attention of bloody-minded youth, "bind and blindfold her."

"No," Empacia shrieked. Her eyes widened and she dashed toward the door. However, Morak grabbed her as she passed and covering her mouth with his hand, pulling her close to his body. He looked over at the two youths, saw them staring dumbly at him, frozen in the confusion of the moment. He smiled paternally and said, "Come on, lads. I can't do it alone." The two leapt to the privilege of serving the savior marshal of Tharsis. With the help of the cafe owner, they bound Empacia with a tablecloth, gagged her with a napkin, and blindfolded her with a dishtowel. Next, they followed Morak onto the street, hauling the struggling Empacia, who believed she was about to be killed.

The impotent abbot was the last person to leave the café. Stunned by the changes of the past months, which now resulted in a murder, so rare on Mars, she told herself, *This is no longer a spiritual mission; this calls for a different branch of government. Brussels must know tonight.* And, leaving Empacia to her fate, he scurried back to her abbey and the secret communications room for which it fronted.

#

Morak did not harm Empacia Vardani. He took her to the stockade (recently erected in preparation for war internees). The stockade sat on the great square in front of

the premier's compound, further interlacing the new military with the premier. Empacia was placed in a room, left bound, gagged, and blindfolded. The boxy and windowless black plastic room was noisy, seeming to echo the many conversations going on in the hallways. Why should anyone care about prison acoustics? Morak assured her that no violence would befall her; he could not tell, nor did he care whether she believed him. His immediate concern was how to explain Dorda's death to Akbari. He had no remorse about slaying the generalissimo. Perhaps had his victim been a real Martian, he would have condemned himself for the act. The deed and the resultant mess turned his stomach, but in his heart, he felt relief, for the beating he had been given by the generalissimo had terrified and humiliated him. Still, he felt murder was not his habit, nor likely to become so. Killing should be done sparingly, and with as much thought and care as solving an engineering problem.

Later that evening, Morak explained what had happened. He had come upon the couple making a seditious speech in a café, and when he objected the generalissimo attacked him. In self-defense, he accidentally killed the man. Akbari paled and tilted his head downward; his greasy black hair hung over his face, providing a shield for his widening eyes. The premier knew that his little eyes were quick to show fear, and he had no compunction about concealing them while listening to people talk. But the exaggerated tension in his bony jaw exposed his alarm. He told himself, *I knew this would come. I never felt the tensions dissipate. One way or the other, there was bound to be bloodshed. Events are fluid now. What does it all mean?* He said nothing.

At his side, Totic asked gently, "And what should we do with her now?"

Morak said decisively, "Send her back to Isidis. Both her and the brat."

Without lifting his head, Akbari croaked, "No. Young Vardani stays here, in my sight! That's one weapon that never goes back to Isidis, one little bastard I'm keeping close."

"Alright. Should we send Empacia away?" Totic asked calmly.

Akbari was silent, trying to think what would Raluca say. He knew his sister hated the Vardani woman, loathed her even before Empacia's bold alliance with the enemies of Tharsis. Years ago, on hearing first word of Empacia's sudden marriage to their sister's widower husband, Raluca flew into an uncharacteristic fury, calling the

nubile bride a slut, a gold digger, and worse. The premier decided it would please Raluca to have the Vardani bitch tossed from Tharsis, and he smiled, brought his head up.

“Yes, yes. Send her away. But not the boy. In fact, bring him here. I’ll house him on the residential floor. They say he owns property in Tharsis, then in Tharsis let him stay.” He looked around nervously, and saw, to his surprise, that his instructions were good enough for Morak and Totic; in their ears, his wishes would never be questioned or thwarted. The moment moistened the premier’s eye. Morak bowed and exited; Totic moved on to the next business of the day. She brought up a memo from Dlette suggesting increasing the taxes on the Earth abbeys to help pay for the new army.

TEN

Water. Investments. Health. Education. Manufacturing. Infrastructure. Civic Order. These headings represented line-item expenditures for the government of Tharsis. Only the premier and the tribunes had access to this information, not the upper class, not Earth, and certainly not the media. Only Raluca was a master of the data. During her vacation, Totic took Akbari to his sister's office, where she logged onto the financial system. The comprehensive secretary brought out a file of Raluca's copious hand written notes. The information was virtually unintelligible to Akbari. Embarrassed by his mathematical anxiety, he rarely looked at accounting records. Now, he wanted to spend a few hours trudging through the information, pointing at each word with his finger, with patient Totic explaining at his side.

He was able to understand the one area that most interested him: funding of medical research intended to expand Martian life expectancies. There was only one small research clinic on Mars, operated by revolving Earth scientists. Most research had to be done on Earth, where live Martians were unavailable for experimentation (Martians could not survive for more than a couple of weeks amidst Earth's biological diversity). Mars poured vast sums into the universities and research organizations of the mother planet. Progress was slow; the health issues of the red planet were as distant from the chemical kinetics of Earth as the planet itself. Earth scientists were little closer than they had been two centuries ago to finding cures for the transplanted civilization. Akbari's concentration strengthened as he watched the highly colored hologram information about medical research spending. He asked questions and requested summaries of certain reports. When Totic offered to create spreadsheets to further elucidate the meaning of the numbers, he laughed and said, "Yes. Yes."

They worked for two hours, eventually he grew tired, and she left him to nap. Alone, Akbari leaned back in his sister's plush chair and closed his heavy lids; his fat thumbs twirled over his well-fed belly. *When the cure comes*, he thought, as though there were but a single malady stalking the lives of his countrymen, *and Raluca and I have been its cause because we turned our mineral into scientific research for Mars, we will have laid the foundation for a great Martian civilization. If we were healthy, we could grow and thrive. Mars will never be like Earth, but we can make it as appealing. Just*

different. As long as that goal is my light, I can't go wrong. Posthumous acclaim charmed the premier. To effect history was like having millions of offspring. For a moment, he rested in his dream, growing woozy with the bliss of hope. Then he slept.

Fifteen minutes later, his door swung open and the recognizable clumsy gait of the loyal Totic shattered the premier's cloudy quiet. Her usually gray face was red with exertion. She bent over and braced both hands on the desk that lay between them. Throaty panting nearly overwhelmed her speech. "The tribunes are at the door! They're in an angry state! Ishihara in the lead."

"What's the matter?" the sleepy Akbari muttered. "He's always in a state."

Totic quickly flipped the picture of a holo-screen to the security channels and a view of the long hall. She zoomed in on the faces of the tribunes and Akbari saw in them a fury that awoke him. He sat straight up. "What is it? Why?"

"It's about the boy."

"Has he caused some trouble? I thought we had him secured."

"No, sir," said the secretary, as she glanced around the room deciding if this is where she wanted Akbari to meet the piqued visitors. She guided him by the elbow; he readily followed her direction. "We want to meet them in your boardroom." They hopped down the hall. She said, "They are here--according to whispers I hear from those men of Raluca's--to protest the boy's detention."

"Protest his detention?" He almost laughed. "What business is it of theirs? He's my relative and with his mother gone, I am responsible for him. Who could complain about that? And he's been here for two days, why so angry now? There's a manipulator somewhere in the mix."

"Guess who." She shuffled him down the hall, without further explanation.

His boardroom had high windows looking across the dusky Martian afternoon. Akbari felt in control in this room, amid plush black couches, a conference table, and a library of legal codes. He settled drowsily into his chairman's seat. He lit a cigarette and waited, wondering what picayune circumstance they would seize on, just to ruin his day.

Ishihara, cage rattling, pushed the door open and entered the sanctum with a boom. Akbari smoked calmly. Dlette and Mowbray crossed the threshold. Akbari looked up with a small, serene smile. “My friends,” he said with lethargic insincerity, “if I’d known of your visit in advance, I’d have prepared a luncheon for you.”

Ishihara, his face tight, his eyes aglow, put his cage into a seated position in front of the premier. He leaned forward, “You have kidnapped that child!”

“And your thug killed the generalissimo!” added a distraught Mowbray. He had, belatedly, heard the news while on retreat at his fig farm. He had returned immediately to the capital. The older man shook his head helplessly. He looked at the premier with wonder; could the other not see the danger this murder and abduction posed to Tharsis?

After a few curses, Ishihara said with a modicum of self-control, “We need to get that boy out of Tharsis. Secondly, we may need to turn your man Morak over to Earth authorities. I’m told that an abbot actually witnessed the murder! If that’s true, then the news is already in Brussels and Isidis. After the Almost War turning Earth opinion against us, this’ll be the last straw. We were lucky to escape an attack the last time, but if we harbor the killer of an Earth-appointed governor and condone the kidnapping of a thirteen-year-old boy, our enemies will have law and conscience on their side. All the forces which from the beginning have opposed our sovereignty will use your crimes as evidence against us!”

Akbari looked to Dlette, his sister’s devotee and the one tribune he expected to support him. But Dlette looked away. He was angry with Akbari for compromising Raluca and himself. He believed the brutish Morak was to blame, that the new man, the parvenu had taken Akbari’s ear from Raluca—hence Dlette. What most annoyed Dlette was his own lack of outrage over the murder. What were tribunes for if not to keep check on the executive? Akbari’s folly was Dlette’s failure, considering the consequences for the nation, the tribune vowed never to forgive himself. Though these thoughts were not clear for Akbari to see, he did, nonetheless, understand from Dlette’s mien that he could not look to that usually reliable ally to bolster whatever excuses he could muster.

“I don’t understand,” the premier said, raising his sparse eyebrows and widening his eyes as if to see into the center of their inexplicable anger. “The boy lives in comfort and safety. His quarters, here in my own home, would be the envy of most citizens. He is happy and secure. Would he be better off if exiled away from his legitimate holdings?”

Holdings we have been forced to accept as his? Would you really put him in the hands of his unstable mother?"

Mowbray shook his head and pursed his lips, looking like a teacher warning a lying child. "A boy is better off with his mother, no matter what their habits. If you'd ever had children, you'd understand that."

"Oh, but I disagree," said Akbari, leaping to his feet and further feigning with facial expressions feelings of rational dissent. "The woman's temper is unpredictable, her morals abysmal and her decision to flee Tharsis without regard to the child...well, I think I've done right by taking the boy in. I thought it a kindness on my part. I'm hurt this august group doesn't share my view."

"Don't say she fled when you kicked her across the border," Dlette said dryly.

"Where is the boy?" demanded Ishihara. "Let him speak and put the matter to rest."

Akbari held his hands out wide, "I'm afraid he isn't here."

"Where is he," Ishihara said slowly, looking at Dlette as if to say, I told you so.

Akbari seemed to freeze. He had no answer to the boy's whereabouts, for he knew Robert was in his upstairs rooms. "With me he will learn the business of operating a mining company. What a wonderful chance for an apprenticeship."

"My God!" cried Mowbray. "Answer the question, man!"

Tosic stepped forward and said with calm authority, "To that end, he is taking his first visit to mines."

"You're lying," Ishihara shouted.

"No, it's true," she said. "He's out at the mines."

"That's right," said Akbari. "You can't expect him to learn his trade in town. The director of the mines is giving him a tour. I forgot that was today. The lad's a self-motivated learner. Very precocious. Hard to ever know what he's up to or where he is."

“Then,” Totic continued, “we’ll work out an educational program. First, we must see how he takes to the place, see if we should train him as a hands-on overseer, or if his nature is more suited for deskwork. We must learn about the boy as he must learn about his inheritance.”

“You see,” said Akbari, “I have resigned myself to his co-ownership. I’m not fighting this; I’m trying to bridge the earlier disputes. However, the boy’s mother is another thing. She and that horrible generalissimo, rest his soul, had other plans. The boy’s right of inheritance was used as a ruse to get them into position to undermine the order and independence of Tharsis. If we look below the surface, it’s plain to see, the generalissimo created this whole episode to give a pretext for taking over Tharsis, just as he took over Bakhuisen. He probably planned to support our independence, but wanted to get into position to seize the reigns of state once he finagled Earth into an agreement. We should be thankful he’s dead. Again, Morak is a hero. As for the boy, he’s fine with us; we spoil him. Last night, I sent discreet ‘maids’ to his room; a little spoilage in youth makes a man demand more from life, which is a trait we wish for in young Vardani. I treat the boy as my protégé and kin.”

“You sent him whores?” asked the aghast Mowbray.

“You must produce him,” said Ishihara. He glanced firmly at his two colleagues, who in turn nodded begrudging solidarity. Then he turned to Akbari. “You must produce him when he gets back.”

“It’ll be late,” said Akbari.

“Tomorrow then.”

Akbari clapped his hands and said brightly, “We are agreed, gentlemen. Now, I’ll have to say goodbye. I have a great many reports to read. With Raluca away, there’s a ton of work on my desk”

“I tell you, Mr. Premier,” said Mowbray, his voice tight and raw. “You are dangerously close to beyond the pale. If any harm comes to this boy.”

“Harm? Harm! You think I’d ever harm a child? What drives you to that wicked conclusion?”

Mowbray did not answer. Akbari protested his good intentions; he recited past good deeds performed on behalf of the nation “they all loved so dearly”. All the while, Mowbray’s attention was distracted. Akbari had nearly lead the nation into war, and now the first citizen of Tharsis perpetrated a kidnapping that might bring repercussions as catastrophic as war. On the eve of his long sought retirement, Mowbray faced greater responsibilities than ever. Akbari’s careless choice of Morak and his inexplicable kidnapping of young Vardani jeopardized Mowbray’s own needs, put off for so long out of concern for his country. Now more than ever, he had to worry for Tharsis. Mowbray again told himself that he must continue in office until reason, law, or force pushed Akbari from office.

The premier’s speech about his worthy intentions and saintly past was, along with Mowbray’s ruminations about his future looking no different from his tedious past, was interrupted when the door opened and Morak strode through the room. Tonic had alerted him of the situation. He was in full uniform, including black chest and groin protectors; he carried his thin, impenetrable bronze-colored helmet under a formally folded arm. Going past the tribunes without notice, he walked up to Premier Akbari, bowed and held his bow for some seconds. With a wave of his hand, Akbari gestured toward the tribunes. Morak turned on his heel and nodded confidently to the indignant officials.

“Sir,” said Morak, his voice great and loud, for he had grown accustomed to filling a battalion of ears, “the Kiratas have begun provocative maneuvers along our frontier. I’m moving to counter them. We will also have a military presence here in the city.”

“In Tharsis?” Dlette cried.

Morak nodded, keeping his eyes straight ahead. The tribunes looked at one another with flinty faces, but their freighted eyes betrayed and mocked their set jaws. Ishihara abruptly and noisily shifted his cage to toward Akbari. “Is this your plan? Perpetual threat, inevitable invasion?”

“The time for debate is past,” said Morak, and the other men turned toward him. “Our Tharsis is threatened by off-world schemers and their Martian flunkies. What’s even worse, when I came upon generalissimo and the Vardani woman, they were fermenting treason here in Tharsis, and finding receptive ears. That’s why I want troops visibly on the streets. This threat trumps all other concerns. We’ve made plans for weeks, now the time for action is on us, and act we will.”

Dlette again found himself switching sides. Once foreign troops threatened Tharsis, he turned his back on all other aspects of governing and rallied around the military. He said to the other tribunes, "Until we abjure our independence, they'll be at our doorstep, ready for blood. Earth 'll never let us break away. All that matters now is that we defend ourselves. Whatever we think of these two, they are the only ones able to protect Tharsis."

"Finally," said Akbari with a sad smile. "It has taken this new threat for you to understand. The marshal and I are standing between Tharsis and oppression. Why can't men understand the big picture until civilities are breached? Haven't I been telling you this exactly? They won't rest until our flag is trampled."

"It's because of Dorda's murder!" said Ishihara, looking at Morak, who did not flinch or return the glance.

The premier looked at the caged man blankly, then went on, recounting his many warnings to the tribunes about the need to keep an army.

Ishihara's instincts told him that the threat was serious; even though Akbari's stupidity had brought the nation to this point, the bona fide danger to Tharsis forced him to stop his efforts to unseat the premier--for now. Ishihara nodded when Morak declared, "In the face of this threat, let's resolve to be friends and to kill our foes. The tribunes and the electors are truly the voice of the people, but the premier is commander in chief. So, my noble friends, my army serves Akbari. I pray we have your blessings."

ELEVEN

Morning's soft sun brought dull illumination to the peak of Olympus Mons. Near the summit, in a brightly lit restaurant, Raluca sipped hot chocolate while nibbling a scone. The circular window-walled room featured vistas at every point of the compass. This site would have been the loneliest spot on a lonely planet, were it not for the buzzing resort, which lodged a hundred plus tobogganers, sightseers, and workers. Along with the view, the lodge's chief attraction was the Great Robert Louis Stevenson Toboggan Run. Stark, rusty, and icy dirt relieved only by the occasional boulder, Olympus Mons was less textured than the ancient freeways of Earth. In contrast to the barren volcano cone, a lunar landscape was lush.

Raluca studied a map of the run: a steep, spiraling five-mile chute, cut out of the volcano's side. Pale gray Martian ice covered most of the track; aside the run, tightly lined artificial pine trees formed a border and a safety cushion for spun-out toboggans. Earth visitors (80% of the guests) joked smugly about their poor relations' replica woods, but Martians, who had, of course, never seen real pine trees other than in an abbey tableau, were giddy about their *little forest*. No matter how disdainful the Earth people felt when they saw the faux woodland, it was forgotten once on the trail. The speed, incline, and cornering were beyond anything found on Earth (although Earthlings always mentioned that the First to Grindelwald run was over two miles longer). The Stevenson Run's steep course and lesser gravity taxed the nerve of the most veteran sportsmen, and frequently once down was enough, the limit of courage. A sign atop the run paraphrased the location's literary namesake.

THE MOST EXHILARATING FOLLY ON OUR WORLD

The sign brought a smile to Raluca; she could not decide whether she was here for exhilaration or for folly. For years she had vacationed here, alone. On vacation, being alone was a condition of happiness. Only when severed from the familiar did she let

down her guard and turn light-hearted. The dreadfully swift, occasionally life-threatening ride relieved her of all other thoughts. The excitement of physically controlling her life and safety in the face of gravity, angle, and surface strains, erased thoughts governance, finance, or war.

As for the danger, she knew soft gravity favored a thinking person; the brave and the coordinated could land well in even the most vicious wipeouts. Although it was common for tobogganers to fly twenty meters into the air after hitting an upslope, de rigueur protective plastics covered the entire body; now and then bones were broken, but for the brave and able, there were more thrills than spills. For rich Earth people, Olympus Mons was the hottest vacation spot in the solar system. Raluca felt that Martian temerity, not true danger, was the reason the sport never caught on with the natives. It infuriated her to think how spiritless trepidation so often her fellow immobilized Martians. The majority of Martian visitors were here for the sights, not for the sport.

Unlike most visitors, Raluca did not cherish the lodge for its social life. Two large, serious-faced female bodyguards insured that no one sat with her or approached her without interception; nor could anyone without fear of menace speak ill of her within her hearing. She ate alone; occasionally spoke with Dlette by holo-phone. Day after day, she declined invitations to cocktail parties with Earth vacationers, who seemed determined to talk with any Martian that would put up with them.

After breakfast, Raluca went to her room, put on her dark green Kevlar suit, and polished gold helmet. The flashy colors, so rare on Mars, were, like the lodge itself, displays of Earth fashions.

#

Kirata's formal meeting room was designed with faux-Danish wood, zinc and bronze; fine prints by 20th century Earth artists Marc, Rouault, and Kandinsky hung on the walls. Soft gold rugs and curtains, blood-red pillows lay on dark leatherette upholstery. The glass walls rounded boldly to give full views of the red landscape and city below.

“But I had the word of a great man, the breath of all order, justice, and permanency. I had your word, governor!” said Empacia. She stood pointing a broken-nailed finger at Kirata. The governor had told her plainly he would not use the military to rescue her son. This issue was criminal, not a matter of state.

“If force is not for this use,” she cried, “how can it ever be justified?” She paused, looking into the governor’s face for a reaction and got none. She went on, louder, faster. “A man disguised as a state has kidnapped the boy, my boy; a boy whose fortune and character make him a treasure, not just to his mother, but to all mankind. If you won’t send the Earth soldiers, at least send your policemen.”

Kirata paced before her, at times within inches of her nose or breasts. With a backhand, she slapped his passing shoulder blade. The governor swirled around and glowered at her. Yet, once in the lock of in her indignant and fearless eye, Kirata shied back. His recoil was partly due to the shame of his impotence, and partly due to the politician’s instinct never to fight motherhood. He looked away, shook his head, flipping his long silver and black locks over his shoulder. “The purpose of an army is to defend the solar system, not each individual within it. This is an issue for diplomacy, not arms. Our police would be unsafe if I sent them to Tharsis right now. Accordingly, we have sent our artillery back to their border. That is a military statement. Don’t forget, Akbari is still surrounded by men at arms.” He paused and put a finger to his lips as he mulled over the situation. “So far, he’s been willing to work with me one on one. I’ll call on him; I’ll make it clear to him that he must return the boy. I suspect he’s already considering it--surely knows this will not stand.”

“A renegade province becomes a haven for child crimes. My fiancé is murdered, my son kidnapped, and you want to talk it over with the perpetrator? Insufficient, sir! Insufficient!”

“Please. Calm down,” said the governor coldly.

“You cheapen your office,” cried Empacia.

“Enough!” yelled Tybolt, who had been sitting quietly since Empacia began her assault on the governor. Tybolt stepped in front of her and grabbed her wrist brutally. “Say no more. Your sex, wealth, and rights mean nothing to me.”

Shocked into silence, Empacia looked into the dispassionate dark eyes of Tybolt and saw that hitting a woman was not beyond his nature. Her next thought was, *If this man were in charge and not his husband, he’d settle this for me.* He bent her wrist back further, increasing the pain, moving the sting up to her elbow and shoulder. She bit her lip and nodded. He dropped her numb arm. She almost cried out, but again bit her lip and held her throbbing arm. For a moment, Tybolt even thought she smiled.

“But, I wonder if her point isn’t well taken,” Tybolt said to Kirata. “To overlook kidnapping and murder, that stretches tolerance to complicity. Also, let’s not forget, because Brussels won’t, Akbari is still in rebellion and won’t be policed. Perhaps here war serves goodness. Just wars are more common than we think. Perhaps the time has come.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” said Governor Kirata. “I let you talk me into moving right up to his borders, but no more! Organized devastation of life and property, that’s...”

“That’s what’s called for,” Empacia said. The men glared at her. She could see that her presence was not helping her cause. Calmly she said, “It’s the same old argument. Drop it already, and do something.” Then she left the room holding her wrist.

Outside Kirata’s meeting room, Empacia was alone, and alone beyond her greatest fears. Her lover murdered, her son in her enemies’ hand, and now deserted by Kirata, the agent of law and justice on Mars. Empacia stood swaying on weak legs. Feeling naked and in despair, she made her way along the hallway, leaning against the wall, wishing that floor would rise up and swallow her. Not a person at her side, this once privileged woman whispered, not in bitterness but in surprise, *Betrayed by fate. Being at odds with the self-interests of the men who oversee justice is like trying to tear through the fabric of time. But I can’t find it in me not to fight. That boy is as much mine as if he were my own flesh and blood. I won’t let them strip him of what is his. And poor Dorda, he did nothing wrong. To be killed for trying to help a child! Oh, there truly is no God on Mars.*

She wandered thus unsteadily toward the central atrium, a huge glass structure with a vista of the surrounding sand dunes. She took the glass elevator to her quarters, for the Kiratas had insisted that she stay as their guest. At the residential top floor, she could see to the curvature of the planet, yet see nothing but dunes. A strange thought crossed Empacia heart. She was glad to be here; the barren, unwelcoming world of Isidis was as void of heart and hopes as was she, and so echoed and reinforced her feelings of self, of loss, and of victimhood. Out of that moment of despair, she found a touching beauty and even dignity in her sad milieu. Where she surrounded by beauty, she would resent it, and in its reflection felt more deprived. But the bland desolation of Isidis matched her inner life.

#

Throughout her stays on Olympus, one after another invitations were pushed under Raluca's door. Usually, the occasion was drinks at a certain hour with a select group of people. Often someone wanted to interview her, particularly Earth travel writers, of which she imagined there must have been millions. Now and then, a serious scholar attempted to meet with her. The seriousness of their credentials meant nothing to Raluca; like most Martians, she found Earth's alphabetic hierarchy of intellectuals confusing and dull. During this trip, a university couple from Sydney, Australia seemed most determined to meet her. Not only did they slip hand written notes under her door daily, but once they sent by bellhop a two-page letter explaining their line of inquiry, 'Off-Earth Judicial Systems.' She sent back a note explaining her situation, her need for privacy while on Olympus. Yet, that very afternoon, in a public ladies room, the Earth woman cornered her and pleaded their case. Raluca told her that if they wanted to talk to her, they would have to travel to Tharsis after she got back. While still standing between Raluca and the door, the woman wrote down the dates and contact numbers offered her. Before she left, she said, "This will never do. He wants to see you now."

Raluca slowly composed herself, then found her bodyguards, gave them the woman's description and told them keep the academic away. Then, her mood broken by the pestering, she went back to her room. By the time she'd arrived, there was another note from the Australian academic couple. They offered to buy her lunch within the hour. Raluca walked to the window and looked down toward the common area on a wide veranda around the lounge. She saw the Australians sitting at a table near the entrance. She went to her luggage and found an eye piece, which she attached to the bridge of her nose in front of her left eye. Going back to the window, she had the eyepiece zoom in on the Australians. They were talking very quickly and though she tried, she could not read their lips. Next, she summoned a holo-communicator and called her Valkyrie bodyguards. "Find out if those people are connected to the Kiratas. Find out everything you can about them. Bribe the staff. And keep them away from me!"

After a nap, Raluca prepared for her day's run down the great mountain. She imagined that the few other Martians also on the toboggan run, like herself, wanted to test themselves for themselves. Unlike the Earth people, who seemed to enjoy talking about tobogganing as much as doing it, and who had nightly parties, the Martians were almost stoic about the sport, which was, of course, much more dangerous for their weak bones and tendons than it was for blue planet athletes. For Martian tobogganers, this was not just a sport; tobogganing was a supreme test of courage and spirit. It was the kind of test

that could only be graded by the doer. The question at hand? ‘Am I as strong as my race can produce?’ Most Martians thought these daredevils eccentrics, almost deviant. What, they wondered, would prompt a frail native to slide head first down and across the zigzagging mountain trail at heart-stopping speeds, with crashes common and injury not unusual. For Raluca and for a handful of other Martians, such speeds, such risks let them taste life’s fullest riches.

The toboggan suit was cumbersome and almost useless for walking, but the hard plastic casing had more than once saved Raluca. The Martian toboggan, which had to handle ice and bare dirt, looked more like a large, plastic bathtub, with straps that gave the driver much more control than an Earth toboggan. After bouncing meters into the air, the sportsmen would land awkwardly but safely due to the toboggan’s engineering and the plastic suit.

Raluca waited to get into the toboggan at the starting chute, which required the help of four workers. There was a group of three in front of her. Finally one of the workers waved to her, but before she could take a step, her holo-communicator went off. “Yes,” she said, almost pleadingly. It was the bodyguard. The couple had checked out. They were not affiliated with any of her antagonists. They were on a six-stop trip to the larger off-world colonies, and, as they had claimed, doing research on off-world judiciaries. They hadn’t talked to any high level officials so far, and although they were here for a short break from their research, when they found out a Martian of her stature was also in the lodge, they became very excited. Raluca said, “Maybe if they went to capital cities instead of resorts, they’d run into more high office holders. Thanks.”

As workers locked her into her toboggan, Raluca, as she always did here, became very excited, suddenly smiling and slightly hyperventilating. She tightened her helmet, gave the thumbs up and waited for the shoot to open. Suddenly, she was whirling down the volcano, careening off the curved and elevated walls of the narrow track. Only by wrapping the steering straps tightly around her arms could she hold on. The scenery, what was visible over the track’s wall and false trees, was only a smear familiar Martian colors. She let out a cry of joy. The happy shout was still in her throat when she lost control. The toboggan flew up and over the ‘little forest’. Upside down, she saw the soft plastic leafage below. Using all the strength of her arms, legs, and torso, she pulled right, attempting to correct the toboggan just enough so that it would not come down on top of her. Throughout the years, at such moments on nearly every run she had taken, the thought ran through her spinning head that this could be the time she did not come down,

that this precarious, uncontrolled moment could be her last. She looked danger in the eye with excitement and awe. To enter this moment of crisis, and react with courage and composure was the point of Raluca's trip to Olympus Mons.

#

Earth art covered the walls of Ishihara's home. The tribune, the planet's foremost proponent of high art, known across Mars as an important private collector. The artists he favored were Tanguy, Dali, and Modigliani. The actual objects on his walls were prints, made on paper, which was a luxury on Mars. The proud collector gave personal tours to every visitor to his home. Official Earth visitors were fore warned that these tours featured the kind of poster art found in college dorm rooms on Earth; to a one, they did not disillusion the tribune, who took eye-watering pride in his collection. A beaming Ishihara gave a brief, clever description of each object d' art. His wife followed along, sometimes spurring the tours on when her husband over lingered, praising a favorite piece. She was a quiet woman, who listened to everything her husband said; she responded succinctly when questioned; she never initiated conversation.

#

Dlette insisted that his son and daughter prepare for college, and not just any college; his aim was Bakhuisen A&M, the finest of the few colleges on Mars. Agriculture and Mining were the professions of the educated, although the school also graduated many geologists, engineers, and medical practitioners. The courses ran 3 years and focused exclusively on the students' area of interests: general courses, history, writing, psychology, and the rest, were studied only in primary and secondary school. No graduate schools existed; the idea was get young Martians into the work place by the age of twenty so they might have productive and satisfying, albeit short, careers.

On those rare nights when Dlette was home to eat dinner with his teenagers, he steered the conversation to their work at school. Knowing that talking about their academics pleased their father, the son and daughter chatted brightly about what they had learned since their father had last broken bread with them. Motherless and unsupervised away from school, the two were nonetheless good students, as so many Martian youngsters were. After all, there was nothing else to do except go to school and study once school was over, classes were taught in a pleasant manner, without great pressure and with plenty of free time.

After dinner, his daughter asked if he would be spending the next night with his friend.

“Does it trouble you?” he asked earnestly. “Raluca and I have so much to talk about, so much to do each day. It’s really like a working session.”

His daughter smiled, “Father, we’re glad you have a friend. Adults look lonely, I don’t think they really have friends like kids do. I mean Mom was your friend, but she died. I want you to have a friend.”

Dlette shook his head and murmured, “You are so much better than I deserve.” Then, the three embraced.

#

Akbari fell to his knees when his comatose sister was wheeled into the room. Her neck broken, her lungs unable to work on their own, Raluca would live evermore in motionless silence. Her eyelids fluttered, and at times, when her brother was near, holding her motionless hand in his own quivering fingers, one might suspect a slight glow emanated from her cheeks, though no other indication of feeling or consciousness stirred. The doctors tried to explain her condition, but his attention would not have it; he waved them away. The reality was too plain: the sister who had been comfort and guide throughout his life, had, through excessive desire for adventure, ruined her life and scourged his own. Totic pulled the doctors aside. She heard and made note of their instructions. She asked for sedatives for the premier, and then sent the medical men away. For the man she served, silence was more palliative than medical lurkings. If nothing could be done, then nothing need be said.

For the first two days, Akbari sat mutely at the side of Raluca’s bed, wiping her brow, stroking her hair, and hoping that these small acts of love might penetrate her sepulchral stillness. He would not allow anyone to speak of her in her presence, claiming that the mysteries of the coma had never been unveiled, and no one could tell if its victims were safe from hearing or from having monstrous dreams conjured by the morbid prattle of their caretakers.

Dlette was the only visitor Totic did not shoo away. Akbari treated the tribune with brotherly respect. They did not speak, but sat in chairs on the opposite sides of Raluca’s bed, silently holding her hands. Dlette sat for a half hour, twice a day. They

stopped acknowledging each other after the tribune's first two visits. They had nothing to say which her motionless presence did not express. Of course, from time to time their thoughts would drift across her long, white body, wrapped in a white warming sheet, and once or twice their eyes met. When caught in each other's eyes, they would each start like the antenna of a snail, and then retreat into their own disoriented sorrow. All stimuli outside each suffering man's skin were alien and threatening.

#

Too soon, Akbari went back to work. The pressures at hand left little time for grieving. During the days of mourning, Morak dealt with the military and diplomatic work. For Akbari, work consisted mostly of going through his sister's notes and logs far more extensively than ever before. Totic was again at his side and quick to understand the gist and implications of Raluca's writings. The overwhelmed premier was easily fatigued, and Totic, who had worked closely with Raluca, was forced to paraphrase nearly every paragraph to help the premier digest all the new and boring information. After the first day of work, Totic's to-do list had grown immeasurably. When they turned off the comatose woman's holo-files, they sat silently and watched the wide-screen pull itself into a small green dot, then disappear with the sound of an electronic G cord.

"I had no idea," he muttered, still staring at the spot where the green dot had vanished.

"That she did so much?"

"That so much could be done."

"Oh, she could have done much more," Totic mused. "Had she been ambitious for herself, she would have looked further and seen more that could be done. But she wasn't ambitious, she was energetic and devoted."

"Meaning she just did what I needed."

"Your needs and those of Tharsis were the boundaries of her desire and of her purpose. Meeting your goals of state, preventing vitals from falling through cracks, and insuring impeccable accounting, those things drew her attention. But, Raluca could have done anything."

Akbari nodded with a frown, then he snapped his head up and said with a feeble smile, "Bless your loyalty."

Sensing now that the day's work done and grief would soon overcome the premier, Totic ushered him out of Raluca's office and to the lift that took them to the fifth floor residency. The elevator opened in the foyer of Akbari's quarters, a warren of rooms, opulently furnished, impeccably tidy, with ruby red walls. The rest of fifth floor of the Administration Building housed a bevy of guest quarters, in one of which stayed Robert Vardani.

"I don't sleep," said Akbari, as he made his way into his quarters, Totic's devoted hand under his elbow.

"It will pass, sir. It will take some months. You must determine not to let sorrow enslave your soul. Honor Raluca by leading Tharsis to further greatness..."

"Yes, yes."

"Yes, sir. Focus on her great dreams, not her broken matter."

"Totic, you are my friend. Without Raluca, I have only you, the people, and my enemies. I'm too old marry, never really wanted to. Without you, I'd have no one who knows me. It's so important. I don't know why. But I must have at least one who knows me."

"To know you is to care for you, sir. And you need care; that is clear. I do know you, my premier."

The two old friends paused a moment and embraced with familial affection. He walked her to the door, opened it, and then hugged her again. Totic stroked Akbari's raven hair, and rocked him gently. He pressed his cheek against her bosom, found a moment's peace. Then he felt Totic's body twitch. He looked up; she stared down the hall. Akbari followed her eye line to see the diminutive figure of Robert Vardani standing, swaying nervously from side to side and watching with head tilted. The boy's eyes were wide; his pale face blanched at shock of seeing a moment of tenderness granted to the tyrant who with a smile had stolen his inheritance, banished his mother, and imprisoned him. It slightly hurt Robert to see the kind Totic comfort the cruel Akbari.

Akbari straightened. His embarrassment was overwhelming. The premier did not want to be seen in a moment of weakness by this brat, this whelp who threatened all that was his, threatened even the future of Tharsis. Akbari grumbled, "Glad to see you in the residences. Hope all is well with you."

The boy motioned an awkward bow. "I am sorry for your duress, sir. Truly sorry. Your sister is a great woman."

Akbari thought, *He patronizes me. He aims to be friendly and to charm me.* He said, "She has been. I'm afraid she will never again be more than she is now."

"It's a loss, sir."

"Yes."

They stood for a moment, as if the eyes of the other froze each. Akbari's eye twitched as he waited for the boy to surprise him. Almost in acknowledgement of Akbari's thoughts being so clear via the tiny movements of muscles in his blue-bearded jaw, and reddening of his high cheek bones, Robert Vardani came to something within himself that moved him to speak.

"Sir, in this time of your sorrow, perhaps you'll understand my own. A great hurt has fallen on you, sir; one has befallen me, as well. I cannot assuage you. But you have it in your power to end my sore. Let me go back to my mother. I'll sign whatever you like and give you possession of the mines."

"Not at all," said Akbari. He held his hands out wide, and although they shook from the weakness of his spirit, he smiled unconvincingly. Even in the deepest heartbreak his life had known, he would not miss such a chance. "No the mines are not for me, but for Tharsis. If you'll cede to the state?"

"I would gladly, but by Solar System law, my mother would have to agree."

"She won't."

"No, she will not."

"The Kiratas won't let her."

"They will not."

“So, young man, you have nothing to offer me.” Akbari smiled and winked at the boy. His tone softened as he said, “I’m fond of your presence and I believe that you belong here, in Tharsis. You’ve heard dark stories about me, and I understand your trepidation. All the more reason I want you to stay. We must become friends. You know, our fates are tied. These mines that others say are disputed between us, these are not for either of us, but for Tharsis and posterity. But our enemies, for we have the same enemies--though you, in your youth, can’t yet see that--our enemies would have us at odds to force a legal decision which strips the mines from under Tharsisian law. It must not be. We, you and I can stop it. We must stay together, under one roof. As long as we are inseparable and on Tharsisian soil, there can be no dispute where ownership lies.”

Robert looked to the ground and involuntarily shook his head. “My mother, sir, must rule me in this matter. You can see that, can’t you? Totic, you see my position. I don’t want to resist you, but my mother, sir. I must do as she says.”

On other days, Akbari would have humored the boy further, then found a vulnerability and turned tables on him, sending him away with his tail between his little legs. But Akbari was weak that afternoon, and passive and polite as it was, the boy’s resistance was more than the premier could endure. Robert’s girlish voice was like a banging snare drum when his sister’s condition required an ecclesiastic silence.

The boy read the end of patience in the premier’s pallid stare. He composed himself with a breath, straightened his jacket and bowed, and then he turned and walked back down the long hall toward his own quarters. Akbari and Totic, both standing with their hands clasped before their chests, watched the adolescent recede. They turned to each other then, finding the mote of union in each others eyes, turned back to glare down the now empty hall.

Finally, Totic said, “You go to bed now, sir. I’ll have some papers for that boy to sign in the morning. I’ll take care of it.”

“Then I want him out of my sight and off stage. Do you understand? Somehow.”

“To bed now, sir.”

“I mean it! He has to go!”

“I understand.”

TWELVE

The abbot ran her fingers over her short yellow hair and took a glass of water. In her hand, she held a red-tailed hawk, its wings spread, its unimaginable beak open wide, and its tiny yellow eye fixed like a bullet. A small congregation of Martians gazed reverently at the stuffed bird. Tharsisians' passion for "Mother Earth" grew stronger as they aged and their health dwindled on the incommensurable red planet. A significant minority of the population attended Sunday morning services. The sermons focused on the natural history of Earth, bedazzling the Martians with the multifarious and beautiful wonders of the blue planet. Unlike on Earth, Martian sermons centered on no divinity nor did they vend exhortations to moral living. The abbots displayed strange animals, creatures which no Martian had ever seen alive. The hawk's speed, flight, sight, and its murderous physiology and appetite, fascinated the crowd. Like Earth children fascinated with dinosaurs, Martians never tired of taxidermic raptors. Abbots brought out the hawks repeatedly. The people watched with nervous disbelief, transfixed so firmly on the hawk that the abbot's speech faded in and out of their consciousness, like an Elizabethan drama bouncing off an untutored ear.

Each lecture ended with short, lovingly delivered discourse on the oneness of Earth, Mars, and all the worlds of the colonized solar system. The abbot told her flock, "And though you, my friends and my kind, feel hollow and crave the nurturing of Mother Earth's true air, it is in you to fill that spiritual void right here on Mars. Some say Martians have no souls, that the feeling of spirituality is lost once a human leaves Earth and Gaia. Never believe that. Look inside; find your soul there. Come here and worship; come feel the woods, the waters, and the minerals. Touch them and through your fingers merge with the atoms of Earth. The mere touches of Earth's native atoms, through osmosis will soothe the weighty woe of your exile. Come, worship. Gaze at

these holo-screens; see and become one with the miraculous chemistry and divine geography of your mother planet. Come, worship: know that you are not cast out; know your brothers and sisters throughout the solar system embrace you. Not forever will you be the victims of misadventure and bad science. Your plight is the fault of our ancestors, who in their 21st century hubris miscalculated the arithmetic of their adventure; we of 24th century will work together to cure your bodies and your spirits. The Earth and its people, embrace you, Martians. Our scientists work tirelessly on your issues; our people thank you nightly for your contributions to the solar system; and our children pray for your safety and your health. In sanctuaries much like this, Earth people pray for our brothers and sisters on the red planet.”

As the abbot neared the end of her talk, the crowd grew restless. They shifted on their feet and mumbled to one another, for the people had heard these words many times before. They wanted to wander unguided around the holo-screens and taxidermy. They would rush upon the exhibits when the preachment ended. What would it be: a holo-walk over the Grand Canyon; a trip to Machu Picchu, Timbuktu, or Moscow? Possibilities were endless. However, on this day, the last loaded words of the abbot’s discourse never came. Like all good preachers, politicians, and performers, the abbot felt the mood of the crowd, felt their attention bleeding away from her. She wished to leave the ideas of allegiance to Earth and the fellowship of humanoids to remain untainted by the boredom from her over lingering speech. Her racing mind edited her script while she talked; her speech accelerated toward a final flourish of patriotic enthusiasm.

A uniformed and armed man stood far back in the crowd, unnoticed by anyone. Quietly, this person had only just entered the room. He was not of the flock. His arms folded across his broad, black beribboned chest, his eyes narrowed. Pursing his heavy lips, the newcomer, Morak, saw exactly the orator’s intent. *She wants to quit the podium while the message is fresh. And next, she’ll walk about. She’ll whisper in the ears of opinion-setters. She’s studied them, catalogued their vulnerabilities and interests. She’ll warn them of Akbari. She’ll weave moral hobgoblins into the fabric of my premier’s reputation. So be it. Now let them hear me.*

“Tharsisians!” he shouted. The mumbling stopped. The congregation turned and looked. The abbot, unable to see over the tall Martian crowd, pushed through the small clump of humanity. The abbot’s face darkened when she got through and saw Morak standing like the general he now was. She had seen this man kill, and her fear of him was

overpowering. The abbot's eyes dropped down to the gun on the field marshal's hip. Morak put his hand straight out, his palm nearing the abbot's little face.

“Be still. Be still,” he commanded softly. His deep voice froze the abbot; she squinted at him, her clear blue eyes cold with hatred. Morak nodded with grim satisfaction: they each knew where they stood. He smiled warmly to the crowd. “Countrymen and honored visitor from Earth with whom we clasp hands. Even though you are not of our species, I bring welcome from Premier Akbari, father of our country. We are a fortunate generation, ‘present at the creation’, and responsible for laying the foundation for all our planet’s tomorrows. Ours is a noble experiment. Yet, the lords of the solar system can’t or won’t open their minds to the needs of a different species. As recently as the 22nd century, they feared and scorned even members of different races within their own species. What must they think about our lanky genus? Are you blind to their contempt for Homo martius?” He paused and looked around the room, satisfied that he had their complete attention, he went on. “These exhibits are displays of history. History holds wonders and lessons. We need to know history. But this is not the history of Mars, nor does anything in this building pertain to Mars. Most importantly, nothing here speaks to the future of Martians. Our bodies are inimical to Earth in both proportion and chemistry. Tharsisians, walk away from the seductive wonders of a world not our own, on which we could neither walk nor breathe. The past is rich, but the past is vast beyond man’s ability to sum up, and all histories leave out more than they tell. Much more. My friends, history is history, but the future is life.” Again he paused, savoring the silence, looking into the infuriated eyes of the Earth abbot. Then, turning back to the crowd, in a low, firm voice, he said, “Go now.”

Without second thought, the crowd followed instructions and filed out, murmuring phrases like: “I wish everybody would just get along.” “What is he getting at? A war wouldn’t affect us, would it?” Despite being subjected to unending political speeches, the man-on-the-street remained apathetic to any public policy not immediately affecting his day-to-day life. Almost all believed that Akbari was working to ameliorate their health problems. Without liking him, they were content with his governance and thought him clever. However, the citizenry did not care whether Tharsis was a nation or a province. The abstraction puzzled them. Although they did understand the financial gain Akbari’s nationalization would bring, in their hearts there was no sentiment against Earth. They would not fight or join. Tharsis was not so much a nation of shopkeepers, as a nation of shoppers: vain, uninformed, and frivolous with commitment.

When the crowd left, the abbot spit out her words, “How dare you! Coming here armed like a mad man, decrying the sacred ties of the home world and the settlers’ souls.”

Morak pulled his head back, and his large eye twinkled. He waved a mocking finger. “Beware, foreigner, beware. I enjoy disabusing Tharsisians of your deceitful folklores and manipulative fables. You tell tricky stories, children’s stories meant to mold character into a narrow dullness. All your lessons flatter and inflate that blue planet’s worth to Mars.” He smiled conspiratorially at the abbot. “But some of us know what your watery world is all about. I understand your corruption.”

“Blasphemy!” groaned the abbot. She put her hand to her heart. Her face lost its anger and retained only somber concern. “Curse Earth, curse your own matter. This abbey leads your spirit to your blood’s native soil, the landscape of your own being.” For a moment, they looked at each other, angrily and without understanding. Then the abbot said tightly, “I know you, Morak. I have seen you kill! Everyone knows you. On Earth, everyone knows your picture. You are the great enemy of the solar system, Akbari’s hound. You defiled peaceful Mars. You are the thing that divides men. Go ahead, ignore my earlier guidance: curse Earth! I curse you, Morak of Mars! May your soul be as barren as this red rock in empty space.”

Morak heaved an exaggerated sigh, and held up his palms. “I’ll survive your worst feelings and faux curses. Now let’s talk about you. I am here to impound half your revenues, and I’ll do so again each week. Half of your congregation’s tithing and half of the money Brussels pays to keep this propaganda mill churning. Very easy to remember: half your income comes to the new state. And it comes weekly. Of course, we’ve accessed and studied all your financial transactions—and by the way, we now study all electronic communications between this place and Earth, so don’t ever imagine you have secrets from me. I know that there are nearly a hundred thousand rings in your current account. Transfer half to me. Do it now, while I watch you.”

The abbot did not move. Morak pushed her so that she stumbled backwards, but did not fall. He sighed, “Now Earth lady. Not all Martians are still pacifists. You’ve already said you know that about me, haven’t you?”

#

Daily, Totic encountered Robert in the halls of Akbari’s citadel. Each day, she ran across the boy sitting before an easel, looking out the great windows, sketching the

landscape and city. His paintings were quite detailed, showing the shades of sand, the shapes of rocks, and the traces of man's presence on the land: industrial junk and featureless domes. Totic saw these subjects more clearly on the lad's canvas than she saw the same sights before her own eyes. Most Martian art was abstract or primitivist depictions of Earth's menagerie. Robert drew with a draftsman's firm hand. His realism and the strange hues of his hand-mixed paints astounded her. When he noticed Totic, young Robert stopped working, stood, and bowed. "Totic! So great to see you. Always on the run, aren't you?"

The premier's handler looked warily at the beaming young man. Playfully, he looked closely into her eyes. Totic blushed and said, "If painting is your work, you should stick to it. Work is the future of every man, so you'd better learn to think of nothing else. Don't waste time exchanging niceties with someone you see everyday. Particularly when you know that I don't like you."

Robert hustled to her side, took her arm and folded her hand over his as if they were walking across a ballroom. Her eyes widened, but she did not pull away.

He said, "I think we should be friends. I admire your devotion to the premier. I'm jealous that I don't have you as a friend."

"Don't be silly."

"But it's true. I..."

Totic blurted, "You're being a child."

"I am a child. Look, you admire my painting. I'll give you this one when I finish."

"You're wasting your time trying to chum up to me. It's the premier you need to win over. In his hands, he holds all that's yours, including your future."

"Grave counsel."

"To be given good weight." Her eye remained fixed on the canvas. Surely she had never seen that shade of red, or noticed the peculiar unity of the hitherto unnoticed background.

“But, would you like the picture?” he asked softly.

Despite herself, she said meekly, “Oh, yes. Yes.”

#

Morak levied tax on all Earth holdings throughout Tharsis. Duty was assessed on lands, buildings, and treasuries of the government and commercial interests owned by Earth people. In person, he brought word to the abbots across Tharsis regarding the excise on their outreach activities and their sermonizing. The marshal’s declarations and swagger incensed Earth’s emissaries. Electronic communications flooded back to Brussels. Reaction from the home planet was swift. A special envoy, diplomatic troubleshooter Legate Earl Blunkett, was dispatched to Isidis. His instructions were to draft Governor Kirata’s wealth and manpower to aid the Earth soldiers in their mission to subdue of the breakaway region of Tharsis.

Legate Blunkett was a happy man. After a happy childhood spent in Milan, where his father was an abbot, he went to school at Oxford. There with little effort, he got by with middling grades and more than his share of romantic conquests. Upon graduation, his father arranged his son’s appointment to a secretarial position in Brussels. His direct superior was a man like himself, brilliant at the seduction of young women. Together they drank, smoked, and whored away the nights; they spent their days recovering blurry-eyed behind desks pantomiming their facile jobs. Men like this, men for whom vice is life, readily found each other in Brussels, as they had in capital cities throughout history. Blunkett and his ilk were clever and worked well together. As the decades went by, this fraternity of rakes became a formidable force within the solar system bureaucracy. By the time he was forty, the libertine had ascended to the position of legate, the highest ranking envoy to the off-planet worlds. His face, sun browned like all Earthlings, was soft and wide, as were his neck, midsection, and thighs. His turquoise eyes were always tired yet laughing. Others tended to smile in his presence. His hair was black, short, and curly. He dressed in an ornate ‘grand boubou’.

“We have been to the brink,” said Kirata. The crisis had aged the governor. He felt his brows were tighter than ever; his scalp seemed too small for his skull; he perspired uncontrollably, and his hair fell out in clumps. He explained to the gently smiling legate, “We nearly came to war once. I looked into that abyss. Never again. An Earthman can’t possibly understand. We Martians have always believed that our planet

and our civilization was a shining example of man's potential for civilization without war. To have come here only a few hundred years ago and then, after billions of years of peace, to have man kill man on this planet...I'm not sure I can live with that. Please don't come here telling me that we are going back into that valley of death."

Legate Blunkett held up his hand. His eyes stared from under his heavy black eyebrows and the swollen, purple flesh around his drooping eyelids. A blue vein pounded down his forehead. His voice was soothing, not belying his loathing of contradiction. "This police action won't be the iron boot you imagine. We can use sound waves to incapacitate them. There's no need for killing. Your fears are unfounded."

Tybolt Kirata stepped forward and said, "Akbari's thug has artillery on his border. He's not wanting much to begin."

The legate laughed, "His Rube Goldberg catapults? I can't believe we're talking about these primitive and untested weapons."

Tybolt, after a deferential glance at the governor, said, "He has already fired one, destroying a small dome and killing a man. For the sake of domestic tranquility, we are keeping the death a secret. He can touch our infrastructure with devastation. His explosive devices are powerful enough that he could lob them into our towns and break our domes. You'll need to do more than disable his rabble army. You'll need to kill it."

"Tybolt!" cried Kirata.

Unperturbed the legate took a deep drink of wine, which caught the Kiratas' attention; Martians were always amazed at Earthlings' capacity for alcohol. The Legate wiped his lips with a napkin, and then said, "Tactics are your realm, my young friend. I just tell you this: Mr. Governor, you are Earth's deputy on this planet; you are the official connection to the Solar System. I think your worries about Martian social calm overlook the bigger picture. We've studied this quite carefully."

A silence fell. Kirata rubbed back his nearly hairless head and breathed deeply. Tybolt looked between the legate and the governor, waiting for their decision. Although he had not told his husband in so many words, his wish was to be unchained, to make total war on his enemy. He foresaw that a military victory would lead to Mars becoming one secular nation and again be part of the many worlds of the family of man. He saw,

too, that like Morak, he would be known on every world. War gave great men great names. Tybolt wanted his name written across the solar system.

Empacia sat quietly in a wing back chair across the room from the three men. Finally, she was in the right forum; her views would count. The legate's resolve to remove Akbari squared with her needs. And, with Tybolt raring to go to war, the governor was on the defense.

Tybolt paced, his long pale arms folded tight across his chest. He muttered to himself, so that the others looked at him, then, in embarrassed mystification looked away from the hollow cheeked man who seemed attuned to a distant string. Empacia and Kirata met each other's looks. She saw that his commitment to pacifism gave him the ability to win by inaction. Kirata's line was, *Let's do nothing. All things pass.* Empacia saw that he used inertia as a tactic.

The legate. He pressed his hands together and shook his head. His eyes fell with fixity on the governor. "Do you side with the criminal Akbari?"

Kirata snapped, "I don't side. I don't want war, but that doesn't mean I accept what has happened."

"If I may quote the great S.I. Hayakawa, the legate went on placidly "'there are no innocent bystanders.' I'm not here to bargain, Governor. Mars can't survive without the rest of the solar system, and the rest of us folk need you. If Mars falls from solidarity, all worlds bleed."

"For mercy's sake," said Empacia, now standing and facing the men. "My outrageous injuries and the unity of mankind both urge you to fight this man. Isn't there some saying about bad men thriving when good men do nothing?"

"It's not a man, it's a country."

"Make it the man," said Tybolt. "In fact, make it both men, Akbari and Morak. Without those two, there is no rebellion. Cut off the head..."

"The heads," interrupted Empacia. "Don't forget Raluca."

Tybolt thought for a second, then said, "I heard she had an accident up at Olympus Mons. I haven't heard what happened after they whisked her away. I'll look into it. She might be out of commission..."

"Even so," said Empacia, "as long as her mind is working, she's running Akbari. Leave her behind, she'll find another politician to play. As long as she is loose..."

"Fine," said Tybolt. "We'll arrest all three of them."

The legate looked up with interest. He eyed Tybolt. With the generalissimo dead and the governor resistant to action, the catamite Tybolt was the one man on Mars most able and willing to take the necessary police action. He said directly to Tybolt, "With Dorda's demise and the termination of Akbari's uprising, I think we'll leave Mars as one administrative zone."

Square jawed Tybolt crossed the room and stood behind Kirata. He said softly, "Husband, it is time to relent. Say yes; stand aside and I'll back your "yes" with action. It's politic in all ways. We'll gain the entire planet. Don't fear the judgment of history, we'll win and winners write history. Don't call it war; call it a police action. Write the correct memos; make a written record of our motivations. Leave a note to the history you so fear and revere. And in the here and now, I will be your arm, Husband. The day has arrived to put an end to Akbari. To all his maligned clique. Please, for the good of everyone, unleash me."

FOURTEEN

As the days wore on, Totic noticed many changes in the premier. He brooded constantly, was short of temper, and he walked the halls at night, talking loudly to no one. He treated her better than he treated others, few bursts of anger, rare biting sarcasm. He appreciated her work and tried to express as much, but his throat was so tight, his breath so short, that even a compliment sounded like a snap. And he went on about the boy. Robert was the bane of his existence, and somehow his mind tied this problem to Totic.

“Will no one rid me of this brat?”

“Sir, we can always send him back to Isidis,” she said.

“That’s idiotic. I have to keep him here so he won’t go back there! Oh, here is a problem. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to be through with him, but I’m trapped with him. Of all the Martians in the world to be healthy, it would be that precocious little monster. Precocious and extroverted: what could be worse? Will no one rid me of this brat?”

#

Though trying to pass as white, the kitchen walls of Akbari’s citadel were painted pale pink. Most Martians were uncomfortable in any environment not roseate; their world’s monochromatic scenery restricted sensory appreciation. The kitchen was well equipped: hard plastic pots and pans hung over the ten-burner stove in a neat row. Three great hutches lined one wall, packed with tan hemp linens and mauve pottery dishware, fired in Tharsisian kilns. On the facing wall were metal sinks and plastic chopping boards, workstations for the small staff.

A lone man, thin and bent, dressed in kitchen whites and the large, blousy hat of a second chef, looked out of the corner of his blinking eye to see the entrance of the premier’s secretary. The second chef’s pale blue eyes, filmed over with yellow and

obscured by bushy yellow eyebrows, darted back to the stove. He was a man who enjoyed the solitude of his kitchen. The lazy first chef was off drunk, leaving the second chef free from hated oversight. The second chef had never understood how a man of his talents for supervision and creative menus could have been so undervalued by the ever ignorant and invisible 'powers that be'. He grumbled alone in his sanctuary. Despite a life of striving, it seemed to this eternal malcontent that he would never achieve his dream. It was a goal that pulled him from his bed day after failed day. This goal, this one thought, had led him beyond his kitchen to many adventures, some nefarious and all petty, most involving informing, some few involving violence. More than anything, he wanted to be first chef of the premier's kitchen. Blesser of taste and menu, poobah of the cookhouse and pampered pride of Akbari. The first man's first chef was the one job in his world that would balance out the sweat and service of life.

"I wish to talk with you," Totic said coldly. She stood at a distance from the man.

The second chef nodded and wiped his hands on his apron; he kept his eyes averted. He was aware of his incessant blinking; the cursed twitch made everyone feel they were his better. Averted eyes, in his mind, lessened the affect of his blinking and protected him from seeing the expressions of disgust and pity in the eyes of his interlocutors.

Totic intended to be frank and brief, for she was not accustomed to dealing with this sort of man. The great heat of the kitchen oppressed her. The smells were unfamiliar and off-putting. And, her mission was odious. She would do what must be done. She said, "I'm told that you are a man who knows where to find men who will do things which good citizens dare not do."

Keeping his head down and his hands continuously wiping in his apron, he mumbled, "I'm a good citizen ma'am. Don't do things wrong. Just do my job. Good cook, I am."

"I'm not here to cause you trouble. I need your darker service."

"I'm a fine cook, ma'am'. If you're looking for a cook, you couldn't do better."

With mixed exasperation and revulsion, Totic said, "Raluca told me that you were very helpful; that you could be trusted far more than most."

At the mention of the comatose woman, the second chef's eyes rose. Those bitter blue and yellow eyes softened and implored. "Ma'am, is Ms. Raluca better?"

Tosic raised her hand, motioning the man to slow his thoughts down. "I am performing tasks that she has seen to in the past. Do you understand?"

The second chef drew close. A smell of sour wine and garlic enclosed him. Tosic's nostrils quivered in disgust. "I'm her trusted man," he said softly, glancing toward the door and holding his blinking eyes in that direction. "Ms. Raluca told me more than once, in all of Tharsis, there's no man more loyal than yours truly. All those tribunes and merchants, why they'd sell out you folk in a minute! Ms. Raluca got me this here job and told me the time would come when a man like me should move up, as it were. Now, are you here to tell me, ma'am that you'll be following through on Ms. Raluca's promise?"

"Oh, dear," said Tosic.

Reading her alarm at his request, the second chef calmly put up his hand and smiled unctuously. "Not that I'd ever be demanding, but I know Ms. Raluca herself would be concerned that a friend like me would be left adrift after her horrible accident. I didn't want to go to the premier, bother 'im with my small troubles when I can see how much that beloved man has on his mind."

"I will talk to the premier for you."

"It's the first chef's job we're talking about, here. See, he ain't never here."

"I understand. First chef. I'm sure we can arrange something."

"Soon?"

"I'll talk to the premier for you," she said, wanting desperately to be done with this meeting and this scoundrel.

"I do appreciate that, I do. It's not money I want, you see. Oh, the money is good, but I got me money. Ms. Raluca and I talked about positions. That's my aim, position. Position, not money. Do you understand?"

Though she did not understand anything about this man, Tosic nodded yes.

Again, the second chef put up his hand mildly and said, “But now you’re here and, unless I’m wrong, you want something from me. Well, my service is for you, ma’am. If you’re filling in for Ms. Raluca, then I’m your man for all those things, which, as you say, less loyal citizens shy from. I trust you know the number of the bank account that Ms. Raluca and I used to settle things? I’m sure you do; knowing how orderly Ms. Raluca was, I mean, is, well knowing that Ma’am, I’m sure she left no detail unattended to. That account is a big detail for me, you know, I usually got to settle up with those men I know how to hire. Just wonderin’ Ma’am. Did she ever mention the position of first chef?”

Tosic had never known that such a man was employed in the Administration Building. Raluca had brought him here to do the dirtiest of work. What had she put the villain up to? What had she promised this devious wretch?

#

Robert’s lodgings on the 5th floor of the Administration Building were large: three rooms, a bath and kitchenette; he was provided with all possible means of entertainment: a large holo-library including films, intellectual games, and role-playing contests. His meals were the best available, made personally by Akbari’s first chef. He was given a full set of workout equipment, designed with all of the latest means to reduce the boredom, which plagued the Martians during the de rigueur workout sessions they daily endured to counteract tendon, muscle, and bone frailty. The only thing he was not allowed was a single human contact other than Tosic, the doctor, the first chef, and the unpleasant prostitutes sent by Akbari.

In the hallway, on the other side of his heavy door, Tosic waited. *Where did such men come from*, she wondered. The second chef was a rotten sort, deceitful and sycophantic, but he himself would not murder. So, who were these men worse than he? What sort of past had lead them to their horrific trade? Tharsis was so materially blessed, why would anyone need to take the risks that crime posed? She was ignorant of the underworld. Tosic had never met the seedy men who spent their unoccupied days in the taverns of the Dolores Town, the nameless haunts of depressed and twisted minds. These were the outcasts, the black souled narcissists who fought the impulses of civilization at every turn. They stole and cheated, these men for whom daily life was an obtrusive and painful distraction from their passionate yet hazy dreams. Now, for a simple transfer of

funds from the national treasury to the second chef's secret account, Totic was about to meet such men.

The two who approached her looked like any normal Martians: fustic hemp suits, shoulder length hair, and soft, pale skin. However, as Totic had anticipated, their muddy eyes told a story of dissipation, drunkenness, and cruelty. Their eyes were moteless, lacking any hint of luster. They approached, taking her measure as she took theirs. One man took the lead, and the other, a shorter, fatter man, crouched behind his comrade as if using the other's body for camouflage.

The lead man spoke. "We've no stomach for this poison job. Your lot has us cornered so we'll do the deed. But don't think we like it. Cookie has us over a barrel, so here we are."

After a pause, as she turned to open the door, Totic said hoarsely, "Your scruples are noted."

The lead man asked, "Why don't Cookie just poison him?"

"Don't ask questions."

"I'm just sayin'."

"That would be a bit obvious, wouldn't it?"

"See? It didn't hurt to answer me. Now I know."

"Well, none of that now," said Totic. She opened the door slightly, so that the two men were not visible from inside the room. She raised a hand for the henchmen to wait in the hall until she set the scene. They dropped back. Breathing heavily, they waited with drooping shoulders and squinting eyes. She slid sideways through the door.

The main room of Robert's suite was large and square; comfortable furniture lined the gray walls, leaving a great deal of space in the middle of the dimly lit room. The great portion of the room was given over to a holo ant farm. During his three-month sequestration in Tharsis, the boy had each day spent his liveliest hours watching holo-enactments of red and black ants. He read voraciously about the critters, and wrote down his observations.

Moments after Totic entered the front door, Robert walked in from the kitchen and he snapped on brighter lights. He held a fat avocado sandwich; crumbs besmuged his soft face. "Totic," he said with some joy. "Great to see you. You never visit. Do you know why we love avocados so much? Why we Martians just can't get enough of them? It's the protein. Now that I say it, you know instinctively don't you? We love them! They take up disproportionate acreage on our farms." He sat down heavily on a long black couch that, like every other piece of furniture in the room, was against a wall. Totic stood expressionless at the door, her hand slightly twisting the knob. He went on. "You see how well I spend my time? I don't mope and go, *oh, this will be forever*. I'm using this time to study-- like the Count of Monte Cristo. The ants take up most of my time. They're great farmers. I bet you didn't know that ants began farming long before humans did."

She could bear this no longer. Totic opened the door and the two men came in, one hiding behind the other, peeking out to glance at his hapless target. The sight of the men froze the blood in Robert's veins. Their dull eyes gave dread eloquence of their intent.

Robert leapt up, dropping his sandwich on the floor. "Good no! I know what this is! Totic, my friend!"

"I'm not your friend," she said sadly.

"Haven't I always had a good word for you? Made you smile? Have mercy, Totic. I know the meaning of men like this. O' Jesus!" His face contorted with fear, he moved from side to side, looking for an exit.

"Be brave, boy," said Totic. She felt perspiration on her forehead and upper lip. In a second, she began to feel lightheaded. She leaned against a black lacquered credenza. "It is your time, and none of us has much of it. Don't think yourself less fortunate than others: life is not such a great thing. That's what you learn as the years go on."

Robert stumbled backward half faint, but his instinct for dignity stilled his wobbling body. "You're all corrupted by morbidity. You people are so afraid of death that you make it commonplace to lessen your fear. I want a chance to live."

“I am doing as bid, as my leader needs,” Totic pleaded, as though Robert would understand and forgive her.

“Please, Totic. O God! Please, I’m young...I’ll cause no trouble. I’ll sign over the mines, and I’ll take his side against my mother. I’ll stay here forever if he wants!”

“It’s a matter of state, beyond my control.”

“I’m in your hands. Use them to save me.”

“You will die at those hands.” She turned to the two men. “I will wait outside.”

Robert lunged across the room and grabbed onto the woman’s silky brown tunic. She was much stronger than he and not much jolted by the trust of his stick-figure adolescent body. Totic thought of the old horror stories about the Earthling food politely called ‘veal’. This boy was like that veal, living blinded by confinement, milky musculature, unlikely to live much past maturity no matter what happened today.

“Oh, you do it, Totic! These men, these dreadful men are more frightening than death. To be in their hands... at least save me from that. You kill me. As a friend, you kill me. Your own conscience will be lighter. Please. Totic. Please send them away!”

“I can’t,” she said in a choking voice.

“Please, Totic. Let me go gently, at the hand of a friend I love.”

She looked back at the paid killers, and knew she was one of them. The front man smirked, his dirty, red cheek rising insolently. He held out the gun and watched Totic’s hand twitch, freeze, and then reached out. “I got it set so it won’t leave no mark. Then you can make it look however you want.” After he handed her the gun, he said, “It’s your own evil work, crone, should be done with your own wicked hand.” He turned quickly, grabbing his partner. “Let’s get out of here. We don’t no more have to be a part of it.” The two quickly left the room.

“I chased a friend away,” Robert gasped. “That one would have faltered before he hurt me”

“You have no friends worth having, now.” Totic looked around for a chair, for now that she had released the hirelings and held the gun in her own hand, she felt even

fainter. She did not so much sit as fall into a plush, mauve wingback. Briefly, she glanced at the boy across the room. His eyes, wide and reddening, fixed on her. She dropped her eyes and looked at the flat square gun, with its fat, red metallic button. How did such a day ever come? She had never held a gun before. The irony that she was expected to do the deed at her victim's request seemed an appropriately merciless sentence for her. Several minutes passed this way, with Totic fixed on the gun and her victim fixed on her. Only by reminding herself of Akbari's need did she keep from flinging the gun across the room and running to embrace young Vardani. Her dedication to the premier was the core of her being, even now, when that loyalty had pushed her to the brink of perdition. Her only option was disloyalty.

Robert's tension lessened. His young but strategic mind intuited that the longer it took Totic to act, the less likely she was to do the chore. He felt as though he could watch the workings of her mind under that stringy patchwork of gray hair. He saw her evil courage recede, saw her lose the blindness in which unnatural crimes begin. He watched as her character, her inner Martian values, her loathing of violence eventually smothered her commitment to Akbari. Robert saw that Totic had yet to realize that she had passed the moment of her crisis. She continued struggling with herself, unaware that the decision had been made, made deep in her unarticulated heart. Robert watched, knowing her better self was indomitable and that she would not kill him. He breathed easier. He kept silent and so did she. The eerie minutes rolled on and on. They sat thusly, neither moving nor speaking, and no exchange of glances. Robert rolled his head slowly to loosen the tense muscles in his neck and shoulders. The crackle of his muscles seemed so loud that he stopped suddenly, fearing he might break the spell, change the benign course.

The room's lighting dimmed, mistaking stillness for emptiness. When it was nearly dark, Totic said, "What will we do now?"

Robert cleared his dry throat. "Maybe Akbari, too, has changed his mind. He's not a bad man...greed and avarice aside."

Totic shook her head. "You make a joke of it."

"Well, you'll understand that I'm in a rather good mood right now. I just escaped death. Makes you want to chirp a bit."

Tosic smiled wearily and shook her head. She pushed the gun off of her lap and onto the floor. The two of them looked at the killing thing, then their faces rose in unison and they smiled at one another.

FIFTEEN

Sparse was virtuous for Martians. Earth people attributed this quasi-religious commitment to minimalism in decor, art, and fashion to be a symptom of sensory deprivation. The bleak landscapes, the confinement, and the narrow choices of occupations and entertainment ruined Martian imaginations and dashed inclinations toward venturesome aesthetics. Martians retorted that this was an example of Earthlings' banal dependence on psychological explanations for cultures they could not understand. With metaphysical conviction, a citizen of the red planet would say, "Simplicity is beauty."

Sparse but not Spartan, Akbari in a night-robe reclined in the extreme comfort of the most luxurious chairs on Mars, crafted specially for him at government expense. A goblet of red wine rested between his manicured fingers and soft round belly. His eyes were heavy; he had not slept all night. He was confident of Tomic's ability to arrange the disappearance. That was done; Vardani was best forgotten. Akbari would grasp tightly to the accident scenario. He would counter all doubt, in his own mind and in the minds of those who would inquire. He would come to believe the fiction and doubt the fact. This facility to choose and then absolutely believe his own truths had aided Akbari throughout his career.

He leaned back against the soft headrest; his fatigued eyes fell shut. *Vardani is gone. After such a tragedy, we must reach out to each other; heal the wounds...yes, healing wounds, reaching across, always winsome, warms hearts. I'll name the mines the Robert Mines; make the boy a posthumous hero. Had to do it, how else could we free ourselves. Need independence to keep the wealth in Tharsis. Wealth is health.* He wrote down the sound bite. Throughout the long night, the premier repeated aloud his reasoning, his goals, his strategy, and his intention. He incanted and babbled each rationalization as though the words were magic protecting his feelings from the full horror of what his greed had wrought. Yet, as the orange dawn spread across the Tharsisian Bulge, Akbari's face was awash in tears.

After a shower and a failed attempt to eat breakfast, he pulled himself together. Akbari prepared to face his first meeting of the day, which would, unfortunately, pit him against the pettifogging tribunes. Their combative questions, under the rubric of governmental oversight, were obvious and shallow. They oppressed his heart; all contact

with them was painful. The loss of Raluca made things worse. She had kept them in check, and her manipulation of those men had amused Akbari. But, no more. Dlette became increasingly troublesome after Raluca's accident. Akbari now understood that the tribune's past amiability toward himself was wholly due to his obsession with Raluca. Dlette's affection for the sister had snookered his apprehension about the brother. For Premier Akbari, this new tribinary antagonist made these meetings even more grating. Although feeling nauseous and weak from lack of food and sleep, the premier dared not cancel a scheduled event with his antagonists. Soon they would get a shock; it would be best for him to keep the tribunes within reach, in case a heavy touch was needed. Akbari prepared himself. He would suffer them under a disguise of equanimity. Akbari had the skill to do with a smile a task he loathed

Shortly before the meeting, Akbari entered the cool, dark room in which Raluca lie. Her bed sat alone in the middle of the room. He saw the standing equipment, which was at various times attached or injected into the motionless creature beneath the sheets. A screen in the corner hid a nurse's station, a recliner and headphones. Raluca's head tilted toward the left side of a large white pillow. Her eyes were half open, her jaw slack and streaked with spittle. She was thin and balding. Aside from breathing, she had no common symptoms of health. Her brother took her hand. He began to cry. His shoulders heaving, he groaned like a wounded animal.

"I've gone wrong, Raluca. Shouldn't have killed the kid!" He wiped his eyes and smiled faintly. "I'm in a tough one now, Sis. Pretty much surrounded, home and abroad. But don't worry: we still have that bag of snakes, Morak. He's good. I could always see talent. That's what you always said." Maintaining a small, grotesque smile, he fell silent, rubbed his nose; his eyes drifted to the ceiling. He laid his head beside her withering body. He remained in the bowed position, in this angle of communion for nearly fifteen minutes. Finally, he stood; he looked about, noticed the silhouette of a nurse behind an opaque screen. "I am going now," he announced. His voice was low and full.

#

In the weeks following Raluca's accident, Dlette's incivility to the premier caught everyone's notice. Ishihara, finding a new ally for his malice, intensified his own confrontational manner, interrupting Akbari, bringing up alternative ideas to his every proposal. Before this particular meeting, Mowbray spoke firmly to the other tribunes.

“Intemperate speech won’t help the nation. Our situation is highly combustible. I understand your anger, but...”

Ishihara said, “He never acts from considered thought, always from impulse. He never listens, he’s always planning what he’ll say while somebody else is talking. The man is not an adult!”

The three fell silent; then they saw Akbari coming swiftly down the hall. With his great, kangaroo hops he was before them within a second.

“My old friend,” said Mowbray, “the time is come for very serious talk.” Akbari nodded warily. He smiled, but his tight angry eye focused on Ishihara. Mowbray went on while the antagonists glared at one another. “No matter what territory we now hold, no matter how dogged by Morak’s exuberance, once the war machines are unleashed, we’ll have to surrender. We cannot fight them. Do you hear? We can’t fight them. We warned you, but you made military moves despite our counsel. Now you’ve brought down Earth’s power on Tharsis, and neither you nor Morak has any inkling what to do. Everything Tribune Ishihara predicted has come to pass. You heed us.”

“Quit pussy-footing around,” snapped Ishihara. “Pull back your troops and either free young Vardani or allow his mother to live here with him.”

“You’d give up the mines!” said Akbari.

“Who said anything about the mines?” grumbled Mowbray. “We would forestall catastrophe!”

“Your policy is at a dead end,” declared Dlette. “We’re not going to be allowed to succeed, and we’ll be lucky if we don’t all end up in jail. It’s over!”

Akbari threw up his hands, and smiling even broader said, “There’s no morality in nature, and the state is more like nature than like a family. An alien land is brazenly robbing our people—for that is what Earth is: a world of creatures unlike us. Our mutations, our new biology transcend the laws of Homo sapiens. Homo martius has no more connection to man’s law than do Earth’s beasts. It is unnatural for one sentient species to be ruled by another...”

“For your own protection,” Dlette interrupted, “you must change course. Enfranchise the boy and pull Morak back from our neighbor’s frontier!”

“The Kiratas are there, too. I can’t let them threaten our borders without answer. I’m the executive. These decisions are mine to make.” Akbari turned his back on the tribunes. Then, still with his back to them, he said in gentler tone, “But it doesn’t set well with me to keep the child confined.”

Mowbray smiled and spread his hands. He glanced at his unsmiling comrades, and then said to Akbari, “That’s the most important thing. Robert Vardani has become a folk hero in the pubs. Drunks toast him nightly. Two popular songs have been written about him!”

“At every pub in town,” said Ishihara. “After 10 at night, after they’ve had a few cozy hours with their booze, they’d hang you if you showed your face.”

“But the matter is settled now,” said Mowbray. He patted Ishihara’s shoulder and smiled as though to say, ‘we won!’

But the other brushed the older man aside and slid his cage towards the premier. “Will you call off your dog?”

Akbari whirled around and stepped toward Ishihara until the two men were nose to nose. Each could feel and smell the other’s hated breath. Fearing a fistfight Dlette and Mowbray quickly came between them. At that very moment, the door opened, and Tomic, wan and trembling, but determined to report to Akbari, came into the room. Akbari flipped his fingers in front of Ishihara’s face and without conviction or coating he said, “Well, maybe we’ll do that to.” He then walked over to his stone-faced secretary.

The tribunes turned away from Akbari, who now whispered with the woman in the doorway. “She looks like she’s just seen hell,” Mowbray said.

Dlette said, “Maybe we are too late. If Akbari decided to harm the boy, the hag would be his agent.”

“A bureaucratic war horse,” said Ishihara. “That woman has no morality other than Akbari’s orders. There’s nothing she wouldn’t stoop to.”

Mowbray said, “She is a horrible looking old crow.”

“Wears her character on her face,” said Ishihara. “Capable of anything.”

Akbari was not looking at Totic. His eyes, filled with a horror, fixed on the floor. His hand reached up and he squeezed the bridge of his nose. Had he looked up, he would have seen that his secretary was faint with disgust and dread. She leaned against the wall.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” he muttered irritably.

His tone struck home with Totic’s increasing panic. She looked across the room and saw his enemies hover and glare. She felt the tension in the room that her own moment of ultra-drama merely heightened. To betray him, then to make him aware of that betrayal with them in the room, was a double betrayal. Without further thought, she uttered, “He fell.”

Akbari, too, fell against the wall. The two had not looked into each other’s eyes; he turned back to the tribunes. Thus, he never saw that she was lying, that his wishes had not been carried out; she never saw the very news that he wholeheartedly wanted to hear was the truth she had not revealed. She now saw Akbari unsteady on his feet. He stumbled. At seeing him fall, she stiffened her own courage and caught his arm. Now, they looked in to each other’s eyes, but the message of her eyes was, *don’t let these men see you falter. Go back to them as if nothing has happened.* He responded with a petulant rising of his elbow to free his arm. His face had become a knot of tense muscles; his eyes gleamed with hatred. After a moment, he gave a stern head gesture to bid her leave the room. Totic obeyed.

Akbari turned his head and met the glares of Ishihara, Dlette, and Mowbray. He pulled up his chin, twisted his neck to release the tension and strode towards them. “I have bad news. An accident. Something has happened to young Vardani. A fall.”

“I told you,” said Ishihara to his comrades. “I told you we’d soon hear about an accident. We’ve wasted time in deliberations, while the malignant mind acted. We debated and debated; our long wind squandered a young life. We are as guilty as he is.”

“Bull shit,” said Dlette. He reached out, grabbed Akbari’s shirt, and pulled the wide-eyed man toward him, forcing a stumble and a miserable moan deep from within the premier’s throat. “I for one am done with you. I’ll prove you had the boy killed, turn my evidence over to the people. Even our listless populace will demand you stand down.”

“You will be prosecuted,” Mowbray added. He then fell back into his silence, glad to have been able to make such a strong point. He thought, *From the Premiership to the docket*. Liking the ring of the phrase, he said it aloud with an ominous hand gesture, “From the Premiership to the docket!”

Akbari hardly heard the threat, for he never had listened much to Mowbray, and the man’s voice had no resonance in his ear. His mind was racing through excuses, escapes, and revenge. More than anything, he wished Raluca would awaken.

“We need to go find Robert’s body and make our inspections,” said Ishihara.

“Nobody said he was dead,” cried Akbari. “He fell, that’s all.”

“Where?” snapped Dlette.

Akbari froze. “Uh, well...She didn’t say. Isn’t that strange, you’d think...”

The others ignored him. Dlette let go of Akbari’s garment with a shove. He said, “The quicker we get our hands on the body, the less time his cronies will have to cover-up.”

The three fumed out of the room. After he was sure they were gone, Akbari fell to the floor and pounded it with his fists, until he thought he had broken a bone in his hand. Then he lay still, but still groaning. And after several moments, a strange thing happened. As Akbari lie stretched out in full, grunting, beating his unhurt fist slowly at the floor, suddenly he felt larger than ever before. He felt fury shake away all about him which was politic, polished, and for show. Rage brought him to himself. Only his rage was as complete as his ambition. Only when wrath-filled did his mind and spirit fuse. He chuckled. Anger felt wonderful after weeks of lamenting. *It came over me so quickly. An epiphany. It’s an omen: I must be as bold as wrath.* His rapid breathing slowly calmed; minutes later, he stopped grinding his teeth. After a half hour of lying on the floor he was, for all purposes, at rest. *Damn the boy! I didn’t want to him die. A moment’s anger, a foolish word. I gave no order. Not specifically. I merely complained about him and that foolish old woman, always trying to get on my good side misinterpreted it. Even if I had told her to kill Vardani, that’s the kind of order Raluca would’ve scuttled. She was a big enough person to shoulder the responsibility for not carrying out a bad order. That damn old maid, Totic!* He rose and walked over to his desk, punched the intercom button and shouted, “Totic, get in here!” There was no reply.

Akbari pounded the intercom and its plastic shell cracked then splintered under his fist, cutting slightly his palm. He brought his hand to his mouth and sucked at the blood. His hands, now both smarting, trembled, and he pulled them in to his chest. Regret and rage alternated their grasp on him. Akbari threw his arms heavenward. But he had nothing to say. Another momentary calm took him. *If I persevere, I may yet win and Tharsis will become the America of my vision. My duty is to survive. At all costs. Were it to me, I'd die now, rather than live with Vardani's death on my hands. Child killer. Of course, that's really Totic. God, if she weren't so ugly, those fatal thoughts would have never crossed my mind. But I saw her, so willing to do anything. Even her virtues breed vice: her unnatural zeal for loyalty was a spawning ground for corruption. I saw her and in these violent times, I had the bad thought. Yes, I was guilty of that: a bad thought. When I told her, she took to it like a drunk to wine. If she would have only slowed me down, asked me to reflect, as Raluca would have, I'd've had that conscious saving second thought and not...I'll never sleep again. God, what has that hag led me to? What has she done to me?*

He paced around the rim of the room like a caged timber wolf. There were no sounds other than his soft-heeled shoes padding across the crushed brick floor. His thoughts kept circling the dark trail back to Totic. Such bad luck, having her at hand. *Her eagerness to do crime threw me on the rocks, pushed me to the precipice. And she's so damn literal.* The pain of his guilt readily channeled into dissatisfaction with his working conditions. In addition to the burden of making this unhealthy and sullen country work, he had had to forfeit his soul because he could not rely on anyone. Then he stopped and grew dark again. Despair sat him down and his chin fell to his chest. Then his broken communicator beeped and opened before him. For a moment, he stared at the unit in near exhaustion. Then Akbari said to himself, *I am always needed.* The thought gave momentary pleasure.

The image of Morak appeared in the air before him. His general was dirty and the side of his face cut. His firm jaw twitched slightly. Akbari feared the worst. Before the other could speak, the premier blurted out, "Don't bring me any bad news, I've had enough today."

Morak narrowed his eyes, "I warn you about events, so events won't fall on you without warning." The young man's face had an expression Akbari had never seen before. The pressures of the boarder confrontation now sculpted his face. The engineer was gone, and on the wavering hologram before him, Akbari saw a new Morak: a man

for whom violence and mayhem were expected, perhaps welcome. Akbari took note of Morak's transformation, as he did whenever he encountered a person whose life had recently altered. Akbari could tell such things; the politician read people the way a jeweler sized up a gem.

"Don't be so dour," said Akbari with an unconvincing smile. "Go on, unburden yourself."

"Would that it were so easy. Tybolt Kirata has moved the Earth fighting vehicles across our border. He has flanked me and passed me by. He heads toward the heart of Tharsis. They move much faster than anything we have."

"Good God!"

"And I hear," said Morak, fingering his facial wound, "from new troops that the abbeys and pubs are restless. Are people gathering in the parks? Is that true? They tell me Robert Vardani has become the hero of the crowd. Is it true?"

"I don't know! God, I don't know!"

"Where is Tosic? She will know."

"Don't mention that name!"

"Has she turned on us? If even the most loyal soul in Tharsis has deserted us, perhaps..."

"No!" Akbari shouted. "Her loyalty is unabated; it's her judgment that infuriates me. But, don't you think about it. She's my problem."

"One way or another, you must, sir, get a feel for the mood of the crowd. I am returning with nearly all my men at arms, but you must discover for me if I'm coming back to a mutinous nation. We can't fight the solar system and our own people. If we are isolated, you and I must have new plans."

"Yes, it is time for new plans," said Akbari distantly. "But don't come back yet. Hold on, just keep tabs on the Earth movements."

"How are things with the tribunes?"

Akbari held his head in both hands—which further disconcerted his general. Finally, he said, “Nettlesome as always. But, I’ll handle them. And I’ll take care of the populace. You just worry about your damn army and those fighting vehicles.”

With his head cocked to one side, Morak said grimly, “It’s your war, sir. We’ll fight it as you say.”

SIXTEEN

Tosic knew she had to get Robert out of the capital. The boy's life would be worthless if Akbari found him; perhaps the premier would kill her, too. She knew that her relationship with the premier was now irredeemably corrupted. He cherished his friends, savaged his enemies; disobedience had changed her status. Service to him had been more than a career: it had been her religion. Now, having disobeyed and lied, he would never again trust her; the man whose betterment had been the guiding focus of her adult life would never again share the slightest confidence. She was lost. She must resign, for she could not bear to play the unfaithful servant; if she could not serve him well, she would leave him. With this intention, she made her way through the hallways to the beleaguered padrone.

Moments later, she stood before the premier in his cavernous office. He did not look at her, but shielded his eye with his hand, which was propped up by an elbow on the platinum colored conference table. Her features so repulsed him, so reminded him of the crime, that he avoided her face as he would Medusa's. "State your business and leave me alone," he growled.

"Sir, this is hard for me..."

"Hard for you," he bellowed, and at the same time looked at her with such hatred, that she fell back a step, gasped, and put her hand to her mouth. He had begun, and now he could not stop. "Hard for you. My good woman, were it not for your eagerness to be part of what you imagine to be the inner circle, my hands and conscience would be clean. But, just having you near, with hot breath pleading for a seat at the table of state, put me in a mind to do a thing I never otherwise considered. That face of yours is meant for trouble and trouble it's brought me. Oh, Raluca knew to keep you in check. Why couldn't she have warned me? You can't keep a devil around without falling into sin!"

"But, Sir..."

“No! Don’t give me any more of your whispered poisons. Next you’ll be suggesting we kill the tribunes.”

“I would never...”

“I blame myself, too. I was shallow to not see through you; I was weak to let your criminal mind work on me! A leader can never be weakened by personal sorrow. Well, now I know. I must have a harder heart.”

“This is wrong, sir,” she said emotionally. Now she turned her back, leaned her head against the pink wall. Other than Totic’s soft weeping, silence ensued.

Akbari held his head in both hands. Then, spleen surged through him again; he went on with his assault. “You were jealous of my sister and even jealous of Morak. You wanted their place, God knows why; you have no agenda for government that I’ve ever heard. You just want position for position’s sake.”

Totic whirled around and staggered towards him. She slammed both of her large fists on the table. “Enough! Robert Vardani lives! I could not find it in myself to follow your order. But I have memory enough to know that you, not I, sought that good child’s death. Don’t placate your burdened conscience by foisting your guilt on me. Anyway, the murder wasn’t done.”

These words cut through all of the premier’s angst and anger. He repeated the words to himself; *Anyway, the murder wasn’t done!* He smiled wanly, mumbled unintelligibly, *Anyway, the murder wasn’t done!* He dropped his head on his desk. Emotion choked his throat as he said, “I’m guiltless. Guiltless.”

Totic shook her head, decided to say no more. She would walk out and leave a letter of resignation for him to find later. As she turned to leave, Akbari leapt around the table and grabbed her to him in a bear hug. The woman was the stronger of the two and she pushed him off.

“No! Don’t go,” he said. “I was beside myself. Forgive me. Neither of us could do such a thing, but thinking myself guilty of a heinous thing, I was mad with remorse. Insane! Oh, God: who knew I had such cruel words in me? Forgive me, Totic. I wasn’t myself. I know I blamed you. I said terrible things. But you must forgive me. Oh, we need each other, Totic. And Tharsis needs both of us. As a team. Whatever problems

have arisen between us, we all have a duty to pull together, or else Tharsisian independence is doomed! Oh, you must forgive me.”

She stood motionless, staring at the man she had so long admired. Akbari mistook, perhaps willfully, her stoic expression for acceptance. “Now, hurry. You must get the tribunes and take them to Robert. Show them that he’s alive. Hurry.” He pulled the stunned woman to the door and pushed her out.

As the door shut behind her, he groaned from the depths of his soul. Making his unsteady way to a chair, he muttered, “Thank all that is holy. Whatever the hell holy is, I thank it. I’ll find out what it is.” He told himself that if Totic had indeed killed Robert Vardani, then suicide would have been his only choice. Akbari saw that now. He understood that prior to the relief of Totic’s confession of her blessed insubordination that he was subconsciously preparing to kill himself. *I have that much honor*, he told himself. *The thought had not crossed my mind in a naked, articulate notion, but I see it now. That’s where I was headed. Honorable suicide. I must find out what is holy so I can properly thank it.* And with a chuckle, he leapt to his feet, hopped over to his window, and admired the beautiful day.

#

At that very moment, Robert contemplated his meaning to Akbari. *My existence blocks his aims. I’ve only survived because Akbari misread his underling. When he finds out I’m alive...he’s persistent, and he has good reason to be. I’m the symbol of private property and the people like what I’m selling. Once I’m gone, it’s just Akbari versus Earth, no more cute kid standing up to him. His enlightened self-interest must have only one objective: my death.*

Many times in daydreams, Robert planned his escape. Although his window was a sheer five-story drop, he knew of a hall window with a mere fifteen feet drop to a small ledge. A plausible, albeit risky drop in Martian gravity. From there, he could he could cross to an adjoining patio. From that patio to the one below would be another jump, but not so precarious as the first, because unlike the ledge around the fourth floor, the unused and barren patios below stuck out several feet from the story above and even a clumsy jump would only result in a fall, not a drop of five stories.

He pressed his ear against the door, listening for the telltale clack of footsteps in the hallway. What he heard was the hushed whoosh of the ever-present ventilation

system, which to his heightened senses seemed to roar through the building. He heard no voices, no footsteps. With care, he cracked open the door and peered down the hallway. After his eye confirmed the emptiness his ear foretold, Robert slipped out of his room and cautiously moved toward the window at the end of the corridor. His own excited panting, brought on by exertion and fear, combined with the steady whoosh of the ventilation system to fill his ears with an unwanted soundtrack. Alone and unwatched, Robert pressed himself against the wall as if to secret himself even from the corridor. Though he had taken off his shoes as a precaution, his footsteps seemed to thud against the red flooring. His heart pounded, yet Robert realized that exhilaration was overcoming fear; now he risked losing his self-possession to a bestial excitement. A dizzying confidence overwhelmed the boy, a new sprung conviction that he could out-fox Akbari, that his audacity and daring would give spirit to all who opposed the tyrant and his henchmen.

The huge windows opened easily. Looking down, Robert saw the ledge was a meter further than he had remembered and narrower than he had hoped. The descent would not be without some danger. He had expected a three-meter drop, but now, looking down on the narrow pink ledge, he added another meter to his estimation. It was still within his range, provided he dropped straight and did not miss his footing.

Carefully, heart beating ever faster, Robert lowered himself out the window and hung by his extended arms. He looked down on the narrow perch upon which he needed to alight. “Thank god for weak gravity,” he said wryly. He released his grip and plopped down to the ledge below. He bent his knees slightly to absorb the shock, which even in Martian gravity was jolting to Robert’s milky bones and fey musculature. His body balanced quickly, but his right knee struck the outer shell of the building with particular force. He could not prevent himself from snapping back in pain. This move proved disastrous. Robert lost his footing and, without a cry, fell backward. His fall did not stop until he landed four stories below. The boy remained conscious for a moment, saw the pool of blood rushing from his head. His last thought was, “These are my uncle’s stones. They have killed me for him.” And, with that thought, Robert died.

#

On one side of the great naked plaza of the boxy Administration Building, was a small bamboo hedge-maze, amidst which Akbari and the politicians frequently wandered. One of the few places in Tharsis where a person could stroll amidst verdancy, access to the maze was not a privilege granted to all. Inside the maze were small enclosures,

furnished with pliable plastic benches that fit a sitter's buttocks like a luxurious bed. Mowbray and Dlette sat grimly in this place of comfort and faux-nature, while Ishihara remained standing in his contraption, his heavy head drooping to his chin. Old Mowbray squinted at a small holo-text that hung in the air before him. Ishihara and Dlette had read, digested, and judged the message from Legate Blunkett.

"He is so indirect," Mowbray wearily complained.

"The legate is being legalistic," Dlette explained. "He says nothing he can't defend in court. He wants to be ready in case Akbari's adventure leads to an Earth docket."

Mowbray shook his head; the holo-text disappeared. "His meaning is beyond me. Let's be quick. These long hours have got to stop!"

Ishihara snorted at the elder statesman's lethargy. Easily irritated, he was as impatient with this colleague's sloth as he was with the premier's Machiavellian drive. Mowbray, however, posed no threat, and was, indeed, an ally; Ishihara's resentment of the soporific tribune went no further than exasperated facial expressions and private grumbling to his attentive wife.

"What he means," explained Dlette, "is that if we come to meet him at Kirata's camp, and we're willing to step away from Akbari, he'll see that neither Tharsis nor we are penalized for all this commotion."

"You mean he wants us to surrender?" asked Mowbray. "But I thought we were agreed: independence is our due and to the nation's benefit. I'm very tired, but I'm ready to do anything for independence from the other species! This whole affair has brought me nothing but exhaustion and unhappiness, but I offer all my meager energy and hurried time to make this work. My God, whatever else is grim about our situation, we can say that Martians have never been this close to having leverage with Earth. That's what we all agreed on."

Ishihara said, "That was before we realized that to pursue the nation's freedom put us in league with an incompetent tyrant and a vicious bounder. They led us into a war we can't possibly win!"

“But isn’t that for us to deal with,” said Mowbray. “Akbari’s crimes are for Tharsisian courts. Nothing requires that we relinquish our right to independence. What happened to controlling the wealth of our land? What happened to forcing health research? I mean, what has this all been about if we just give up?”

“The legate assures us,” said Dlette, “that our point is taken by the powers in Brussels, and that outright independence is not our only option. Tharsis can be enriched without rebellion.”

Ishihara nodded, “We need not fight this ridiculous war. We’ve made the point, shown our desperation. We’ve been heard.”

Mowbray rubbed his chin in thought and tried to decide which rogue to accept, the self-interested premier or the guileful legate. And what Ishihara saw in Blunkett’s letter, did not seem clear in the older man’s reading. He could, but did not trust his own judgment well enough to be certain. *Oh, let Ishihara lead.*

Hiding on the other side of the hedge, Morak heard every word. He had been walking by, going from the Administration Building to town when he saw the tribunes furtively enter the maze. Each day he made a public showing of himself in town to remind an increasingly restless population that he remained the strong arm of Akbari’s intentions. But today he had glimpsed the suspicious tribunes as they sought the privacy of the maze. Having learned that the power of his own appearance was the best instrument in his arsenal of persuasive tools, he popped through the hedge and caught the tribunes by surprise. Their conversation stopped. Luminously confident, Morak stood before them, his eye twinkling with an accusation.

Morak looked at each. More than courage, strength, or oration, the talent that made the marshal a leader was his ability to read a face instantly. A twitch of the eye, a tongue flickering on a lip, or the widening of nostril told Morak of inner thoughts. This flair, which he shared with the premier, for the detection of emotions on even the most controlled face was something Morak had neither strove for nor cultivated. Perhaps he was not even fully aware of his power to penetrate the masks of men, yet he used the skill with unconscious adroitness, like a young protégé on a piano. He saw in Mowbray’s fatigued eyes disappointment that his workday would be prolonged. He saw Ishihara drop his face slightly; he would not open up, whatever his thoughts. And he noticed Dlette’s brow furrow questioningly, so Morak spoke to him.

“Will you come back and speak further with Akbari? The premier implores you not to separate your intentions from the good of Tharsis.”

“He has,” said Dlette, putting his small round chin in the air, “lost any claim on our loyalties. You know what he has done.”

“I know he lives only for the benefit of Tharsis, and your titles require that you do the same. Akbari has given himself to the people and their progeny. That is what a great man does in dire times. How can you sit here conspiring to desert him?”

Ishihara’s cage and body turned to Morak. His eyes clouded with secrets, he spoke softly. “If that man has harmed that boy, he wills...we are not required to follow a murderer. Or a fool! Just because he can spout platitudes about freedom...we can all quote old world bromides, and use contemporary idioms to dance out the old arguments. Akbari spews these banal red herrings and covers his ambition with the rights of man, even though those rights are not threatened by any real adversities.”

“Are you,” said Morak, “calling Tharsisian independence a ruse?”

“Indeed,” shouted Ishihara, “I call it Akbari’s subterfuge. And I repudiate it!”

After a moment of tense silence, Morak smiled. He looked to the other tribunes, who looked on stunned. He shrugged as though humored. “Will you come back and say as much to the premier’s face?”

Ishihara blanched. Dlette stepped between the two men, but he spoke to Mowbray. “Perhaps we should go back and hash this out with the premier. Whatever we decide, we should do it in a uniform front, else the people abandon us for being fractious impotents...which is what we are actually.”

Mowbray nodded and looked meaningfully at Morak, then to Ishihara, “And think where they would turn.”

“Yes, think of that,” said a beaming Morak.

Ishihara’s neck snapped back in horror. He imagined Morak’s ascension, a prospect worse even than his current woe. Already he feared Morak’s great popularity and his control of the country’s organized violence. Morak nodded and his smile widened.

“Very well,” Dlette said. “We’ll talk with Akbari.”

#

The four walked silently back toward the Administration Building. Morak took the lead; the others held back a couple meters, reluctant to be corralled by Akbari’s enforcer. Ishihara nudged his companions and nodded, indicating a small, flat laser weapon in his palm. Mowbray patted his side; he too would be prepared in case Morak was luring them to danger. Dlette thought his colleagues exaggerated Akbari’s desperation, but then he realized he was relieved that the others were armed. As though sensing their apprehension and precautions, Morak turned as he walked; he looked at the three tribunes with a pale smile. His eyes flickered with sudden mistrust and the tribunes saw he was uneasy that they walked behind him, and perhaps even perceived that they had weapons. But Morak set his jaw, turned in slow defiance, and left them his back, much like a matador will kneel with his back to the cowed bull.

“I feel your eyes on my neck,” he said loudly, “and I know you’re ready for some wild confrontation. I won’t instigate trouble. I trust your pacifist heritage will prevent you from following the urges of your heated blood. We’ll see the premier and peacefully listen to his thoughts.”

Ishihara spat in answer, “Vile and bloody as those thoughts may be.”

Morak stopped in his tracks and turned toward the men. “Don’t predetermine that the premier’s thoughts are contradictory to your own. Malicious conjecture is easy when you are not facing the flesh and blood fact of him. Just give him an open hearing. Please, gentlemen, if bitterness closes your minds, what good can you do Tharsis?”

He turned and continued walking, nearing the entrance to the Administration Building. Suddenly, Morak pulled up short. He groaned pitifully and shook his head. He raised his hands before him as if to push away the future. Before the others saw the obscenity that blocked their path, he turned to them and hoarsely whispered, “Spare yourselves this sight. Walk away...”

Before he finished, Ishihara had used his cage to push the shaken warrior aside. The tribune, too, gasped. Before them lay the twisted corpse of Robert Vardani. The boy’s fall had broken his back and skull; his grotesquely pretzeled body lay in drying blood. Old Mowbray, when his eyes fell on the dreadful sight, groaned and fell against

Dlette. The other supported his older colleague, and then led him to a near bench. He looked over his shoulder and saw Morak bending over the body and shaking his head.

Ishihara spoke first. "I had thought that the greatest sin man could commit was to lead his country into an unnecessary war, but to see this innocent slaughtered and left exposed, his expendability flaunted for any passerby to see... as though no laws could touch him... the man's bloated evil."

"I never imagined," said Dlette.

With shaking voice Morak said, "We don't know that we are seeing evidence of crime. Perhaps it was suicide."

"Don't be a fool man!" Dlette shouted.

"Robert was in Tosic's care," said Ishihara. "And this is the care she took."

"Even if it was suicide, Akbari drove him to it," said Dlette, whose fury grew even greater than Ishihara's. For Dlette now saw that for the love of Raluca, he had ignored Akbari's insatiable lust for power, his facile criminality. He now saw he was a dupe, culpably blind to the monstrous plans of his lover's brother. He looked at Morak, saw the same doubts in him, the same sense of his own unwitting complicity in the furtherance of a fiend. "Can you doubt what this boy's murder points to?"

"If it is proven, I will stop the army," Morak said softly.

"If it is proven?" shouted Ishihara. "The boy was in Akbari's sole care; that led to his death. I need no more proof than what I see. And I swear before all, I will not rest until Akbari is jailed! Tharsis cannot accept freedom on these terms."

"Agreed," said Dlette.

"I'm going to Kirata and offer my hand in alliance," said Ishihara.

Dlette shook his head bitterly, allowing without shame tears to run down his cheek. He looked directly at Morak and said angrily, "I will go with you."

"And I," said Mowbray, who still sat aside, holding his gray head in his hands.

“Come with us, Morak,” Dlette said. “There is no honor in standing fast in a dishonorable alliance. Walk away from your mistake, as I do. Walk away now, and save yourself.”

After a thought, Morak replied, “First proof, then conviction.”

“See what your eyes tell you, man!”

“My eyes,” said Morak, “also tell me that matter is solid, that the sky is pink and that the sun is but a small dot. My eyes give me clues, not certainty. Questions and reflection will guide my conclusions. What lies before us is a question, not an answer.”

“Here is what I see,” said Dlette, eyes red with sorrow and rage. “That woman killed the boy; we were there when she told the bastard. And she only acts as Akbari enjoins. We need to act. To question or debate is dalliance. Indecision when facing sin is sin redoubled. I’m going to Isidis to tell the Kiratas that Akbari stands alone in both his claims and his felonies. Perhaps some day...but it does no good to push independence when Tharsis is in the grip of this mobster. Holding patriotism over right would doom Tharsis. The importance of good and evil are greater than our minds can conceive.”

Again standing, Mowbray took Morak’s arm. “Don’t you feel the outrage of a brutalized moral order? I do. I do! Walk away, Morak.”

SEVENTEEN

Morak did not immediately enter the Administration Building. He lingered on the portico, hidden behind a polished metal column. He watched the tribunes whisper. He saw Mowbray break off from the others and hop toward town; Ishihara and Dlette went the opposite direction toward their villas. *As I expected, they're not only going over to the Kiratas, the old boy is going into town to stir up the citizens. To save Akbari's skin and my own, I should put a quick stop to Mowbray, but I must talk to the premier.*

With this thought in mind, the field marshal hopped hurriedly through the long, ever empty hallways toward Akbari's private rooms. His mind raced as he loped: he considered which of his lieutenants would stay at his side if he had to subdue the citizenry. His men were passionately devoted to him, but would their love be strong enough to convince them they must turn their weapons on their own people. He considered what words he would use to steel the army; what lies he would tell about young Vardani's death. Most importantly, what ominous dangers would he claim faced Tharsis and justify a military rule? He told himself, *we're against the wall and it's no time for scruples. In times of havoc, control is the greatest good. And when I look back on these days, I'll not condemn myself for doing what needed to be done.*

Grim faced, he hastily hopped down yet another hallway, all the time reminding himself of his end goals. The attainment of Tharsisian freedom pushed all other considerations from mind. Yet, as he hopped, his stomach spasmed and acid eructated into his throat and mouth, as though repulsion at the boy's broken corpse had lodged in his physical body. Though his conscience was clear, his nervous system rebelled against his mind's intentions. Strong stress typically created havoc with a Martian's health, and illness frequently followed symptoms of distress like his body now exhibited. Morak had no doubt these days would shorten his life, one way or another.

After turning down yet another long, empty hall, Morak heard the clatter of on-coming footsteps. Suddenly, he saw Totic, smiling like springtime. Never had she felt such relief: she had not committed a crime, she had evaded perdition, and she had just quit her job. Totic breathed hard, hurriedly hopping with all the urgency her long body

could marshal. But she stopped short when saw the poison glare of the approaching Morak. She thought, *That good engineer is gone, replaced by a man filled with hatred.* Before another thought crossed the old woman's mind, the warlord leapt at her and crushed her against the wall, his forearm hard against her chest.

"You smile?" he shouted, his spittle flying over her lips and eyes.

"But I...what...are you crazy?" she sputtered. "I'm an old woman, how can you behave..."

"Shut up, hag," he commanded. "I feel such outrage... The tribunes have deserted us. They'll incite the people against us. If I can't control the army, we'll all be lynched!"

Tosic shook her head, and her mouth tensed into a wide thin line, her eyes laughed bravely. "I have no idea what you are talking about. Let me alone!"

He pushed his arm tighter into her chest, and she began to struggle for breath. Morak shouted, "Within minutes, all Mars will know about your ham handed crime. I'm going to convince the premier to turn you over to the mob. It's our only chance to keep the struggle for independence alive. It's fitting that they should pummel you. And they will."

"The murder?" she stammered. "I've murdered no one. Let me alone!"

"You were commissioned to kill the boy, and you never fail Akbari."

"I didn't do anything. Robert is fine."

They were silent. Morak's eye twitched. He lessened the pressure against the old woman's chest and throat. "I've seen his corpse!"

"Impossible."

"I've touched it."

"Robert is dead?"

Morak slammed her back against the wall so hard that she bled from the back of her head. Seeing the blood, his mind flashed a picture of the dead generalissimo. "Don't weasel with me, crone!"

“But I left him well! Oh, God!”

“Well enough for your purposes. Did you think his death would go undiscovered, unchallenged? Are you finally on your way to hide the body? Finally? Do you think anyone will believe that the premier had no hand in this? That anyone other than you, his toady, would have killed him?”

She tried to push free of him, but could not; his thumb dug into her shoulder. “Let me go to him. If Robert is hurt I..”

“Not hurt; dead!”

“I swear...”

“Save your breath.” Morak now released her and stood back. “Run for your life, hag, because soon all Mars will use its fury to hunt you down.”

“But, I’ve done nothing. I saved Robert.” Totic fell silent. Morak thought, *yes, warn her, and then let her go. Let the mob chase her beyond the dome. It gives us time to think.* He turned and continued hopping toward Akbari’s chamber.

Totic stumbled over to the tall widows. She sat on a padded widow bench. For a few moments, she concentrated on slowing her heart and easing her blood pressure, just as she had learned in school. When she felt within healthy metabolism levels, she turned her mind to the situation at large. She believed Morak. No doubt, the boy was dead. Likely murdered. *And I am the likely villain,* she thought. *He’ll never defend me. He’ll accuse me and join the posse. My premier will say it was all me. Morak will act and I’ll be killed. So be it; I won’t run. I’ll wait. I’ll go to my office and wait. And when they come, I’ll tell the truth, and then I’ll be killed. And I’m fine with that. I think I’d just as soon be through with it all. I’ll go wait.*

#

While this confrontation took place in the lower hallways of the Administration Building, on the 5th floor, Premier Akbari was involved in a far different and wholly unexpected conversation across the holo-scape. The leader of Tharsis had been sitting alone, waiting to hear back from Totic about her meeting of conciliation with the tribunes. He was leaning back in his great chair, eyes closed, and breathing lightly. His relief that the boy had not been killed--as he now believed--filled his entire being with a

serenity and a sense of well being, the like of which he had not felt since Raluca's catastrophe. The surprising act of mercy by Totic, her insightful insubordination had saved him from a crime he now knew he could not have lived with. Akbari felt the mystic felicity of the well-intentioned spirit of life, and he was grateful for what he could only imagine to be divine intervention. *Perhaps, he thought, we've been wrong all along. On Mars as on Earth, a spiritual presence, 'not dreamt of in our philosophies', has some power over our actions. Perhaps the same presence, what they used to call "God".*

In this moment of transcendent reflection on fate's moral guidance, a short tingling noise came from his desk. It was the sound of his private communication port, rarely used since Raluca's new condition. Few knew how to reach the premier without going through Totic's discerning gate. In his mild mood, Akbari assumed Totic herself was calling to report on her confab with the tribunes. He told the holo-device to open and a holo-screen popped up in front of him. To his surprise, Akbari saw the face of the Earthman, Legate Blunkett. The shock on the premier's face gave a brief smile to the emissary.

"Can we talk?" asked the Earthman. Akbari did not answer; he pulled his shoulders back, lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes. Blunkett raised a bushy eyebrow and nodded. "Does it really surprise you that we have your private line? Mars has no secrets from Earth. I'll quickly get to my point. To fight without first searching for a mutually acceptable solution is not my way. After all, we're all people, cut of the same cloth. Let's see if I can help you find a middle ground. Governor Akbari, you have your people's needs in mind. I know that. I believe now Brussels knows that, too. After the heated early words and an unfortunate casualty, wise men must search for a way to peace. Is that not true?" Still no answer, just a narrow-eyed caution on the face of the man from Tharsis. Blunkett went on. "I understand. You want medical research funded for matters that are important to all Martians. You are a leader on the planet. If not you, then who for Tharsis? Your care for those in your ward is laudable, a character trait which no doubt played a part in Brussels' selection of you as governor. Remember Akbari, you were our appointment, so long ago. That shows Earth believes in your judgment. You are known as a compassionate and activist leader. Don't let the word 'warmonger' blemish that fine legacy. Listen to me. I'm not here as a herald of war and devastation; I'm here to plead for peace and reconciliation. I know you don't crave the riches of the mines for your own, but for your people. That wealth is the only tool

you can imagine that will force the authorities on Earth to attend to the short lives of your people. I know, Akbari, I know.”

“What do you offer?” the premier asked in a small voice.

“To submit your plea to Brussels, and to back it with my own appeal.”

“I am not pleading. I’ve done that for ten years, and my predecessors have pleaded for a century. Always being bamboozled by...”

“Forgive me for interrupting. Please, hear me out.”

Akbari nodded. The legate saw that his adversary understood his predicament and was ready to look for a way out. Akbari was not known as one to listen to views not to his liking, but now he allowed himself to be interrupted by a man he despised. Blunkett read this slight concession as recognition on the Martian’s part, not as typical Martian timidity in front of Earthmen, but as an awareness that war would be the ruin of him and of Tharsis. Raising his hard, pink hand in gentle appeal, Blunkett went on. “Hear me out. No legate before me has taken your side. I’ve looked into this, and I found a history of disregard. Perhaps in your shoes, I’d rebel, too. So, I now feel a personal responsibility to put things right. I can persuade the people you’ve never met, those mysterious grandees of Brussels. They will listen to me. I know their minds. I know how to form the argument and how to construct a logic that will appeal to them. I will use cost analysis, ethical arguments, and foreboding alternatives. I can bring around those upon whom Mars is dependent. I offer a different way than you or any of your predecessors ever could grasp. If the legate is on your side, Earth will listen. I swear it is so.”

“What about the Kiratas, their blood is up. They want all Mars.”

Blunkett said, “Don’t be histrionic, Akbari: the Kiratas are Martians, they don’t want to fight.”

“What about Empacia?”

“She is too insignificant to bother talking about. I have never understood how she became part of Kirata’s inner circle. Besides, the ownership of the mines will no longer be an issue. That is your part of the bargain.”

Akbari turned his head, so that, through his holo-screen, Blunkett seemed to be talking to a man in profile, one eyed and hawk nosed. Blunkett settled back into his chair and waited for this exotic creature, this meld of dedication, suspicion, and greed to begin what was sure to be a guarded speech; Blunkett knew Akbari would not speak his mind, but only give of himself those thoughts that enforced his goals. Such was the way of negotiations in this world, and Blunkett took no umbrage.

“I have control of the mines,” Akbari said. “You have more than a week before your full complement of Earth soldiers arrive on Mars. I will not wait a week. I will destroy the mines before then. At this moment, they’re fully loaded with enough explosives to render them inoperable for many months. Can Earth’s economy survive that long without deuterium 2b? Can your satellite colonies around Saturn and Jupiter go that long without contact from Earth? What about the mining camps in the asteroid belt? Even your own moon needs our mineral.” He paused, took Blunkett’s measure and found the old man fearless, but realistic. Akbari smiled his small, crooked smile. “No to all. Can Mars survive without Earth and without all that deuterium 2b? Yes, emphatically yes.” Blunkett shook his head, and dropped his eyes. Akbari could not discern if the legate was being thoughtful or disgusted. Akbari declared, “This is the hand I hold. Don’t imagine I’m not resolved to play it.”

“Oh, I see that.”

“We die young, while on Earth you live to be active centenarians. There is no justice in your dismissal of our needs.”

“No one is dismissing your needs, but there are no immediate remedies,” said Blunkett.

“God damn it! Find them! Put all your resources into this! No more deluding tales of brotherhood with Earth, while you treat us as you treat your planet’s lower beasts. I want a commitment. I want rings; I want plans written down and in my hands, and I want time-lines. I want the best scientists. I want new hospitals. I want more training in science and medicine for our people, so we can evaluate whether or not you’re feeding us crap. And if you do not give me what I want, you’re age of deuterium 2b fades into history.” He paused, licked at his lower lip, and then leaned forward. “Hear me: I will destroy the mines. Afterwards, you may send your soldiers and even kill me, but the price you pay will be enormous. You have a complex off-world civilization, built up

over centuries. Think of your kind dying slowly of hunger and thirst because your spacecraft can't travel at the speeds needed to maintain the distribution schedules. No other off-world colony is self-sufficient. You build a solar system based on cheap fuel from Tharsis, and I hold the life of your system in the palm of my hand. Comply with me, legate. Meet my terms, make medical research for Mars Earth's highest priority, or have Armageddon on your hands."

Earth's emissary shook his head. He pinched the bridge of his nose and momentarily closed his eyes. He let out a long, slow breath, and then said in the gentlest tone he could summon, "For nearly three hundred years, we have sought other life throughout the galaxy, and we have found none. If any radio waves were out there, our equipment would have picked it up back in the late 22nd century. Man is alone; man is unique, a thing too precious to kill. There are no other souls in this galaxy or any other galaxy. Our exceptional status as creation's one reflection of the divine intelligence..."

"Spare me the fairy tales, legate! You have nothing, I have an army and I have the mines. Turn your ships back to Earth; accept our independence and then we can come to arrangements regarding your needs and ours. Tharsis will fuel your solar system, but we will have equal longevity!"

"I concur with everything you say," Blunkett said.

"Those things I say we require?"

"I will work night and day to achieve all you ask for...pardon me: All you demand."

"Well then?" said Akbari.

"Will you in turn assure me there will be no further hostilities? No destruction of the mines?"

"You'll turn back the Earth fighting machines?"

"I will assure they pull back. Now, I must have time. Meanwhile, as you dismantle your army..."

"That's down the line, when we've seen some progress from your side. Then, I'll disarm. I assume there will be no legal repercussions?"

“None at all.”

#

Night’s bluish gloaming replaced the daylight’s pink/peach. Totic walked across the tiled plaza to the other wing of the Administration Building. The night air at ground level was tired, and good Martians went to bed early. Totic stopped to catch her breath. Bitterly she turned her head and listened to the rhythmic mummer of the slow night ventilation. *Move*, she told herself. *These men! They left him to rot while they wallow in wars. These vain, dark men.* In the thin night air, she was in no shape to hop further; she walked slowly toward a dark shadow lying across the brickwork next to the building. She had never seen a dead body, or even a wounded person. She walked forward unstably, holding her hand out for balance like a tightrope walker. She came upon him. She put her hand to her mouth and stepped back; she swung at the air with her other hand; she felt near her own death. The flood of blood and the unnatural twists of the bluing corpse took her breath away. She made no noise for a moment then with a muted moan, she fell hard to her knees, bent over the body and kissed the cold face. She slapped his chest. For some moments, she moaned a hushed dirge, rocking the boy in her arms.

The city was quiet and the sky beyond the dome blackened. The soft yellow streetlights of Tharsis dimmed almost completely. She stood up, holding the boy to her chest. After looking up to the window to his rooms, she stumbled to the door. Despite the thin air, she was no longer tired: the boy’s weight felt good to her. Inside, she trudged to the elevator. The large woman squeezed the two of them in, then knelt and breathed heavily over her beloved load.

At the fifth floor, fatigued, she got out and then dragged the boy’s body by his long, white hands out of the elevator. She knelt, braced herself, and then wrapped her long arms around Robert, pulling his body to her chest. Adrenalin pushed the old woman on. Stoically, Totic stumbled down the hall, stopping twice to lean and to swallow a breath of fresh indoor air. When she got to Robert’s front door, she tried to lower his body to the floor to free her hands for entry, but the load slipped and fell heavily; she caught his bloodied and broken head before it could suffer further abuse.

As she carried the dead boy over the threshold, Totic gasped upon entering his childish room. The walls were alive with a holo-screen ant farm. Black and red pismires

scurried willy-nilly across the wall. His small, black-plastic desk was immaculately ordered, black blotter in the middle; pen set in one corner, holo-graphic screen in the other. She dragged Robert into the next room. The bed was made. There were no sounds other than Totic's panting as she stood swaying wearily, holding the corpse in the center of the room. In an emotional stupor laid him across his bed. She folded his hands over his navel, straightened his fractured legs. His face had lost its natural color; feces and blood, covered his tunic and hers. Already, his fine features, sharp and delicate, had become shapeless. Martian bodies decay quickly; soon there would be nothing left but an indistinguishable and malodorous blob.

She turned away and walked across the room to the window. Standing here is my last free moment. The world believes I killed Robert. Morak was so sure that I could almost see myself doing it. Am I dreaming that I didn't do it? Do I have clear recollection of time and events? Have I repressed a moment so horrible my psyche can't accept it? Hell is discordant. All is mystery.

She opened the window, something not done at night in the low municipal air. She felt the fresh indoor air whoosh out into the great dome. Looking into the night, she saw the small blue dot, Earth. She held her hand out to touch the drowsy-making night air. This was not the window he had fallen from. Across the plaza, she saw the black shadow of the city. Some few buildings kept street level lights on, but the rest of the city was pitch. She had spent her entire life looking at this city; now it seemed alien and hostile. She decided not to look back, not to look at the boy one more time. Putting her hand on the sill, Totic pushed against her exhaustion to hoist herself up, then flung herself from the window.

EIGHTEEN

When Morak entered Akbari's room, he found the premier in a state of exultation. Akbari had secured from the legate a commitment for health research. This peaceable victory occurred on the same day as the other weighty matter on his conscience was lifted: he believed Robert lived.

Akbari sat, both elbows on the right arm of his great chair, staring with blank glee at nothing in particular. *I always knew, deep inside; I knew it would fall into my hands. I won by standing firm. Everyone doubted me. Everyone! Now, I have shown all Mars that courage and a just cause are more potent than a humble and tranquil spirit.* He resolved on his next mission. Now that medical help would come to Tharsis, he would see to the nation's spiritual needs next. He could not close the abbeys, but in the expansive glory of the day's achievements, the Premier of Tharsis concocted a bold, new plan. He would set up his own houses of the spirit, a place that espoused and taught logic, character, and self-reliance. He would turn Tharsis away from the silly worship of kinship with Earth, the Holy Ghost, the human spirit, and the obsession with man's solitude in the universe. Akbari would found a new church, and end the era of the Martians turning to Earth for spiritual nourishment.

Morak saw at once that a misperceived reprieve filled with his superior joy. He saw that Akbari was youthful, energized, and filled with purpose. A voice within told Morak, *he will never again be touched by such joy; my message will destroy it all.*

"Sir, I'm afraid I have grave...."

Akbari held up his hand to silence Morak.

"But, sir..."

Akbari shook his head. Morak fell silent, dropped his head and took a deep breath. *Tell him quickly, for there is no other truth.* Akbari leaned back into his great chair and let his long fingers dangle at the end of its bowed arms. His head fell back, showing the blue-black beard on his neck and chin. "It is wonderful, all so audaciously

wonderful. Morak, listen to this. I have made peace on our terms with Blunkett and Earth! What do you say? Without further violence, I've secured our objectives. Now we, you and I, Morak, will set a new course for Tharsis. Perhaps for all Mars. What does independence matter as long as we have certain guarantees, such as having a just portion of our earnings return to this planet for health and other investments? We don't need it all. We just need longevity; Martians deserve longevity."

Morak could hardly hear what his leader was saying, for he was filled with the oppression of his own message. Akbari, not looking close enough at his protégé's pallor, continued blissfully. "Our people need a new spirit, a new religion to instill them with hope, courage, and satisfaction. I'll guide them, instill them with the will to create a new culture, a culture better, richer, and more imaginative than Earth's. I see our recently won objectives becoming the lodestone for the new way of life, breaking away from the stagnancy..."

"Sir, Robert Vardani is dead. I have just come from seeing his body."

Silence fell on the room like a specter from hell. Morak braced for disbelief and denial, for accusations. But Akbari said nothing. He stared at the floor and twisted his head side to side. The blood drained from his face. He fell back in his chair. He moved his lips in silence. Morak had no need to repeat himself; Akbari had believed him instantly. The premier waved to Morak to go on.

"It appears that Tomic killed him," Morak said.

"She told me he was fine," Akbari muttered bitterly.

"I have touched the body," said Morak. He stood straight and kept a close eye on the parade of expressions that crossed the premier's face. Before entering the room, Morak surmised that Akbari had ordered the crime, but the marshal had resolved not to address his leader's possible culpability. He would leave that to Akbari's own conscience; what the engineer/general needed from his superior was action, not contrition. "He was in her care when it happened. I'll deal with her, but first we must face the complications her crime left in our laps. The tribunes have renounced independence and us. They have gone over to the Kiratas."

Akbari nodded, as though to say, *what else could we expect?* His eyes remained wide open and empty. His face sweat. A slight, mirthless smile crossed his lipless

mouth. He said, “They have no place to go. I made peace with Earth and the Kiratas are left with an army and nowhere to go.”

“Made peace!” cried Morak.

“Yes, I’ve already told you. Weren’t you listening?” Akbari said dully. “We will get a benchmarked schedule for research on our ills. We will get training for our medical professionals, and Earth doctors rotating through the abbeys. We have it all, and all without war. It’s wonderful.”

Suddenly, Morak understood that he did not want peace. Such a harsh thought had not crossed his mind before, but it was now clear to him. He had steeled himself, and the people of Tharsis, for an epic battle of liberation. He saw himself leading the planet into a new phase of history. His mind and heart had been consumed with this glorious adventure from the day Akbari pulled him up from the ranks and gave him the laurel wreath as the first revolutionary of Mars. His engineering career never passed his mind anymore. Morak’s sole reason for being was the courageous battle. He did not want peace. Calm would strip him of all he craved: the love of his army, the magnitude of his grasp, and his name filling the ears of the solar system with terror and awe.

“How can you trust them?” he asked.

“I’ll handle my side,” said Akbari. Finally, he looked up and into his general’s eyes. “How did it happen? When?”

At first Morak did not understand him, and then refocused the other problem, Robert’s murder. “I...I can’t say the time, but he was shoved out a widow and...”

“But the time is very important! Who can tell me when? I don’t believe Totic would lie to me. I don’t... Can I see the boy? I want to see his body; I want to weep over it. I never wanted this. I never...”

“My premier, how can we trust Blunkett? Earth has assured us before. I beg you do not ask me to disband the army.”

“Disband? No, don’t disband,” said Akbari. “For God’s sake don’t disband. But, meet with Tybolt Kirata and lay grounds for peace with full mobilization.”

Morak nodded.

“Did the boy suffer?” Akbari asked. “Must I have his agony on my heart as well as his death?”

“Surely we can make peace without humbling ourselves before Tybolt!” Morak said between clenched teeth.

“I wanted to be his friend,” sighed Akbari. “It was his stepmother’s fault. Empacia’s greed and contrary nature brought this down on all of us. What a bitch! His murder is on her hands! I want her to know that. I need to shape this, don’t I? Get out in front.”

Akbari fell to mumbling and stared blankly at the floor. Morak attempted to engage the premier in dealing with Blunkett and the Kiratas, but looking at the blankness in Akbari’s face, he despaired. Morak also realized these twin blows had so discombobulated his own core, and that planning should be put off for a few hours. The Kiratas were already on Tharsisian soil, and they must be promptly removed. If worst came to worse, he would act without Akbari. Before leaving, he said, “Sir, you must rest. I will do nothing further tonight and we’ll speak again in the morning. I encourage you to rethink this peace. We dare not trust these people. Earthlings are all liars.”

#

Slightly after noon the next day, just inside the frontier of Tharsis, in a temporary dome (large enough to house and supply a few hundred men), Tybolt Kirata stood facing the three tribunes of Tharsis. These servants of democracy, as Tybolt sarcastically called them, had come to tell him that the people of Tharsis were not disposed to protecting the criminal Akbari. The Kiratas had learned that morning about Robert’s death. The boy’s stepmother had cried throughout the day. Tybolt had the woman forcibly sedated, with instructions to keep her thus until further notice.

Tybolt had affected an appearance since the war had begun. He wore dark black shadowing above and below his eyes. A broad gold band held his long black hair out of his face. Shirtless, he wore a dull nickel breastplate, with the large powder blue stanchion of the Earth’s globe surrounded by the inhabited solar system, a symbol of political unity and authority. Such emblems were usually found on the sleeves of the Earth soldiers’ uniforms. Tybolt’s overt allegiance to Earth irked the tribunes. They were also incensed at his dismissal of their cause, although, at the same time, they felt silly for backing Akbari’s hopeless campaign. Like petty criminals after arrest, looking

back on the idea of a war with Earth seemed unimaginably stupid. Each man thought separately and silently, *I must not have been myself*.

Dlette and Mowbray, exhausted from their nighttime flight from Tharsis, sat at a table away from Tybolt and Ishihara, who confabbed intensely. These newly made friends had achieved their aim, the isolation of Akbari. The tribunes' official defection meant the premier could no longer claim to speak for the will of the citizenry. It was perhaps the happiest moment of Ishihara's life.

"He is now a criminal," the tribune said more than once.

"But a criminal surrounded with armed men," said Tybolt. "I will enter the city tomorrow and arrest him, by the end of the week, we will have him bound for Earth, to end his days in a most uncomfortable incarceration. The man will die alone on a foreign planet. That's the price for disturbing the peace of Mars."

Ishihara said, "I would venture that it's time to begin planning for a post-Akbari and post-Dorda Mars. What would such a place look like on your workbench?"

Tybolt answered quickly. "One planet, one government, fitting snugly in to one solar-system...as befits one race. No reduction in number of tribunes, or change of personnel. All other matters can be hashed out between us in the fullness of time. I assume we see eye to eye."

Ishihara nodded. He looked over toward the table where his two exhausted fellows sat. They neither spoke to each other, nor looked towards the conversation at which the fate of Mars was being determined. Simply, they were tired old men; the concerns of the world were slipping away, particularly after the fatiguing past hours' drama. The overnight drive from Tharsis accelerated Mowbray's collapse was. Head hanging, his breathing was heavy; each breath ended in a groan. He doubted this episode would leave him enough life to savor retirement. He felt close to death; he was fatigued, cold, and his vision was very hazy. He thought he might die even before Akbari's rebellion was resolved.

For his part, Dlette, too, felt the swift, crushing onslaught of Martian age. He, however, was not so much enervated by the physical ordeal of the night flight, as by his own apostasy. Here he sat, on Tharsisian land surrounded by the enemies of his sacred home: Earth soldiers with their guns and ammunition. He thought of Raluca, and he was

glad she had not witnessed his ignoble defection. *She would have committed suicide first*, he thought. She would have sided with her brother and independence. So, he sat, knowing that because of his actions in the crisis, the woman he had loved would now wish him dead; perhaps she would have ordered his murder. He watched Ishihara, now exuberant in victory. Dlette knew that their portions were not the same. Whereas, despite his being essentially strapped to a board, Ishihara's fate and greatness lay ahead of him; Dlette would resign from the tumult of the affairs of state.

#

The two withering tribunes did not dine with the Kiratas and Blunkett; Ishihara ate in Kirata's quarters. Blunkett's personal chef, who had traveled with the legate for years, served them. An integral component of the legate's diplomacy, this chef carried an assortment of Earth delicacies, or so they were thought of in this outback of Earth's system. Feasts were served only to governors and other high officials on the planets, moons, and asteroids that Blunkett passed through on junkets between Earth and Saturn. Ishihara had never seen such food, tasted such wine or smelled such intoxicating aromas. Earth fruits vegetables, such as broccoli, artichokes, pineapples, plums, pomegranates, and passion fruit were never seen on Mars, where farming was confined to caloric value per square meter and fast turnover. Even chicken, which no one but the highest officials even knew came to Mars, was cooked and displayed so as not to appear as a 'cadaver food'. Ishihara recognized, despite the poultry's full bath of sauces that the viands on his plate had once walked, felt, and bled. The thing, no matter how disguised, was flesh and he could not imagine eating it. He watched with amazement as the legate and both Kiratas gobbled the dead fowl with unabated delight. He realized Kiratas had eaten flesh before, and that their systems had grown to tolerate gore. Blunkett saw Ishihara's discomfort, saw him staring at the Kiratas eating meat as though it had never lived. He saw that faced with this fleshy banquet, the tribune was struggling with his own digestion.

"I should've had Akbari and Raluca invite you to our dinners in Tharsis. Yes, your premier ate meat with me on more than one occasion! Dlette has enjoyed my chef's masteries. You see, my newfound friend, much goes on this planet that even you, the very eyes of the people, never see."

"Obviously."

The chef, a particularly small Earthman with a red face and small black eyes, served Belgian chocolates for dessert. Ishihara had never in his life tasted such a scrumptious food. By the end of the dinner, the four men lay in the drowsy night air of Martian life. They moved to easy chairs, which gave them all the comfort of their own living rooms. The cloth walls were nearly white, but tinted with cherry. In every way, this field redoubt appeared and felt like a well-cushioned Isidian apartment. As Blunkett good-naturedly predicted, Ishihara became accustomed to having a dead animal on the table. After liters of Earth's fine red wines flowed across the lips of these men, Ishihara even attempted a joke at the dead bird's expense. The Tharsisian tribune lay back in his cage, eyes heavy with satiety and intoxication. He wished only to sit, head up, feeling the almost painful swell of his belly, thinking of nothing.

The others were in similar states, except Blunkett who of course had more experience with Earth wine. He had the lights turned down, burnt sandalwood incense, and began speaking softly. "Governor Kirata and I have something to share with you. Both of you, for you have brought us to a momentous peace."

Ishihara and Tybolt shook their heads, mumbled that they did not understand what the legate said. He said again, "We have sealed a momentous peace. Governor Kirata and I have completed an armistice with Akbari, whereby the mines are not nationalized, Tharsis is not to stand apart from the solar-system, and Earth's assets on this planet will be protected scrupulously, including the abbots."

Tybolt was suddenly awake. He pushed himself out of his chair and said, "I can't abide that. Akbari must be imprisoned."

Then Ishihara's cage jolted into standing position. Holding his chin up defiantly, he said. "Akbari's a criminal, and in Tharsis we jail criminals. We do! Okay, if you want to get us drunk then throw bombshells, try this one on, Mr. Legate. The Tribunes of Tharsis cede sovereignty to Field Marshal Kirata. With or without the Earth soldiers, we are moving on Tharsis and we will arrest the criminals."

Blunkett smiled and said, "One man's crime is not a cause for war. Would you have us perpetuate Akbari's cycle of violence? Fight until the man is dead? Until Morak is killed? Until the population repents? Let's not do out of spite what we shuddered to do for a good cause. Our blood is up, but conscience must temper the heat of our animosities."

Tybolt shook his head. He spoke and pointed his finger directly at his husband, the governor. "I have forged our anger into a weapon. Mars is armed, and we face an enemy, despite Akbari's protestations of a new leaf. A life has been lost in skirmishes brought on by his bravado. A common foot soldier, killed before his already too short life could blossom. That must be avenged. Don't neuter our indignation. Governor Dorda, now Robert Vardani, and who knows what others have been secreted to death during his rule. It is not for the legate or his Earth to tell Mars to forgive or ignore this criminal. Akbari must heel to Martian justice."

Ishihara rolled forward, clasped Tybolt's shoulder. "And that justice will march tomorrow. Already the people of Tharsis have responded to the split between their tribunes and the child murderer. Many are recalling their sons from Morak's battalion. They are speaking louder with each passing hour. They cry 'Yes to justice, no to Akbari.'"

Blunkett tried to persuade the younger men that with peace Akbari would be charged and imprisoned on Earth, all in the fullness of time. But Tybolt was in no mood to stop now. No matter what enticements Blunkett offered, he would not be swayed. He stood fast in the face of promises of beneficial treatment for himself and eventual justice for Akbari. Ishihara loudly egged Tybolt on. Throughout, Governor Kirata was mute, neither siding with his spouse nor urging a liberal ear for the legate. Blunkett saw that Tybolt was effulgent and in firm control, no matter his husband's higher office. He saw too that Ishihara would henceforth speak for Tharsis; the spiritual exhaustion of his fellow tribunes was total. This man alone had the will to exercise the duties of high office. As the Earthman's concern was the repression of a rebellion and the safety of the mines, he put up little resistance to the Martian's insistence on removing Akbari. If they wanted to play war after the mines had been secured, so be it. The perpetuation of the Martian peace was a matter of indifference to the representative of Earth's government.

The group retired early, each anticipating a march the next day. Blunkett's disappointment was mild. He was well aware that any decision made by Martians was purely at the pleasure of Earth, that any feat could be doused; that any social movement could be unplugged; and that his will could topple any power structure. He knew that the power of Earth was greater than these boondocks mutants could conceive. He was in a position to be magnanimous. So he retired to his quarters, had intercourse with a traveling companion, along for just such usage, and then went into a peaceful sleep.

NINETEEN

A messenger awoke the Kiratas at dawn. Day's first light revealed a new dome had been assembled, some 4 or 5 kilometers across the plain, between the Earth army and the city of Tharsis. Both Kiratas jumped out of bed. Naked and speaking softly to one another, they rushed outside onto a viewing platform. They saw the large dome with steam seeping from its apex, looking like a great gray igloo on the rusty plain. Both men understood that Morak had assembled his shabby forces and was preparing for battle.

Tybolt said, "Ishihara warned me that no matter what Akbari promised, this would be his move."

Premier Kirata replied that he wasn't so sure that he believed everything Ishihara told them. He warned his younger spouse, "Ishihara is a bitter man, when he looks at people's motives, he'll suspect the worst, seeing in others the extremity of his own malevolence. Keep the man at a distance; once this is over, abandon him. Men that hate life are never good allies: they will eventually veer toward self destruction...and woe to those who rely on them."

Tybolt grinned. "How do you see so much, Husband? I see a dour man, a man who thinks himself much injured by Akbari. I don't see an innate villain."

"All the more reason to follow my advice. You haven't seen men cling to the dudgeons of their own heartbreak, finding warmth only in their own in wretchedness. Loss of happiness is their only taste of happiness. Lugubriously, they celebrate their misery each day, and hope to see sorrow in the hearts of others. Their life's goal is the reduction of every human motivation to base and vain impulses. That's your Ishihara."

They dressed quickly, and then went to the war room. Earthmen at desks filled this room. The small, silver machines atop the various desks controlled communications, observation, and weaponry. Tybolt asked for a detailed map of the surrounding ten kilometers. After zeroing in on the newly risen dome and examining it with a series of heat and chemical color mappings, Tybolt surmised he was facing five hundred Martians

and six oddly shaped pieces of artillery. The elephantine contraptions Tharsisian engineers had assembled were so oddly wrought that their functions were indiscernible.

“Get the others,” Tybolt ordered the nearest man. “I want the legate and Tribune Ishihara up here *posthaste!* Get me in communication with Morak. If any movement occurs on this holo-screen, notify me. If you feel threatened, fire, don’t wait for orders.” He walked down from the platform. Governor Kirata followed. As Tybolt walked, he issued orders in a loud conversational tone. Soldiers scampered industriously.

Twice the governor found himself in the way. He reached out and caught Tybolt’s arm. “I’m going back to barracks,” he said with some humiliation.

Tybolt turned and grabbed the older man by the shoulder. “Nothing of it. We’re going to parley; you must be in the midst of it. I’ll talk, but all Martians must know that you are the decision maker. We must have you my husband; the history that you worry so much about has chosen you to be the First Man of Mars.”

#

When the holo-screen in the Tharsisian command center flashed on, Morak saw Tybolt, arms folded across his wide chest. Morak had come to hate his counter part with greater intensity each time they crossed paths. Behind the Isidisian warlord, stood Governor Kirata, Blunkett, the Earth officer, Maheed, and the three renegade tribunes. The others looked solemn and firm, but they showed none of Tybolt’s gaudy conceit. Morak noted that Empacia was absent.

“This is Tharsis,” Morak began, “and you have no sanction for being here. Withdraw; tear down your dome and leave in peace. Stay one more hour, and Akbari’s army will show you a thing never seen before on Mars. Take the traitors with you; keep them from ever coming back or they will spend the rest of their lives in a penal dome.”

“And where,” answered Tybolt, “is this great Akbari who makes such haughty claims, but dares not show his face? He hides behind you, little engineer. He sends you to address your betters on his behalf. Akbari, the shadow play belligerent. You see who stands behind me, the leaders of Mars and Earth. I have Earth soldiers and my own aroused Martians. We are here to arrest the child killer Akbari. Your own fate will be determined later.”

“I determine my own fate,” said Morak, “and by your words you have determined yours. Mark your minutes, Tybolt.” The two young war lords, surrogates for their masters and the masters of the solar system, traded a few more threats and insults. The older men stood behind Tybolt, looking sternly at Morak; they were content to have Tybolt’s swagger portray their intentions. When the communication ended, both Morak and Tybolt were angrier than before; more importantly, Governor Kirata was now accepting the situation, and was ready to see his lover unleash chaos on Tharsis. Legate Blunkett and Maheed stood placidly on the sidelines, comfortable in the knowledge that Earth military ships were on their way to ultimately determine the fate of these mutants. As for the apostate tribunes, as a group they felt they had chosen the right side, but their individual feelings were not unanimous. Ishihara was thrilled, for he saw his adult life’s work and attitudes justified by the impending end of Akbari. Dlette grimly accepted that he had taken the only legitimate course open to him; when this was over, so was his public life. He would retire into solitary penance. For his part, Mowbray’s frail system had received far too many shocks, and after the teleconference, he took to his bed, from which he never expected to rise.

#

Tybolt surrounded the Tharsisian dome with six Earth fighting vehicles. A siege was the only avenue of battle. Either side could destroy its opponent’s domes, and drive the enemy back. Such tactics would cause much death and destruction; neither Morak nor Tybolt was ready to open belligerencies with such fatal action. Tybolt had on his side trained and battle-hardened Earth soldiers; his armaments were made for war. On the other hand, Morak’s army was inexperienced, and his jury-rigged battle machines were untested and awkward. On the face of it, Tharsis had no chance. So, it was a great surprise to all when Morak sent out of the Tharsisian dome, three asymmetrical and multi-colored fighting contraptions. These contrivances consisted of differing plastic machine parts welded together in shapes akin to a very young child’s drawing. They fanned out less than half a kilometer from their own dome, and two kilometers away from the silver Earth war vehicles. Suddenly, the Tharsisians fired their jury-rigged canons and effortlessly destroyed two of the Earth vehicles. Just as suddenly, the Tharsisians retreated into the dome. No shots were returned.

Inside, Morak waited tensely, wondering if his gambit had worked. It was one thing to destroy a combat machine and the dozen or so Earthmen inside, but he did not think Kirata would countenance a counter attack that would destroy the dome and kill

hundreds of Martian citizen-soldiers. The remaining four Earth war vehicles pulled back to Kirata's dome for analysis and redeployment. The two domes again silently faced each other across the pink plain of the Tharsisian bulge, where now lay the smoking hulks of two cigar shaped fighting vehicles.

#

That night, word circulated throughout the Kirata camp that Tybolt was furious. He, Blunkett, and the Earth commander Maheed, huddled in a small, soundproof room trying to come to grips with the unexpected speed and effectiveness of the Tharsisian artillery. They had anticipated a quick surrender at the first battle. Yet, their enemy laid back, let the Earth vehicles take their places, let them coolly watch as his junkyard artillery clanked out of his dome, and then with absolute precision and perfectly measured explosive mixture, blasted two of the Earth vehicles off the face of Mars. The Earth commander, face red with anger, averred that the intelligence was pathetic; Tybolt possessed recently arrived turncoats, he should have known about the danger of Morak's arsenal. Though less agitated than Maheed (who had lost many soldiers that day), Tybolt, angry at his own failure, protested that the tribunes had been political, not military actors, and that they had told him they'd been kept away from the artillery and the Tharsisian officers. Like the Maheed himself, the turncoats assumed the weapons were as ineffectual as they looked. Tybolt insisted that the Earth forces were lax in their approach to Tharsis. His pointed under-text was that Maheed's contempt for Martians led him to underestimate Morak and 'phone-in' the confrontation. Additionally, Maheed had failed to give proper instructions to his squad leaders and had been lazy in every aspect of preparation because he had not overcome Earthling prejudices against Martians and, therefore, failed to realize he was dealing with a determined enemy of equal intelligence.

"You both fail to see," said Blunkett smiling wryly, "that you are up against an exceptional opponent. Morak knew and considered everything you have just said, but he considered it before the battle, not afterwards. He saw from your maneuvers that we underestimated him; he knew the tribunes would have little to offer, but that their defection would give us undue confidence. He knew you would not fire while he got into position because, once again, you didn't expect him to attack. Most importantly, he was able to keep his own people from taking the sides of the tribunes, which, I have to admit, I never anticipated. He must be very persuasive. But, whatever the causes of today's mishap, we now see that we have a real foe, with real weapons, and with the faith of his

people. Gentlemen, we have a problem. Of course, in a few days, reinforcements will be here and they will..."

"But who knows what Akbari will be up to before they arrive," Tybolt finished the thought. "You said he threatened to blow up the mines. He has the time and means to do it."

Col. Maheed said, "And he's now shown he has the nerve."

"In abundance," sighed Blunkett.

TWENTY

Spirits were high inside the Tharsisian battle dome. Morak's destruction of two Earth fighting vehicles thrilled every man and woman in the bootstrap army. The battlefield victory was a coup never dreamt of by Martians. Marshal Morak spoke to the troops *en masse*. Then he circulated, speaking one on one with as many of his followers as he could. He gave heart to the soldiers with buoyant assessments of the first victory over Earth, and with brave cautions about the days that would follow. He told them all how Akbari, now himself in the dome, had watched the entire event on a holo-screen, how the premier wept with pride at his troops' valor and resolve. Morak did not tell them that, unlike the drone war machines he designed, the two vehicles they had destroyed were filled with Earth soldiers.

Akbari sandwiched between Raluca's two female bodyguards (now reassigned to the premier) walked around the dome, keeping a quiet distance from the soldiers, nodding silently to their whooping salutes and cheers. His face was set firmly in a mask of dignified leadership; no hint given of his inner misery. Akbari's conscious tore at him deeply. He wished he had never learned of Vardani's death--so that like his followers he could celebrate, blissfully guiltless. He saw the men around him happy in victory, ignorant of what they had done, unaware of the murder they had committed. *I, too, wish for that opiate ignorance. Less imagination, less questioning, fewer second thoughts. But, I wasn't made to look away; to call a thing a thing, that's my perspective. What else is there to say, but that I ordered the murder of a child? My agent, that star-crossed crone, had the dignity to kill herself, getting some little salvation by destroying her recreant hand. But I live and walk amongst celebrants, men toasting wine and promising to name babies after me. I want to clean things up, to die. But to die is to desert, and that is a thing the premier of Tharsis cannot do. I must live on, even in shame and personal hopelessness. I must again sacrifice for the good of my country.*

He felt a touch to his shoulder. He turned to see smiling Morak standing with his arms draped across the shoulders of two young soldiers. Morak began talking, introducing the young men as the "sighters", those who had locked the enemy fighting vehicles onto a 'structural examination machine', a piece of equipment meant to search

for weak spots in a geological body, a mining device for targeting. The target is locked onto a screen, and then probed by micro-sound waves until the weakest part of its body is synchronized with the point at which an explosion will cause the most extensive damage. Morak had redesigned the unit and miniaturized to serve as a battlefield targeting device. The instrument had worked impeccably, destroying the seemingly invincible Earth war-wagons. Morak told Akbari a little about each young man's background and his aspirations for post-independence Tharsis. The Premier heard none of it; with a weak smile on his lips, he stared at Morak's face. He had never before noticed how strong the man's nose and chin were, jutting from his face like a challenge. Akbari's new fascination with the marshal's face manifested itself in a long stare and a slow shaking of his head. Morak fell silent, distracted by the intensity of his leader's absorption with his own physiognomy. The boyish soldiers looked back and forth with open mouths.

Akbari spoke in a dreamy, distant voice. "Morak, what will we do when the Earth ships arrive?"

"Sir, as you have told us many times, the Earth forces cannot be effective as long as we hold the mines and hold our courage." Morak looked uncomfortably at the young men. Concern with the mental state of their premier spread across their faces. He said quickly to them, "Leave us for a moment. The premier obviously has something on his mind. Strategy comes to him in mystical moments. It's proper that he and I discuss this alone. Please excuse us, heroes." The young men mumbled and walked away, speaking to each other out of the sides of their mouths. They headed for the dining hall, where Morak had no doubt they would relay what they had seen, tell others of Akbari's distraction.

"Sir, you mustn't speak doubtfully in front of the troops!"

Akbari seemed not to have heard him. He said only, "Do you feel guilt over the killing of those men inside the Earth vehicle? Does war make killing different?"

"Sir, I urge you not to think along these lines. We have committed ourselves and mustn't fear consequences. When these thoughts come, you must do as I do, push them aside. You must be certain in all that you say to these young men. You must..."

But before he could finish, Akbari walked away. He meandered around the grounds of the encampment. His jaw fell slightly open; he watched all that went on, more in wonderment than with concern. He saw that each group or individual he passed

would, upon seeing him, straighten their posture, tuck in their chins and flash steely confidence with their eye. *They don't know they've killed. They still believe they belong to the human spirit. They can't claim to be part of that which they kill, another human. Ignorance deceives them into believing that they're spiritually whole. It's an illusion, but must fill them with a magic warmth. How can that be? What if they go to their own deaths that way, believing they have done no harm, yet having exterminated a soul of their own soul's substance? How then...?*

Again, Morak came up behind Akbari and took him by the arm, not to gain the premier's notice, but to move him along. Seeing his subordinate determined to walk him to another place, unable to physically resist and mentally indifferent, Akbari, arm held up firmly by his companion, walked along Morak's great strides toward an enclosure: the war room. He saw the same men who had just looked at him so admiringly, now turned their heads and looked away, unable to watch as their head of state was led off the floor like a dance contestant not up to the skills of their competitors.

They entered Morak's large war room. The marshal ordered three soldiers out of the room. The lights were off, but six one-meter holo-screens illuminated the room, filling it with graphs, time-projection images, and brilliant maps in primary colors. Akbari told himself, *brilliant yellow is so beautiful.*

"Sir, you appear unhappy," said his general cautiously. "Is there a particular matter that's troubling you?" He waited, but received no reply. In fact, Akbari seemed intent on watching the brilliant colors of the holo-maps; he did not make eye contact with his apprehensive subordinate. Morak tightened his jaws, took a deep breath, and then said, "Sir, if you can not explain to me what is bothering you, if you won't speak, I must assume total command of.."

"Oh, I think that would be much better," said Akbari. "Can I go now?"

Morak walked away, and then walked in a circle, his face puckered with strain. Finally, he said, "Sir, I am sending you back to Tharsis. It will undermine the confidence of the troops if they see you so abstracted and distraught. I cannot have that."

"I'd like to go back to Tharsis. I can't do any good here, or anywhere. In Tharsis I can reflect."

Morak stared at Akbari and tried penetrate the man's mind, but, as it was when he was at the zenith of his powers, so it was now at the nadir of his career; the premier's thoughts were concealed from the entire world. The marshal tried another effort to open communication, "Sir, with all due respect, I need more than silence. Under your name and your wisdom's guidance, I brought these men and women, these Martian soldiers to the frontier of hell. Give me reasons for your mood."

Akbari stood loosely before Morak, still examining the man's face. *He has murdered, just like I have, but I don't see a frown on his face, as I know my own will wear till the end of my days. Perhaps I'm soft hearted.*

"All right, I'll spend no more time cajoling you to be a man. Stay here; I'll have an escort return you to Tharsis. Do not be seen by anyone whom I do not accompany." Morak went to the door, looked out and spoke into his communication device.

Akbari was now attentive to Morak's every move. *How impressive a figure he is.*

#

Being driven back to the city under the carcinogenic peach sky, now streaked with willowy mauve clouds, the desolate terrain echoed Akbari's feelings; every cell in his body disgusted his conscience. He had heard of such a man before. A mineralogist whose careless inattention to his outpost's oxygen equipment cost the lives of his wife and two daughters. Akbari had known the man through Raluca's meticulous gathering information about the behavior of the Tharsisian upper class. The mineralogist slowly worried and willed himself to death. The Martian's physiology was not sturdy enough to withstand searing sorrows. The fragile people of Mars actually died of broken hearts. Once, during a night of drinking and gorging, Raluca told the details of the life of the tragic man to her brother and Dlette. The mineralogist's story moved Akbari; so much so, that he would rather have never heard it. *But, he thought dispassionately, such withering awaits me. Perhaps a jail cell and quick death. Perhaps that would be best.*

Two soldiers, a male and a female, were escorting the premier back across the bulge to Tharsis. The male looked back over his shoulder. "Still nothing to say, Sir?" Akbari moved not a smidgen. Now the female looked back with piety; she shook her head sadly, and then nudged the male so he would stop grinning at the premier. They turned back around, faced the great empty land illuminated by their bluish headlight, as they sped across the well-worn path. The male said, "I think he's faking."

#

His home, the Administration Building, was silent; the people were all off at war. Two caretakers walked the halls; two quiet men patrolled the grounds.

The drivers walked him up to the door of his fifth floor quarters. They asked if he wanted anything. With his back to the young soldiers, Akbari silently looked at his doorknob as though it would be the last thing he ever saw. As he went through the doorway, he heard the drivers turn and leap down the stairs. Listlessly, he walked through his living room, then down the hall toward his study.

In his amber lit private room, Akbari sat stiffly in a high back chair, his hands folded in his lap, his eyes resting on the light's reflection upon his polished desktop. *The likeness of luminosity: nature's first trick, reflected brilliance. At my zenith, I merely reflected the right of my position, which was the only glow of my vision. My position enabled choices: I chose a path that lead to crimes worse than matricide. Had I never been premier, I would never have harmed so many. Power didn't corrupt me; it revealed my innate corruption.*

It was a small room in Martian terms, with windows, floor to ceiling. Tonight, as he did many nights, he dimmed the lights, and drowned his eyes in the celestial vault. He sat motionless for an hour. His muscles grew heavy; he no longer had sufficient resolve to lift his hand. His thoughts began to congeal. *My deeds assured...I know what damnation means: to go through life without a moment of comfort, pleasure, or security, to feel only rancor and worry. That's damnation.*

Though his spirit seemed as broken as Robert's body, as the hours rolled by he found that he retained the will to live, and then he found the will to rule! His will to live and his belief in himself amazed and charmed Akbari. After all he had suffered, a thirst to live made no sense. Yet, here it was: he not only wanted to live, but to live well, to live in primacy. A slight smile crossed his face. *We are animals after all. Desiring life, even when it's sure to be hateful. What curs we are. We'll wallow in moral offal and physical filth rather than make ourselves die. Perhaps I am not so much accursed as purified. Stripped of all ideals and feelings, I am left with the unadulterated impulses of this molecular amalgamation called man. Life wants to live. My unconscious cells want to live. I want to live. Tharsis wants to live.*

An hour later, he walked the dark, empty, thin-aired streets of Tharsis. He had to come up with a new angle for independence. He had to get back in touch with Blunkett. The two of them could work things out. Things had to work out; the alternative was imprisonment, so longed for a few hours ago, and now as detestable as the crypt.

#

Harold Polfer was a petit Earthman with thin red hair combed over a shining, freckled scalp. He had dull hazel eyes, thin lips, and a chin wrinkled by a serious nature and a proclivity to worry about things beyond his control. Polfer believed with all his heart in the divine union of all life, that Earth was the mother of life in the universe. The problems of Mars troubled him deeply, as did the chronic misunderstandings between the peoples of the red and blue planets. Sometimes he thought he should have been an abbot, a real one. However, his actual work was not in the least occupied with the existential, ethical, and metaphysical concerns the solar system. Harold Polfer was actually Major Polfer, a little known Earthman who had settled on Mars with the late Generalissimo Dorda. His military salary from Earth had never stopped coming, and many times, he had performed services that warranted the pay.

As a real abbot would do, Polfer polished the abbey's wood at night. A knock came. Polfer dropped his dust rag on a library table filled with old paper magazines from Earth, which Martians loved to page through. Because of the reduced air, Martians did not usually roam the streets at night. Polfer assumed it would be some sort of Tharsisian soldier. They patrolled the night streets in orange oxygen helmets. Polfer had learned that under the pretense of insuring the safety of the sacred property and its caretakers, these lonely sentries would drop into the abbey nightly, if only for a moment to inhale the Earthy airs and meditate.

He opened the unlocked door and looked at the man outside. The familiar face sent small shockwaves across Polfer's chest and down his arms. "You?"

Akbari stood in the night, panting. "May I come in?" The premier had already decided that his next speech to the people would begin with the story of his return to the spirit of the abbeys. He would claim redemption through religion, without of course, ever accepting blame for Robert's dead.

"To what purpose?" said Polfer, his voice cracking.

“For the peace of my soul. Surely that’s what you are here for. Well, here’s a man you don’t have to convince. Please, let me in. I need some strong air.”

“I know who you are. You want to look around? See if you can find reason to further tax or proscribe our properties?”

“I’m not professionally involved right now. I’m naked before you. I am bent. Please let me in.”

Polfer opened the door and nodded. “Have you ever been here before?”

The other pushed his way by the Earthman. “Of course! I’m Akbari, Premier of Tharsis. I’ve been everywhere.”

During a short silence, the premier stared at Polfer with cold, unblinking eyes. Polfer dropped his eyes and said, “Please make yourself at home. I will finish what I was doing in the other room.” He bowed, turned, and glided through a draped exit.

Akbari thought, *This Earthman is not my friend. But I thank him for letting me know how we stand. It would be a better world if everyone promptly revealed their antipathies. Take the guesswork out of my job. I mean, my old job. Maybe. Do I still have stature? Or am I just another lost soul seeking solace in this palace of vapid ceremony? But then again, then again. Morak knows I had a bit of a breakdown. But I’m better now. I did the deed, so now I live with it. I was a good governor. Right, me: the child-killer. So be it. No man has ever given so much to Tharsis. Everyone knows it. Everyone prospered under my stewardship. Why should this end me? What a loss for Tharsis. I must make things work out. Don’t have Raluca and I don’t have Tomic, but I’ll find that sort. Ha, I have Morak!* He glanced around the room; saw nothing of interest among the essences of Earth. During his privileged life, Akbari had seen more Earth trinkets and souvenirs than had ever been trotted out in an abbey. These pictures, these woods, stuffed animals, rocks, and shells were trifles. He wondered at the thought of poor Martians cooing over such commonplace rubbish. Then he found a comfortable chair, sat, leaned back, and pressed his fingers to his eyes.

Why have I come here? Suddenly, he pounded his fist in the arm of the chair and growled, “Where the hell is Morak? Where is my army?”

The words were of course empty in his throat. A deeper, obscure self told him, *the game is up; Akbari is down*. He blinked, shook his head, and then looked down at his empty hands. It was the boy, the little bastard's death had done him in. All Tharsis would turn against him when they knew, just as the tribunes had turned on him, indeed, as he himself had turned against Totic. *I have to stop thinking of that damn, dead kid. His death was tragic, but if my banner falls, it will be a tragedy for all of Mars. I am all that stands between this planet and stagnancy and disease.*

Akbari looked around him and saw the wood panels, the rosewood, the oak, the pine, the mahogany, and the ebony. Beautiful and useless, just as his ideas of freedom and health for Mars now seemed. All because of that cursed child. He told himself he had done all possible, that his timing and his choice of Morak as a military leader had been particularly brilliant. The way he had handled the tribunes had been crafty and emotionally satisfying. His handling of Blunkett had been masterful. Most glorious of all, he had surprised and subdued his Earth enemies in battle! *I'm not saying they should excuse Robert's death because of it, but perhaps some liberality might be shown me. Whatever. I've been dealt a new, weaker hand; I must decide how best to use it.*

#

In the next room, Harold Polfer stood with his head against the wall, his eyes clinched tight. His thoughts alternated between his family back in Acidalia and the enemy of humanity in the next room. His thoughts strained to keep touch with his wife and his two silly little daughters. How they would love him when after weeks of separation, he came back from Tharsis. His heart ordered his mind to mimic their sweet voices. But finally, his professional soul took over, squeezing out thoughts of home and love; his focus narrowed; his mind quickened; his circumspection broadened. The plum had fallen into his lap. All the difficult plans were now unneeded, the goal was at hand. Polfer pulled his head away from the wall and looked toward the next room.

#

Oh, I'm sorry about Totic, Akbari thought. She was always so dedicated. I am sorry about the way that ended. I should have been more understanding. But, like the boy, water under the bridge. After all, I've brought this planet closer to health than any man or woman in Martian in history. Me. Whatever they do to me, that is mine. The beautiful vision was mine...not that beauty beloved by that snob Ishihara. Otiose art is

no more than pretty. Pretty is not beauty. I had a vision that would give life to a planet and to a people. Still might, in the future. They'll honor my effort, I'm a pioneer.... This is the way then; think about the good times. Don't be beaten by defeat! If they lock me away on some bleak asteroid, I'll learn to live a life in my mind. Oh, and I'll write my memoirs. Surely, they'd be published here and on Earth. After all I've done. Of course, Raluca ...

Before the thought completed, Akbari was choking. He grabbed at his neck; blood covered his hands and he saw it. He felt pain in his throat. He thought of his sister, his private rooms. Within seconds he died.

Standing over Akbari's body, Harold Polfer watched the villain's life drain away like a sewer emptying into the sea. Polfer dropped the long silver knife at his side. Several moments later, he summoned the communication system and said, "Get me Blunkett."

TWENTY-ONE

Morak sat at a weapons console on the bridge of a war machine. A handwritten note had been given to him moments before. The messenger stood uneasily, awaiting reply; Morak said nothing. The messenger coughed; Morak flicked his fingers to motion the man's dismissal. He quickly regretted his briskness; he smiled wanly, called out to the soldier and thanked him. The note from Dlette told of Akbari's death. The tribune had moments ago entered the Tharsisian war dome. A different messenger told Morak that the turncoat tribune wanted to talk to him immediately. Morak stared out across the barren plain; four silver, cigar-shaped Earth fighting vehicles faced him from a distance of three kilometers. What now? Less than ninety minutes ago, Akbari had been murdered. For Morak and the Tharsisian people, the symbol and heartbeat of independence had been wiped away. Was there any more reason to fight? Who would lead Tharsis to the new era? Was Dlette here to step forward and lead the nation? "So be it. Bring him to my room," he told the messenger. "Tell him I will be with him shortly."

Of course, he thought, I could take on his mantle myself. Brush aside these useless tribunes, push on the war...or even call off the war, just return to Tharsis and declare myself premier. I could work with the Earthmen, make a deal leaving me in charge...Then spend the rest of my life working for the good of the Tharsis I love. The problem is, I wouldn't know what to do...I'm probably no better than the tribunes. When Akbari talked independence it all made sense; I saw where my place was. But I have no strategy, no vision. Finances, trade, diplomacy, judicial system, I have never had a thought about any of them. Water engineering and now military: these are my skills. And these skills are not enough. Well, let's hear what Dlette has to say; let's see if he has a vision. I won't take on the role myself, but I won't cede my approval.

#

When Morak entered the small, colorless room he used as sleeping quarters, tribune Dlette was already sitting at his desk. The tribune looked up with sad, red ringed eyes. His face, grayish on the best of days, was cadaverous with cheeks sunken. The two men held each other's gaze for a moment.

Dlette shrugged, palms up. "We're finished," he said.

Morak said nothing. He looked around the cramped room, and then sat at the edge of his bed, the only place to sit other than at his desk. “We?”

“We, independent Tharsis.”

“I can hold on,” Morak said unconvincingly.

“No,” said the other. “With Akbari dead and the boy’s murder made public, the citizenry has lost its stomach for conflict. Already, the soldiers we left back in Tharsis have stripped off their uniforms and drifted back into the crowd. Soon the word will get to the soldiers out here, and then they too will fade away. There’s nothing you can do. The people are no longer behind you.” He paused to let this information sink in. Morak said nothing, so Dlette went on, “The tribunes met with Blunkett; we’ve agreed to cease hostilities.” Morak’s head shot up. Wasn’t that his decision to make? Dlette anticipated this reaction and did not need it to be articulated. “We are the highest ranking officials in Tharsis, now that the premier is dead. There is no other way. We can’t battle on when the people are no longer with us. Even if Akbari were alive, the death of Robert Vardani outraged the public; they blamed him. Who knows, when we return, they may blame you or even us. I tell you, Morak, all Tharsis has turned its back on Akbari’s cause. In the city, there were cheers when his death was announced. They certainly don’t want to hear about independence and war.”

Morak quietly took in this information. This is how the field lay: a tribunary peace agreement and the loss of popular support. “What kind of deal have you made?”

“Immediate cease fire, dismantle our war machines, resume shipments of deuterium 2b, and accept a new governor, appointed by Brussels. In turn, we are all pardoned. You, too. Brussels will send a Council member to speak in person to the people, assuring them of a renewed effort to deal with our health issues...”

“Do you believe that?”

Dlette smiled ruefully and shook his head. “The people will have hope. Look, Earth doesn’t want anything like this to happen again. They’ll give us a better deal on the deuterium 2b, increase the number of calls to our port, and send a group of researchers to Mars to survey the people and to see how they can make life more bearable for us. They will do these things, Morak, because it is very important to them to keep the outer worlds peaceful; their hands are full with Earth battles. Overall, I think we did quite well. I

even think we can package this as a great success. Blunkett will help us with that. For a few weeks of tension, we got this fine agreement with Earth and we give up nothing we had before the revolt. I am happy.”

Morak could not say the same. “What if I do not pull back? What if I maintain the state of arms? Remember, the mines are loaded with explosives; I can bring the solar system to its knees.”

“If you fire one more shot, they will destroy this dome and your army. Completely. You drew blood and the Earth army wants blood in return. They tell me you have five hundred troops in this dome. You make one more belligerent move and they will all die within minutes.”

“I have the mines,” Morak said as his mind raced through his options. So far, the Earth forces had shown restraint. He had been telling his own army that this restraint was actually confusion and trepidation. Did he now believe his own propaganda? While Akbari had played the larger diplomatic game, Morak kept the military option credible, but with the endgame at hand, he had to admit, a martial solution in favor of Tharsis had been a pipe dream from the beginning. Until this moment, keeping that pipe dream alive was his greatest goal.

Dlette raised an eyebrow and said nothing. He waited; his eyes fastened on the young warrior, letting him sort it out for himself. After minutes of silence, Morak shook his head and said, “Eventually I will lose and losing means losing men and women along with the cause. We’ve always known, haven’t we, Dlette. All of us knew we could only bluff, but Akbari made the bluff seem like real potency.”

“Go home,” said Dlette. “Tell your soldiers to go back to their families. It’ll be as it was, but with more hope.”

Morak stood. “There is nothing more to say. I’ll address the militia.” Without another word, he walked out of the room. Dlette waited a while, smoked a cigarette and contemplated the new political terrain. The removal of one man, Akbari, had changed the lives of everyone on Mars, just as that same man’s vision had once energized the planet. One man, who when you saw him up close had little to recommend him, but the entire solar system had taken him seriously. One man had meant so much, yet, now dead, there would be no one to mourn him, and certainly no one to carry his banner. In the eyes of all Mars, the murder of Robert Vardani had consigned Akbari to infamy, and so

history would record without dissent. His only epitaph was 'child murderer'. On Mars, he would be remembered for bringing warfare to a peaceful planet; on Earth, he would be a footnote, and that as an outlaw. Dlette felt no sorrow over the debasement of a dead man's reputation, after all, no one would remember Raluca, and she had been the great soul, the visionary. *No one but me will remember the woman that nearly brought health to the red planet.*

EPILOGUE

The leaders of Brussels sent a high-ranking administrator to speak to the people of Mars about their issues. The attractive woman was charismatic, glib, and tireless. For two weeks, she barnstormed across the inhabited parts of the planet, making rousing speeches, telling the Martians of new discoveries that would lead to the end of their despair. She announced an infusion of transfer credits to Martian hospitals and increased shuttle flights bringing rare goods from Earth. She promised more funds for entertainment in Tharsis (Tribune Ishihara was given the administrative oversight of these new funds. He thereupon resigned his tribuneship and became Tharsisian Commissioner of Arts). Dlette, though increasingly frail, was appointed as the new governor of Tharsis. On the last night of the stay of the woman from Brussels, she made a planet-wide holo-address, emotionally relating how much she had learned, how deeply he had been touched, and how never again would Mars be without a friend in Brussels. Shedding tears, she closed out her speech professing her undying love of Mars.

After that night, she was never heard from again, nor was there any further response from Brussels relating to the issues of what was now known as ‘The Akbari Revolt’. Six months after these events, Blunkett returned to Tharsis and informed the new governor that Brussels had decided to change the administrative structure of Mars. Under the new organization chart, Kirata of Isidis was now the chief executive officer, the premier of Mars. Blunkett suggested that Dlette may want to run for tribune again, although with the administrative center of Mars now firmly set in Kirata’s Isidis, that might not be as satisfying a job as it had been when tribunes had direct daily access to the executive.

Mowbray died within a month of these events. The harsh tensions of conflict also ravished Empacia Vardani’s health, and she passed away soon after Mowbray. How many Martian foot soldiers found their fragile health damaged by the shadow of danger, no one knows.

As for Morak, he returned to engineering and the Water Works. Despite the ill feeling toward Akbari, Morak was still a hero. He had, after all, killed an Earthman with

his bare hands. He had defeated Earth in battle. And the barnstorming Earth politician left people feeling some good had come from the troubles, and that good they attributed to Morak. His life became increasingly unbearable because of the attention, the favor seekers, and the women. Within five months of the Akbari Revolt, he married a woman whom he had only known for a few weeks. She was the daughter of a powerful landlord, a young woman with a mind of her own and plans for her husband. She introduced him to the powerful landlords who would eventually make him the premier of Mars. However, Morak cared little for her intentions, and soon cared little for her. He shrugged off the suggestion, thereby stupefying the powerful landlords who had been very willing to bless him.

He worked long hours and slept when home. His new wife left him, but he hardly noticed. The engineer in him was reborn with a vengeance. He found more and more reasons to sojourn to the lonely North Pole for weeks at a time. After a couple of years, a position opened as caretaker at one of the North Pole water stations. Morak, to the bewilderment of all Tharsis, appointed himself to the lowly position and resigned as Head Engineer. There through work, meditation, and solitude he lived out his days trying to rekindle the warmth in his soul.