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### Winning Mars by Jason Stoddard

Writer's Notes: this is the novelization of the story *Winning Mars* that originally appeared in Interzone 196, which made Rich Horton's Virtual Best of the Year 2005 and got an Honorable Mention from Gardner Dozois in the Years Best Science Fiction of the same year. It's about about 80,000 words of near-future science fiction, distributed for your reading pleasure under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 license. If you'd like to read the original story, it's available in a collection called *Dangerous Games*, edited by Gardner Dozois and Jack Dann. For more information on Jason Stoddard and why he's giving stuff away, visit [www.xcentric.com](http://www.xcentric.com).

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## ONE: MOTIVATION

Blip

"What you're saying is, I'm obsolete," Jere Gutierrez said.

Silence. The bank man and the dataspook both went rigid, eyes flickering sideways, once, to meet. Which made sense. They didn't know if he was a shouter or a screamer, or if the office had been soundproofed for some after-hours folly.

"We're not implying--" the dataspook said. Richard Perez, his name was. Of course. He would be a dick.

"Yeah. I know. You're not saying I'm dead yet, but everybody's started buying their black suits."

"We're not saying that, either," the bank man said. His name hovered at the corner of Jere's eye. Jerome Pullman. "There's no reason Neteno can't be a thriving business twenty years from now. But if you keep going down the same path, the chance of discovery and backlash becomes greater. Which is why we've had to raise your lending rates."

Jere sighed, looking at the parasites in their too-perfect suits, as if pinstripe double-breasted was their natural pelt and they cleaned it with their tongues, like cats.

*Eighteen months*, he thought. Eighteen months, and Neteno goes from nothing to the luminary of the linears. Now they're telling me it's back to the ghetto again.

Jere stood and turned to look out the window, where broad swathes of Hollywood stood, multicolored in the new fashion, under uncharacteristically blue November skies. He didn't need this now. They'd just bought the old Capitol building. They'd just sunk a hundred million inflationary dollars into gutting it and rebuilding it in sleek blondewoods and translucents and external neons and active wallpaper, turning it into a real vision of the future. They'd spent a million on the Neteno sign alone, rotating in perfect holographic space above the top of the building, some trick of lasers and smartfog that Jere didn't really understand. He cast his eyes upward in time to see the ENO scroll lazily past, and the NET to begin again. In the evening, the letters cast a flickering orange glow in his penthouse office, reminding him of Christmas lights from his childhood.

"Timeline, sales and profit," he said, softly, into his throatmike. His projectacle streamed rectified visuals into the corner of his eye. His whisperpod started chanting the numbers, with commentary on profits.

"Stop commentary," Jere said. He knew the trend. A spike in revenues initially, when he'd taken over the ailing network and did his first stunt. Then, smoothly rising results. Even accelerating in the last few months.

Jere turned back to the parasites. "I don't see a downtrend."

"There isn't one," the dataspook said. "That's why we felt an in-person meeting--"

"That's why we brought along a risk-analysis expert from 411, Inc.," Jerome said, breaking into a wide, thin-lipped, and completely false smile. "I can understand your confusion. In the past -- even the very recent past -- numbers like yours would have CMB dancing in the street. Carte blanche, lowest rates, pick your number. But times have changed."

Jerome shook his head sadly and sighed, as if he'd just discovered the entire world was a cheat, and both he and Jere were set up for the worst rogering. Jere just looked at him. Jerome wouldn't get a job acting in

zero-budget student linears for in-dorm streaming.

Jerome waited another three beats for commiseration, then gulped and went on. "411, Inc. does extensive monitoring and analysis of the buzz universe, using artificially intelligent algorithms and human brainpower to determine trends that are not obvious to the unaided observer--"

"Can the script," Jere said. "What you're saying is, these spooks say we're heading for a fall."

"Your audiences are becoming aware of your manipulation," Richard said.

"Rich, I --"

Jere held up a hand. "No. Let him talk."

Richard looked nervously around, like a study-skipper called to deliver rotes in class. He licked his lips. "Well, you see, Neteo's big innovation was bringing back the writers, making up stories to impress on major world events--"

Jere's stomach clenched hard. He leaned over his desk, placing greasy handprints on the perfect obsidian surface. "What did you say?"

"I said, you use writers to make stories that would otherwise--"

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. Our inference algorithms--"

"Bullshit!" Jere slammed a hand down on the desk, then turned and paced. He didn't know he was doing it. He just knew he had to walk. He felt wound up with nervous energy, like an overcharged battery, hot and ready to burst.

Because that was the big secret. The big secret. One of the writers must have talked. Or one of the sponsors. Or maybe even one of the actors. And if the secret was out... Jere stole a glance at the two double-breasted sharks, trying to look wide-eyed and innocent.

The dataspook tried again. "Mr. Gutierrez, it's plain as a 1M spike in a trendline. There are too many impossible correlations, too many sponsors that match investment and ad revenue records. We can even map some of your plots to television shows that were popular in the nineties and aughties. Seems some of your writers reused their tropes. The new Afghanistan thing was really the most blatant. I mean, every once in a while a commercial entity gets a unique and heartwarming story that hasn't hit the user-generated media pool, but that was going a little too far. And analysis of the shots of the rescue showed far too much product placement for General Motors and Wal-Mart. I assume you have them bid on the rescue contracts?"

Jere just looked at the dataspook. He was young, younger than Jere even, maybe early 20s. He had a wide-eyed sincere look that was completely convincing.

*Perfect for telling me I'm dead*, Jere thought. And he was. If the secret was that far out, he was done. His big epiphany had taken him on a 16-month ride. Now it was over.

He remembered that first great realization. Patrice, his girlfriend at the time, had actually listened to his dad when he said they should watch *Casablanca*. She'd accessed it one night, when Jere was too tired to do much other than complain through the black and white titles, and make fun of the cigarette-smoking. But when the

movie was over, and Patrice was crying, and even Jere was feeling something that he hadn't felt from the morass of user-generated media and found media and interactives and even professional linears, he thought, *Holy crap, if this eighty-year-old-film with guys in funny uniforms can affect me, maybe this is the story thing that dad always talked about, the thing he said we lost back when the age of television got eaten by the internet.*

And then he thought, *I can use this.*

Jere made one stop before he cashed in the small trust fund his dad had given him for education and found an ailing linear network to buy. "I'm going to bring back television," he told his dad. "What you couldn't do, I'm going to."

"Great," dad said, lounging on some foamy thing in his pool.

But the night stars had never looked so bright. The day had never seemed so perfect. And when Neteno started its stunts, started serving up those impossible stories, those heart-wrenching exclusives, it exploded into Neteno the powerhouse, Neteno the savior of linears, Neteno the spirit of television risen.

But if the secret was out... *Forget buying black. I'm already dead. I just haven't started smelling yet.*

"I get it," Jere said. "You know my secrets, so you don't want to lend to me anymore."

Jerome broke into a smile that looked almost natural. "No. Not at all. We don't care about your secrets. We're just worried they'll get out in your audience."

Richard nodded. "We've run some scenarios, and none of them are pretty. If you continue working the stories to the extent you have, within 4 months there's a 2-sigma confidence that amateur inferers will discover what you have been doing. After that, you have a few weeks before the evidence base grows so big people can't ignore it. Then, you're operating with maybe two to five percent of your current viewership base."

Jere shook his head. "I'm surprised it's that much."

"Televangelist syndrome," Jerome said. "You've been in the public eye a lot, and you're a charismatic man. You haven't been the network man, hiding behind the curtain. A certain subpopulation really likes you. They won't be swayed by facts."

*But I can't run on 2% of my audience,* Jere thought. *And the sponsors wouldn't touch me, even if I could.*

"What do we do?" he asked.

"Be more conservative with your scripting," Richard said. "If you handled everything like you did the Twelve Days in May, you'd have 20, 24 months before it collapsed."

"But we hardly did anything in Twelve Days!" Jere said. Mainly because dad had uncles and shit back in DC, and Jere knew he'd have his nuts on the chopping block if dad thought he was tweaking a major national terrorist disaster.

Richard cocked his head. "You have to tone it down."

Jerome nodded. "Work with 411. I believe they have a list of scriptwriters you shouldn't work with. Take their advice, and you could stretch this out."

"How long?"

A shrug. Dancing eyes that said, *Who fucking knows, and I don't give a shit because it ain't my problem.*

Jere sighed. He went to his chair, and collapsed into the soft leather. Their revenue would take a hit if he couldn't do the really improbable stories, but he'd have to make it work.

"And," Jerome said. "We'll have to increase your interest rate on your line of credit. And perhaps charge some points for loan fees."

"How much?"

A razor grin. "Nothing that will ruin you."

Jere nodded, and put his head in his hands. His bushy eyebrows and too-big nose reflected in the polished surface of his desk.

"Why?" he said, softly.

"Why what?" Jerome, sounding happy.

"Why do you still want to work with me?"

"Because, Mr. Gutierrez, there's always risk." Jerome again. It sounded like he was speaking through a smile. "It just has to be measured in terms of reward."

When they left, Jere looked up at the glowing NETENO sign, suspended in space. Little bits of dust sparkled in its smooth perfection. Below, multicolored Hollywood, king of the interactives, seemed to look up and laugh.

*I'm a blip, Jere thought. Here today. Gone the next. Changing nothing.*

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Almighty

Dad loved Christmas. Not because he was religious, Jere thought, but because he was able to show off a little and not feel so bad about it. He could get the house up in the most outrageous decorations (including, this year, a fully robotic free-range Santa, mingling with the guests like a slightly spastic and nonsequitur-spewing rendition of St. Nicholas and a floating "Merry Christmas" that looked uncomfortably like the Neteno sign circling his beautiful and overpriced building). He could wear stupid outfits, like brocade smoking-jackets and knee-socks with cigars on them. He could eat to excess on pheasant and Belgian chocolate and crispy cinnamon churros and excuse it because it was Christmas, that was what you did. But most of all, he could show off, and dispense his largesse to the kid, grandkid, uncle, aunt, cousin, or nephew that needed it most -- almost always with a degree of theater and staging that managed to put all eyes on Ron.

You can take the man out of television, but you can't take the television out of the man, Jere thought, as he whirled up to the house in his new Mercedes. One of the small electric ones. Because he might need to get used to less. Because he could tell his friends he'd found the environmental religion.

Dad was old-school. He lived in a big, sprawling gothic horror of a house up on top of the Hollywood Hills. Built in the 80s, with the money flowing free at that time, it looked like something the studios would have set a turn-of-the-century English boy's school in. It rose from among transplanted pines and impossibly perfect grass, gray and stony and severe. From the circular drive in front, you could see the lights of the San Fernando

Valley, glittering like so many pieces of junk jewelry on cheap synthetic velvet. From the back, you could stand and look out at the towers of downtown Los Angeles, just waiting for the Big One to fall. Sometimes you could hear the popping of machine guns from South Central or big fires where a microriot was breaking.

Fun stuff, growing up. Jere shook his head. He'd stick to his highrise condo. Easy, slick, no grounds to keep, no fake stone to maintain, no fuss, no muss.

*You'll stick to it while you can afford it*, Jere thought, grimacing. He ducked inside (under the floating Merry Christmas sign, which he noticed sparkled just like Neteno's sign), dodged the robot Santa ("Holiday blessings, young man," it said, in a deep voice as he passed), and slipped into the kitchen, where Mom was presiding over a staff of five kitcheneers. The smells of turkey, pheasant, goose, stuffing, fresh cranberries bubbling in a pot the size of a small bathtub, homemade noodles and mashed potatoes brought instant memories of holidays past.

Jere snuck up behind his mother, grabbed her by the arms, and said, "Boo!"

Mom shrieked, jumped two feet in the air, and spun, beating at Jere with a wooden spoon that had materialized in her hand. She chased Jere through the dining room and into the living room, where children giggled and adults frowned at the two grown-ups, acting like kids.

Jere came up short at the big picture-window that opened onto the balcony. Dad was out there, wearing another stupid outfit, this one with embroidered reindeer.

Mom beat him with the spoon.

Jere held up his hands. "Hey!"

Beating.

"Mom, is that thing even clean?" Brushing at his suit.

Mom stopped. Glared at the spoon. Glared at him. Then gathered him up in a big hug. She'd gotten soft and round with the years, and color couldn't hide the texture of her hair, but she still smelled like Mom, some unidentifiable fragrance that had probably passed from popular life three decades ago, before Jere was born. He hugged her back, hard.

"Behave yourself," she said, waving the spoon at him.

"I am."

"What?"

"Behaving myself."

Mom gave him a glare that was supposed to look menacing. It looked like a Chihuahua trying to be fierce. Jere tried not to laugh.

When she'd gone back to the kitchen, his sister Evi approached, bearing husband on her arm. She was a slim thing, thirty-one, six years older than Jere, still holding on the kid front. She looked up at him with glittering, playful eyes. "So the Tycoon of the Linears graces us with his presence," she said.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else."

"Where's your arm-ament?" she said. Her little made-up word for his girlfriend of the week, his arm-ornament.

"I didn't feel like bringing anyone."

Evi frowned and put the back of her hand on his forehead. "Are you feeling all right? Jere, what's the matter? Is business off?"

"No, no," Jere said, cursing himself for being so transparent. He should have brought someone, just for appearances.

"How is business?" her husband said. Samuel, Jere remembered. He was a bulky man with a square face, like he'd bought it out of a magazine at the Cosmetic Surgery Outlet. He did something in interactives. Not a big man, but you didn't need to be big to earn big in the 'active game.

"Good. How's yours?"

"Interactive space's always good," Samuel said. "Challenging, too. For the participants. They don't just sit around and watch."

*Like blowing shit up and random fucking is educational*, Jere thought. But he just nodded. You didn't screw up a dadparty. Never. Nope.

As if reading his mind, dad breezed in from the balcony, trailing the scent of cigar. Jere's nose wrinkled. He never got used to the smell of smoking, whether it was cigarettes or cigars. The one time he'd tried smoking a cigarette, he'd gotten light-headed and puked. That was the end of any fascination there. But dad--he genuinely seemed to enjoy the things.

"Jere," he said, putting a hand on his shoulder. Up close, Jere could see that his outfit was even worse than he thought. The reindeer were embroidered with some kind of ethread, which was running simple animations. One of the reindeer turned to look at him.

"Got a moment?" dad nodded outside to the deserted balcony.

"Uh. Yeah. Sure." That didn't make sense. Dad spent before-dinner doing the rounds, or smoking his cigars. He saved the theatrics and giveaways until after dinner. One-on-ones were always last, over glasses of port or bowls of ice cream.

Dad took him over to the stone railing, where the city glittered below. Jere heard a party horn, loud and long, coming from down in Hollywood, over the rush of traffic on Highland.

"I know what you've been doing," dad said, looking out over the city.

"What... what do you mean?"

"Interviewing," dad said. "Getting stupid ideas from stupid people."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you do." Low, dangerous.

Jere paused, considered, nodded.

"I know why you're doing it, too. The banks. 411."

"Jesus, does everybody know?" Jere said, throwing up his arms. "Fuck, am I gonna put on my eyepod and see that I don't have a customer base?"

"No," dad said. And waited.

Jere shivered. Did this mean he was going to help? Like the year he decided that Jere should be educated, and the only way he would be able to do it was with a big trust fund? That was the big show after dinner one year. That was where he got the money to buy Neteno.

But this wasn't a show. This wasn't public. This was one on one. Jere felt his shiver work its way down his spine. He didn't know what that meant.

"What?" Jere said, finally.

"I have someone you should meet."

"A friend?"

Dad's mouth quirked into a quick, thin grin. "I don't know if I'd go that far. But he has an idea. A good one."

*Great, Jere thought. I get to entertain another fossil from the golden age of television.*

For the last month, he'd entertained every diapered octogenerian, smelling of piss and death, who could claim some connection to the age when television was the piper, and everyone followed the tune. Whether was the last great years of Reality, or the almost-mythical Hegemony of the 70's and 80's, when the world was run by television, when that was all there was, when audiences sat rapt on their cheap cloth sofas and scarfed microwave dinners in front of the tube, long before the coming of the internet and the rise of Interactives, long before television had been cast into the "Linear, Free-Access" ghetto, they all claimed to know that one compelling idea that would trounce all and vault Neteno to even greater glory. But, so far, they were all doddering pisspots who drooled in their coffee and sat, watching, while Jere dissected their ideas like frogs in biology class, fat with data from his eyepod and earbuds. They might wear new fashions, they might even wear eyepods, but they didn't feel it, they didn't get the world had moved on, and they weren't on the train.

"No," dad said. "Really."

"How'd you find out?"

Dad just turned to look at him. The full-spectrum houselights glittered in his eyes, making them seem to sparkle with glee. "I worry."

"Don't."

"No," Ron said. "You don't. Don't get used to this lifestyle. It's not good for you."

"It's been good to you," Jere said, spreading his arms to encompass the house, the view, the muted laughter of the guests inside the house, the glow of his fucking Merry Christmas sign, so much like Neteno.

"That's different," dad said.

*And how so?* Jere wondered. Because he made your fortune in the eighties? Because he had it for so long?



Because he planned your life, so perfect, so he'd have a pile before he had kids, a pile so big he could never outgrow it? Because, at the carefully calculated age of forty-three, he finally decided to have kids? Look at him, almighty, sitting on a wad of assets so big it would take a bulldozer to move it, a wad that wouldn't be returned to circulation until he died. His two only kids, held hostage by the thought of the money, the money, OMG the money, probably never getting any of it, except for dribs and drabs dispensed at his whim.

"Want to make a difference, lend me some money at lower rates than the sharks at ChinkBank."

A frown. "Don't call it that."

"Why not? They're twisting my nuts. And don't change the subject. Be a lender. Make some points. That would make some real difference, dad."

"Ron."

"What?"

"You're a big businessman now. Call me Ron. Because you aren't my son, raising your voice to me at a family get-together, at a party, when I'm trying to help." Ron's voice got low, rough and deadly towards the end.

"I'm sorry. Dad."

Ron just looked at him.

"Ron."

Ron nodded. "I've considered your pitch to borrow money at market rates, and I regretfully decline. In light of your current position in the market, I can't jeopardize the well-being of the rest of my family."

"Great." Jere said.

There was silence for a time. Jere waited for his dad to tell him to leave, before he embarrassed him further. But the old man let the silence draw out.

"My other offer stands," Ron said, finally.

"I'll take it," Jere said.

"You don't have to."

"No, I want to."

"You don't need to do this for me." Ron said, through a thin and deadly smile.

"Send him," Jere said. He turned away and began walking back to the house.

At the big glass doors, his father's voice found him. "There might be hope," he said.

Not without affection.

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Pitch

He took the meeting with dad's friend in his office, because dad always said you meet friends in restaurants, you meet business in your office. Plus, he told himself, it probably wouldn't be too hard to impress the old bastard, who surely hadn't seen an overtop-Hollywood view, unless it was from some sales job, calling on midlevel interactive pukes who'd torture him with promises they had no real power to keep.

But the fucker just walked in, sat down, and looked at him. Never even glanced at the view. As if he had always lived there, as if he was still living there, as if television still ruled the world, and God was right in his heaven, or whatever they said.

The old bastard's CV scrolled on his eyepod. Evan McMaster, producer of *Endurance*, one of the last of the reality shows. Ten years dead and good riddance at that, the netbuzz said, 'cause it was a timewaster of the worst sort, putting people with zero physical stamina and skills into situations where they were sure to kick it, except for some heroics of the group at the end. Surely scripted. Jere grinned at the irony.

"I'm amusing to you?" Evan said. Rich, gravelly voice, the kind that came from years of cigarettes and booze or expensive operations. He looked fifty, which meant he was probably at least seventy, especially if he palled around with dad, who at seventy-four was also scraping the last of the best med-tech before the docs threw up their hands and said, in fatalistic voices, *We're not miracle workers here!*

But Jere had to give him credit. Evan didn't wear animated clothing, have his hair dyed neon green, or even carry an eyepod. His jacket was black and boring and imperfectly tailored, like it had been made by real, imperfect humans somewhere in the world, rather than grown to his shape. He wore a boring gray collarless shirt underneath, devoid of even a corporate logo. He even had a big clunky metal watch, one of those awful things you probably had to have whirligig life-support for, a thing that throbbed and ticked on your wrist like a bomb. He imagined Evan falling into the ocean and being dragged down into black depths by the weight of that watch.

He seemed, well, almost *comfortable* being old.

"So you have an idea for me," Jere said.

Evan looked at him, zero expression, eyes like carved lumps of lead. For a moment, Jere thought Evan would ask him again if he found him amusing, and he'd have to stutter and make something up, or throw the old asshole out on his ear. And how would dad like that?

Then Evan's face animated, like some nineteenth-century automaton, made of brass and wood, cranked to life iron gears.

"I have a proposal," he said.

Jere waited. He waited some more. Finally, he said, "What is it?"

"We resurrect the reality show," Evan said. "We take it to Mars."

For a moment, Jere sat there, mouth open. He'd expected something stupid. Something even monumentally stupid. But not something so stupid that it was in danger of creating a black hole of stupidity. "Resurrect the reality show?"

"Yes."

"And take it to... Mars? As in, the planet?"

A nod. "As in the planet."

Jere stopped again. *You gotta be kidding me*, he wanted to say. *Get the fuck out of my office*, he wanted to say. *Dad, I know you're filming this, and it ain't funny*, he wanted to say.

But. The look on the old fuck's face. He looked so. Like. Serious. And if Jere threw him out of the office, dad would hear quick. And there would go the chance for any sweet parental financing.

"So, you're saying we send a bunch of people to Mars. And have them do? What? Like running and jumping and stuff like that?"

Evan studied him for a moment with those lead eyes. Then: "You don't think I'm serious."

"No, no, it's not that--"

"Yes. It is. You think I'm some old nut, from the end of the TV age, trying to push his own dumb agenda on you."

Jere said nothing. That was so close to his own thinking it was a little surreal.

Evan held up a hand. "No. Don't deny it. I know what you're gonna say. This doesn't make any sense, you'll say. This costs too much, you'll say. People will die, you'll say."

"You're telling me they won't? Die, that is?"

Evan sat back in his seat. "Of course someone is going to die. Probably lots of someones."

Jere nodded, trying to hide his surprise. So maybe the old fuck wasn't just another crank with a stupid dream trying to suck his nuts. He was -- at least -- realistic.

"Death is a legal problem," Jere said.

"You're saying that all your stunts, all your shows, haven't gotten anyone killed?"

"Neteno doesn't do snuff."

"What about the new Afghanistan thing? Or the Phillipines?"

"That was news."

Evan nodded. "So nobody died."

"Nobody who didn't volunteer--"

Evan made a disgusted noise. "No bystanders died? Not a one? You can guarantee that? You'll do a deposition?"

*Very realistic. So maybe taking this meeting was not just a complete padre-suckup. Maybe his father was right, just this once.*

Jere just looked at him. He waited for the old guy to drop his eyes. Hard eyes like agate. He waited. And kept waiting.

"Make your pitch," Jere said. "And make it good."

"I have data," Jere said, waving a pocket-projector. "Can I show it?"

Jere nodded. "Lights down," he said. The window overlooking polychrome Hollywood dimmed to twilight, and the room light ramped down and blue. Evan pointed his pocketproj at the screen, descending to the side of Jere's desk.

Evan stood up and paced in front of Jere's obsidian desk, as colorful graphics lit the screen. WINNING MARS, it said, A proposal for Neteno.

"First, let's dispense with the death thing," Evan said said.

"Sponsors don't like it."

"Don't lie. Sponsors love it. They just look properly horrified and give some insignificant percentage of their profits to the survivors and everyone's happy. Your big problem is legal."

And the fucking risk managers, Jere thought, thinking of 411, and the conniption they would have if he ever told them about this. "Tell me why we should take the chance. Pretend I'm stupid. Convince me."

Evan made a gesture and remapped the screen with colorful data, demographics, charts, multicolored peaks spiking like some impossible landscape. Stuff he had seen before, but this was far out of proportion. The audience was far larger than he'd seen in a good long time, and the engagement numbers were hitting the top of the screen. Jere thought of those impossible charts they threw at him, back during that single semester of college he'd endured. This was too perfect.

And yet it still bore the stamp of 411, Inc. The fuckers. *But it might make them more likely to back it*, Jere thought.

"Why?" Evan asked. "Three reasons. First, the Chinese."

"Didn't the Chinese stop at the moon?"

"Yeah. That they did. But they said they'd go to Mars, and apparently a whole lot of Chinese still want to go to Mars. And Koreans. And Japanese. And even Americans." Evan pointed out separate spikes on the chart.

"Then why didn't they?"

Evan shrugged. "Cost. They just don't go for spending on a US-style scale. They don't have the tax base. Even using Russian tech, the missions woulda killed them."

"And it won't kill us?"

Evan held up a hand. "Patience, my friend. You know the budget numbers are always hidden in the back."

"So skip to the bottom line."

"No. Another reason is NASA. They're dead. Gutted. After the Twelve Days in May, all the money is going to Homeland Security. Everything's being folded into the new Oversight thing. And people know that's where it has to go, so the polls show 'em being OK with the Kevorking of the Mars flights. By the US, anyway. But they still want to do it. They might not bitch about the all-seeing eye, but underneath it all they have a pent-up

need to see some great endeavor, not just utilitarian defense. It's the Frontier Factor."

"Never heard of it."

"Henry Kase. New pundit. Blames the lack of a Frontier Factor for most of the world's problems."

Data scrolled in Jere's eyepod, fast-ref video cap with contextual icons showing a balding little man, talking to sleepy rooms of unshaven and poorly-dressed people.

Evan winked. "Complete crap, of course, but it maps well on the audience we're looking at."

"Good. He doesn't look particularly convincing."

"He's not a charismatic. It's a real trend, real as 411. Put someone behind it who could work a crowd, and we'd nuke Russia so we could make it into our new frontier. Or go into space."

"Sounds stupid."

"Third reason, the Rabid Fan. That's real. You know it."

Jere nodded. Everyone dreamed of creating a new Star Trek, still in syndication after all these years, or a new Simpsons, a new show that made people dress up, go to conventions, meet in real life, found languages, change dictionaries.

"They'll think this is too game-show," Jere said.

"Yeah. But they'll watch, anyway. They'll bitch, they'll moan, but they'll watch. What else do they have? All the trekkies and scifi nuts and people who dream about getting out, getting away, people who hate their lives for real and imaginary reasons, they'll all watch, and they'll clamor for more. You don't have to take it from me. Look at the numbers."

Jere looked at the projection, peaky and perfect and tantalizing. If they could create something like that... he sat silent for a long time, thinking, dreaming, imagining himself at the forefront of a movement. Evan stayed still, like a statue, as if he was holding his breath.

"There are problems," Jere said finally.

"Of course."

"Death is still one. I'm less than confident we can get the whole idea past the risk-management sharks. And even if we do, and even if I can buy a platoon of lawyers to armor-plate our ass, but the shitstorm that follows may still take us down. Especially if all the actors kick it. As in Neteno is a goner. Done. Stick a fork in it."

Evan nodded. "I know, it's a stretch."

And his grin said, *But you're really considering it, aren't you? I have you on the hook. You're actually running the objections through, as if it was a real proposition.*

And, Jere realized, he was. Because the idea was... monumentally stupid, and ballsy, and dangerous, and it probably wouldn't work... but you didn't get ahead without ideas like that, you didn't revive an entire industry, you didn't pull a Neteno.

How realistic was this Evan guy? Who was he? Jere whispered commands into his throatmike and gasped at the inferred wealth and swarmstrength of the man who sat across from him. He was at least as big as his father.

A brief, acid surge of anger: Another fucking almighty, another parasite living off spoils from another age.

"You're asking me to risk my network? While you sit there comfortably, almighty, still living off the interest from a previous life?"

"I'm prepared to throw in."

*Realistic and ballsy. And maybe the source of funds his father couldn't be.*

"How much?"

Evan looked at him with those lead eyes. "Everything."

"It's never everything."

"I'll sign a personal guarantee."

Jere nodded. "What's the bottom line?"

Evan changed the slide. Jere gasped. The total was \$1.1 billion. Even in the days of the inflationary dollar, that was ridiculous. Especially when you were buying something that had to earn itself out. And more. It wasn't real estate, where you could just pay forever. "You need funding like a first-run Interactive for a free-access linear."

"The cost is really quite low. The Russians have some new tech that will keep the cost way down. Hell, I remember seeing bottom-lines of thirty, forty times this for shoestring missions back when."

*Back when you were what? A kid? Playing with dinosaurs?* Jere wondered.

Evan saw his disbelief. "It'll earn out. The sponsors will line up."

"Why?"

"Your logo. On Mars. Maybe a featurette on how you helped build one of the transpos, or fund the food and bev, or just just how you're a visionary, opening the new frontier. This is the biggest thing that's ever happened to entertainment. In the history of entertainment. Come on!"

"Sponsors don't like one-shots."

"So tell them this is the first of many. Tell them we're going to mine the asteroids. Tell them we're going to storm the Chinese on the moon!"

"That's not funny."

"You know what I mean. The spin. You got it. I've seen you on the screen. You're the one who could make this work."

It was crazy. It was stupid. And it was, more than likely, impossible. But it was an idea. It was a big idea. And

it just might be enough to get the attention of people jaded by the 'Actives. It might be enough to spike Neteno's growth, once again.

*Wouldn't that be a surprise, to the risk management assholes?*

"Reality shows are dead," Jere said.

"It's been over a decade since the last one. It's coal. Time to mine it."

*Which was probably true*, Jere thought. The way things retroed round and round, it was probably comfortably new again. And there were probably millions of people like himself who had caught a glimpse of the last reality shows and remembered them in a fond way. The data seemed to say so. And his intuition agreed.

*You've taken big chances*, he thought. *Which is why Neteno was a rising star amongst dying embers. It's time to take one more.*

"Do you think we could get some money from NASA?" Jere said, finally.

"You're in?"

"How long's the flight?"

"To Mars? Six months there, six months back. As best we can figure." Evan's eyes darted with manic glee.

"We're going to do it?"

"We could run it like a year of programming. A year exclusive. We can definitely get food and bev sponsors. Start it around Christmas next year, wrap it up next Christmas."

"Start in June," Evan said. "Remember, six months out. The big show will be on Mars. You want it to run for Nielsen in December, when everybody is snug and warm at home."

"Got it," Jere said. "So, what are they supposed to do? The actors?"

"Contestants," Evan said. "So, we're doing it?"

Jere nodded.

Evan did a little jump and victory dance. "Yeah!"

Jere cleared his calendar with a few quick touches and stood up. "Let's go to lunch. You can give me details. Like just how we're supposed to pull this off on the cheap."

Evan grinned. "It's Russian tech. The new stuff. You know, the stuff they do the \$250k packages to orbit for a week."

Jere paused at the door. "Now, I'm sure people are gonna die."

As they left, Jere thought, A whole year. An exclusive for a year. Some of the brands of the first and second great internet booms were made on less than that.

A new foundation, to build Neteno even higher.

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## Getaway

Patrice Klein thought the thing with Jere was over. Thought it, but didn't feel it. That little tickle in the back of her mind, that little facial overlay when she was out to dinner with a boring date, or even in bed with another man. That niggling doubt, *Is he the one?*

Not that, as a modern woman, she thought The One was anything more than some subtle and inexplicable shifting of brain chemistry, or that The One was The One forever, or even for longer than a few years. But Jere was that shift of brain chemistry. He was the one who ran away, when everyone else flocked.

Of course, that didn't mean he shouldn't be made to jump through a few hoops. He wanted dinner, which meant dinner and breakfast, interrupted by whatever calls were too important to be routed around his eyepod, or eyeblaster, or whatever it was they called them those days. Patrice stuck to earbuds and a palmtop with a little laser-projector, a neat little cultured-wood thing with real synthetic diamonds crusting the edges, and neat gold trim, like an elegant old cigarette-case from a movie.

So, no dinner. She made him take her out for a weekend on one of those new Yamaha speedboats, to the little chain of private floating islands that had grown up beyond Catalina. More beautiful than Catalina, and gyro-stabilized, you could imagine yourself stranded on a perfect desert island. Disney'd done the hills and mountains and impassible bits of forest well, so you could never get to a point on the island that you could see any other. Some people called them, disparagingly, Gilligans, but she thought that was dumb. She'd watched the show, and you couldn't see the ocean at all. Like they did it on a sound stage or something. They probably did.

Best, though, was the islands complete lack of connectivity. The Relaxation of Complete Isolation, they said, and they meant it. Jere'd tried to use his eyepod, then bitched about them jamming the signal, running too much spread-spectrum noise or something. He tried to use his whisperpod, but it was really stupid without its net connection, and Patrice took the first chance she could to throw it in the water.

On the first night there, on the warm sand, under a primitive tent of tree-branches and stretched animal skin (what kind of animal, she wondered), Jere asked her something strange.

"Would you like to work for me again?" he said. His voice was soft, faraway, as if he was thinking of something really important. But when she looked over at him, he was watching her intently. He was a beautiful man, even though he didn't know it, with his big patrician nose and curly black hair--so black it was almost blue--and his icy blue eyes, courtesy some genetic trick of fate she didn't pretend to understand. They didn't come from his mother. Or his father. Maybe he was engineered, like they said some kids were getting these days. But she thought he was too old for that.

"You have to ask?" she said.

"You work in interactives."

"So now I'm too good for your little linears?"

Jere nodded. "Something like that."

Patrice laughed, and sat up to look down at him. She liked looking down at him. "Just don't get me killed," she said.

Something in Jere's eyes flinched, and he was silent for a long time, just looking at her. Could that be the glimmer of tears, she wondered?



"It might be dangerous."

Patrice pretended to consider. "I'll do it anyway," she said.

"You don't even want to know what it is?"

"No. I trust you."

Jere sighed and sat up. "You aren't even going to ask?"

Was that? Was he uncomfortable? Patrice giggled. She liked that. She'd gotten under his skin. He didn't know how to take this.

"No," she said.

Jere just shook his head.

"Besides," she said. "You'll be right there with me. Maybe even on camera."

Another long, strange look. Then: "Let's go look at the stars," he said, almost a whisper.

Patrice got up and went with him, happy. The sand squished happily through her toes, tickling. The water, chill, splashed her feet and calves. For a while, she could forget she was on an artificial island on the west side of Catalina, and this was their life, and it would be like this, forever, uninterrupted.

Orbit

After hearing Evan's colorful stories about Russia in winter, Jere was almost disappointed. It could have been Texas. Or Oklahoma. Miles and miles of nothing but gray-brown weeds and low hills, or at least that's what it looked like as the run rose behind them on the flight in from Singapore.

*Man oh man do they have this flyover country thing down*, Jere thought, after what seemed like hours. *Ain't got nothing but.*

Deep inside, he breathed a sigh of relief. Evan talked a game like he knew everyone in Russia. And Singapore. And Hong Kong. Rattling on about hotels he burned rooms down in, women he fucked in cabs, deals he made with nothing more than a napkin and an pencil and a whole lotta balls. He didn't need to know that Jere had only been out of the country once, when his grandfather died and they had to Mexico City for the funeral. He remembered endless rows of cheap houses, women weeping, and the butchered English his translation software whispered in his ears. That was bad enough. Like being stuck in his own head. A reminder he should've learned Spanish, or better yet, Chinese, like all the other kids did.

Jere hadn't had time to cross-referenced Evan's tales with Found Media, and he almost didn't want to. What if Evan was as big and powerful and ballsy as he said? It made Jere's own accomplishments pale. It made it seem like Neteno was built on one bit of luck, quickly lost. It made him worry that he could keep up with Evan. The man who talked so much, but somehow told you nothing about him.

When they landed at Krainly Airport, Jere's sense of déjà vu got even stronger. They could have just flown into Austin. Just another little regional airport. The only difference were the English tags floating over the Cyrillic characters on all the signs and ads.

A tall, stocky, dirty-blond man wearing the largest and shiniest chrome-and-wood eyepod that Jere had ever seen waited for them in baggage claim. He held a hand-lettered sign that read: MCMASTER/GUTTEREZ.

He saw Evan.

"Good morning, Mr. McMaster," the man said. He spoke English with only the slightest trace of a Russian accent. "Mr. Guterrez."

"Gutierrez," Jere said, emphasizing the 'i'.

The blond man gave him a moment's blank stare, then shook his head. "Of course. Sorry."

"It's all right," Evan said. "Valentin Ladenko, Jere Gutierrez."

"Call me Leninsk."

"Leninsk?" Jere said, thinking the name sounded familiar. But his earbuds whispered no wisdom.

Evan burst into a big old-man barrel-laugh. "Stop kidding, Valley," he said, slapping the other man on the back. "You'll confuse the mark."

"Mark?" Jere said.

The two men both laughed, as if they were best buddies sharing the world's funniest joke.

"I'm not a mark," Jere said.

Evan laughed again. "Of course not. Lighten up. Let the old farts kid around a bit. Valley, any chance we can partake of local hospitality before we launch?"

"I would prefer Leninsk to Valley."

Evan just cocked his head.

Valentin looked heavenward. "To answer your other question, no. Your launch is in three hours. I have already had to bend the rules to get you in without orientation."

"There are rules?" Evan said.

"Yes."

"Funny, never got the manual."

Valentin frowned. "I will wait until you get your bags."

While they were waiting for their luggage, Jere leaned close to Evan. "Who's that?"

"Valley. The guy I've been working with."

"Is he... what is he?"

"He's our RusSpace rep," Evan said.

"But is he..."

"Organazatsiya? Sure, why not."

"I just... I mean, they're sending us up free? As a teaser? Is that how it works?"

Evan squinted his eyes shut, as if the question brought him physical pain. "They really want our business," Evan said. "But, if we decide not to do it, I think we'd want to find a way to get these very nice people at least five hundred thousand dollars in gifts."

"Gifts?"

"Specifically, the kind that are paper and printed with green and black ink."

It felt like there was a baseball stuck in Jere's throat. He swallowed it down and looked from Evan to Valentin. "Evan, I don't know about this."

Evan shrugged. "What's done is done."

"What does that mean?"

Evan leaned a little closer. "It means, don't even think about backing out."

Jere shivered. *Great. What am I getting into?*

He was very happy when the bags arrived.

Valentin had a new Mercedes, a big gasoline S-Class, waiting for them outside. Idling. In front of the airport. With nobody in it. He piloted them past more big Mercedes, Hummer limos, little Daewoo microcars, and the odd goat on the way out of the airport. Jere didn't even realize he'd seen the latter until they were on a narrow, cracked highway, leading into more of the bleak land.

"Goats?" Jere said.

Evan chuckled.

"We are very cosmopolitan," Valentin said, flashing laser-white teeth in the rearview.

Ahead of them, a bright light bloomed, illuminating far mountains and low clouds. A roar soon followed, and a brilliant spark began climbing into the sky.

"Was that ours? Did we miss it?" Jere said.

"I think that was a SpaceX flight," Evan said, squinting up at the now rapidly disappearing dot.

Valentin nodded. "SpaceX."

"We're still on?" Jere said. Wishing they weren't.

"Still on," Evan said.

As they got closer, more bizzarity abounded. More big S-classes, BMW Ms, Lexus and Cadillacs competed

with fuel cell personal transports. The little they saw of Baikonur the town was a mix of grim multi-story apartments and shining fanciful new hotels, including the Sputnik II, which looked like it had been braided out of glass ribbons.

Evan saw where Jere was looking. "Lots of space money coming in here," he said. "Nouveau riche."

"We like to show off," Valentin said, nodding.

"And you have goats."

"There will always be goats." Evan laughed at that.

At Baikonur Cosmodrome, they drove past a big mural of a man in an old-fashioned spacesuit, spreading his arms wide. Evan explained it was called "The Fisherman," after a cosmonaut who was bragging about a fish he caught in a nearby river. At that moment, Jere decided that Russia was nothing like Austin, nope, no way, no how, and wondered if he would ever really understand the country.

They had the RusSpace terminal done up in orange-tinted concrete, with uncomfortable furniture that looked like Chinese knock-offs of old Eames designs. Outside, it had a good view of the RusSpace rocket. Old-style, as they said. Jere remembered seeing pictures of the old space shuttle, and other delta-winged sketches of fanciful spacecraft, but RusSpace had none of that. It was just a slim needle, bulging slightly towards the top, with a row of tiny dots near the front that Jere figured were portholes.

The terminal smelled of good espresso and vodka, but they didn't get a chance to stop. The behind-the-counter lady started yelling at Valentin in Russian, which Valentin gladly returned. It ended when he handed us off to her, and she ran us down a long tiled corridor to an elevator that took us up to the passenger capsule of the RusSpace craft.

Where every face turned to look at us, all angry. Jere heard a babble of comments in various languages. The ones in English were not exactly complimentary.

"What's wrong?" he asked the counterlady.

"You one hour late!" she said.

"Oh."

She helped them climb in and set their straps. They were in something that looked like a cross between a commercial airliner and a bus. Five rows of four-across seats with high, flat backs were bolted to a vertical floor of bare aluminum. The seats pointed skywards, and they had to climb to their seats at the floormost part of the cabin using handholds and footholds set into the aluminum. There, they could sit back and look upward. It was a vertigo-inducing experience, and Jere knew why people glared. He tried to smile at the couple sitting opposite them, two middle-aged and very elegantly dressed Asians. They wouldn't return his look, instead just staring straight ahead.

Jere sighed. *I'm with you*, he thought. *Get it over with.*

But there was one difference, he realized. Until they had to wait an hour on their backs, they were probably here to have fun. To have a great experience. To spend a whole lot of money. They had every right to expect it to be perfect.

"Isn't Valentin going?" Jere asked.

Evan shook his head. "You think they have any spare seats? Every one of these go up, full."

Twenty people, twice a week. Five million a launch. Jere ran the numbers in his head. Five hundred twenty million a year. Not exactly huge numbers. No wonder they were interested in the Mars project. Though...

"I'm hearing the numbers you gave me might be very optimistic," Jere said.

"What numbers?"

"For our current project."

Evan's eyes got wide. "You've been asking around? Are you insane? Three words in front of the wrong audience, and we're blown--"

"Give me some credit. I just had my sister's friend's kid look it up a bit, like he was doing a paper or something."

"Oh." Evan looked a little surprised. That made Jere feel good. *So you don't know all the tricks*, he thought.

Jere waited. Evan licked his lips. "We'll discuss cost later. Just know there's a lot of sources out there, most of them for only a single purpose: to keep you from ever wanting to do what we're doing."

"Is that true?"

Evan nodded. "Yes. It is." And he would say no more.

Which was good. Because less than five minutes later, the pilot gave them a brief welcome in Russian, followed by English and Chinese. Then there was a minute's worth of countdown, mirrored in the little flatscreen at the front of the cabin, and Jere felt something like an earthquake, and he was pushed back in his seat, hard, like someone had piled bags of cement on top of him.

The roar and vibration drowned all of his thoughts but one: *I never asked Evan how RusSpace's safety record was.*

Jere saw motion and looked over to the side. His head snapped violently down, pulled by the force of their acceleration. He felt a sharp twinge of pain, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, streamers of mist were threading in complex patterns outside the tiny portholes. The sky was a deep blue-black.

Jere tried to look back upwards, but his neck howled in pain. He relaxed and watched the portholes. The streamer fell away, and the sky changed slowly from blue-black to entirely black. He could see the pinpricks of stars.

*Space*, Jere thought. *I'm in space. This is insanely stupid. Why am I here?*

And, like a little voice in the back of his head, a sarcastic aside: *Be glad you didn't blow up.*

Then the roar and vibration stopped, all at once. Jere felt the crushing weight fall away. He looked back up towards the front of the cabin. His neck gave a sharp twinge, but otherwise seemed functional.

Then he got light, real light, like an express elevator nearing the top of the building. And lighter. And the cabin did a funny thing. He'd been looking up, but suddenly it wasn't up, it was forward. Then it heeled over again, and he was staring down a long metal tube, falling, seemingly motionless.

They were falling towards earth! Jere gripped the arms of his chair.

"Evan, uh," he said. The words squeaked from between his clenched teeth. "We're falling."

Evan didn't look at him. "Of course. That's why they call it free fall."

"I, uh, oh, shi--" Jere said, as half-digested airline dinner hit the back of his throat.

"Use the bag!" Evan said, pushing himself away from Jere. Jere saw pens floating in the air, in the seats ahead of him. A kid, maybe eleven or twelve, had unbuckled himself and was floating in air. A stewardess (spacardess? he wondered) worked her way back to him, pulling herself by the railing on the ceiling.

Evan scrambled through the seat-back pocket and extracted a bag. It still bore a United Airlines logo. He thrust it at Jere, just as the airline food exited his mouth at what seemed like about a hundred miles an hour. Jere watched a red-brown streamer fly into the air of the cabin, fascinated and horrified at the same time.

The stewardess squinted at him as if marking him for some terrible punishment, and chased the puke. She held something that looked very much like a butterfly net. Jere had to laugh. It echoed over the expressions of disgust as the puke hit the wall near a porthole. Part of it rebounded, but the stewardess caught it with her net.

"Bag!" Evan said.

Jere realized he was holding the bag. He popped it open and held it to his face. He didn't feel like he had to puke, but better safe than not.

"Gross!" the kid said, disappearing down beneath his seatback. Assorted adults glared at him.

"It OK," the stewardess said, her expression saying it was anything but. "Shit happens."

"I'm sorry," Jere said, into the bag.

He only had to use it one more time before they docked with the RusSpace/Hilton Hotel. And even then it wasn't so bad. He was by a porthole, watching as they approached the slowly spinning wheel, and he thought, *God, it's like those old movies, those ones where we fly around the universe, a fucking space station, really really* But then he saw the RusSpace and Hilton and Scaled and Boeing and Starbucks logos, and he thought, *Holy shit, this thing will really work*, and then the shuttle wheeled around a bit, and his point of view changed, and he got to see some more remains of dinner.

"Gross," the kid said, again.

They wheeled up towards the end of the hotel, spun the shuttle to match it, and slotted into the end with a metallic clang.

*Pretty professional*, Jere thought, as he was climbing out of the shuttle, past what was clearly a caulking gun with a tube of GE silicone sealer in it. His eyepod tagged the Russian lettering on the case as "For Leak Use."

The hotel was small and cramped, with hallways that seemed to curve forever upwards. Jere felt light and disoriented, and had to use the bag twice again before he got to his room. But the girl who led him seemed genuinely concerned. She spoke English with something of a midwest twang.

"You're American?" Jere asked.

"Yep," she said. "Nebraska."

"Why are you here?"

A grin. "Anyplace is better than Nebraska."

"No. I'm serious. Why here?"

She stopped for a moment, and turned to face Jere. "Beats getting an accounting degree to count some almighty's money."

Jere nodded. That was a sentiment he could agree with. He wondered, idly, how many young accountants had thought about killing their whales, just to get the money back into circulation, just to free up some assets.

She looked at him, serious-like. "What do you do?" she said.

"I'm a producer. Linears."

A frown. "Movies? I thought that was... well, not doing so well."

"We're not doing bad."

She turned back, took two steps, then stopped and looked at him again. "Because where am I ever going to get this chance in America?" she said, with a cool intensity that made her look ten years older than she was.

"That's why I'm here. This is the future. This is what matters."

*Fuck*, Jere thought. It was like the early years of the internet. Like those interviews of all those young kids who thought they were changing the world.

*This could work.*

Evan came down the hall towards them, probably back from getting his room. "Getting lined up?" he said, looking from Jere to the hostess.

"No," Jere said, as she looked away, with a frown.

"They're all available, don't let them tell you they aren't. I already negotiated down from the ratesheet."

Jere just looked at Evan. He wanted to tell him to shut up, the world didn't work that way, he liked Patrice too much. But he said nothing. Eventually, Evan slapped him on the shoulder and slid past, down the narrow hall. "See you in the bar."

"I'm sorry," Jere said.

His hostess led him to his room in silence.

Jere sat on the narrow little bed. There was another tiny round porthole, just like the one on the shuttle, where he could see the Earth wheeling below. He looked until he felt sick again.

The wallscreen displayed advertising in English for the EarthView bar and grille, with sky-wide panoramic window. Jere shuddered, and hoped there was another place to eat.

*A week of this*, he thought. But he also thought of his unnamed hostess, full of idealism and intensity. If this could reach Nebraska, he could reach half the world.

And make them believe in Mars.

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## Decision

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Jere squeezed his eyes shut and tried to sleep, as shadows moved, bathed in blue light, behind the China Air 807's Ultra Class privacy screens. Jere had his down, because his life was over, and he didn't really give a shit. He was flying back to California. Evan was flying on to England, or some other place, to try to beg money.

But it didn't matter, because the fucker'd told him, *Well, yeah, the budget really was just a guesstimate, could cost a lot more, but hey, get soft dollars, trade, yeah, we'll make it work.* And when Jere'd asked him about earn-outs and dividend guarantees and pre-promises with pre-pays, he'd just looked blank, and Jere'd realized that this was how Evan was, this was how they did it in the old days, they didn't really know what they were doing or how much they might make, they just scrounged money and went big and crossed their fingers and hoped for the best.

*Holy. Fucking. Shit.*

He'd fly back to California. He'd find something else to do. There had to be something other than a crazy Mars thing, where probably half the ship would be puking, and the other half would be fighting, and oh what a great show that would make, especially if they all died in the end.

At least WErU reported that nobody had twigged to his week in space. The personality simulators said that fully 95.6% of recipients of email and video from their service hadn't been able to tell it wasn't Jere, based on facial analysis. And most of the other 4.4% just thought he was on vacation. The only problem was the 1.1% who thought he might be out with a new girlfriend, according to deep analysis of the buzzosphere. But there was zero correlation of buzz with space-related terms. So nobody knew. He was clean.

Yeah. Back to California. Something else.

*But what?*

There was a soft buzzing as the privacy screen next to Jere retracted. A young guy, dark hair cut close, stretched and looked around, smiling at Jere.

"Look at us," he said. "Pods of isolation, inward-turning, sixty thousand feet in the air."

Jere thought about ignoring him. He sounded like a pompous ass. "It's what we pay for," he said, after a while.

A nod. "That it is. But is it what we really want?"

Jere shrugged.

"Sometimes I like to talk," the dark-haired man said, holding out a hand. "I'm Thomas."

"Jere." Taking his hand. It was warm and dry, firm grip. The handshake, as illustrated in a textbook.

"What's your gig, Jere?"



"Linears."

"Really? I'm in personal needs analysis."

Jere thought of zipping his screen. But mom had always told him to be polite. And enforced it with a stiff ruler. "What's that?"

"You know, run the found media of your life, discover your hidden potential, that kind of thing."

"Yeah." Jere'd heard of it. It sounded like an expensive scam.

"I thought linears, well--"

"I'm the founder of Neteno."

Thomas gave him a sharp look. "Neteno? The Afghanistan guys?"

Jere nodded. "That's us."

"So you're doing pretty good. For now, at least."

"At least?"

"There's a lot of commentary on your charts," Thomas said. "Revenue flattening, borrowing rates going up, stuff like that. They're saying you're a blip."

Jere's hand clenched, and he felt his face go red. He shivered in anger. "Who's saying that?"

Thomas held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa. Just the chart boys, the ones who follow investments. Maybe not a big percentage, either. Just something I saw."

*Just something I saw. Just fucking something I saw. And remembered enough to bring it up to the fucking founder.* Jere closed his eyes tight. He felt his breathing coming, loud and harsh.

"You know, maybe our InDiscovery service could help you find that hidden potential," Thomas said.

"No."

"No?"

"Neteno isn't flattening. We're going higher."

A pause. "Uh, that... isn't what the charts say."

"Screw the charts! We're coming out with something so big, you won't believe it! The biggest thing in the history of entertainment!"

"That's pretty grandiose."

"It's the fucking truth. You know, I really hate all you guys, all you guys who say linear is dead, stick a fork in 'em, interactive is where the money is. Because what we've done already is just a start. Wait till we really get going!"

Thomas just looked at him, eyes wide. Then he looked back towards the back of the Ultra Class cabin.

Jere followed his gaze, and immediately wished he hadn't. A steward was wrestling with a big kid, maybe thirteen or fourteen years old, who wore a headband with a dozen net-microcams strapped to it. He'd sliced the privacy screen that led back to the First and Business Class cabins, and stuck his head through to fish for imagery. Jere had heard about kids doing things like that, looking for trysts and arguments they could sell to the limited-access realife sites.

Fuckasaurus. And the kid had had his cameras pointed at him. Him, saying they were gonna do a stunt. A big one. Probably already streamed. Nothing he could do about it.

The steward finally dragged the kid back into First, while another appeared from the front, with a heavy black drape to separate the sections.

The only thing he could hope for is that the kid didn't catch his face well enough for the recognition algorithms to work, or his voice was too garbled by the engines.

But his eyepod shrilled and there was Evan, sweating in some hotel bedroom and looking really, really pissed.

"What did you do?" Evan said. "The boards are lighting up."

"Nothing," Jere said.

"Nothing? They say you're claiming 'biggest thing in the history of entertainment' and other incredible hype."

Jere looked over at Thomas. His privacy screen was already drawn. He sighed.

"Well?" Evan said.

"I got slasheyed," Jere admitted.

"Fuck! How could you do that?"

"It ain't something you do!" Jere yelled, suddenly pissed, because this just wasn't fair. "Fucking kid stuck his goddamned head through the divider, wearing a headband."

"And you didn't notice?"

"No! Damn, Evan, get off my back. After the budget--"

"Quiet!"

Jere frowned and nodded. Evan was right. They needed to talk about this later.

"Fuck," Evan's voice was low and hard.

"What?"

"They're connecting it. To our flight."

"Our flight?"

"The last flight we were on."

Jere's stomach did a quick flip-flop, like a rerun of his spacesickness. "No. I checked. No correlation."

"There is now. I guess when they heard you, they had to dig a bit deeper."

"How bad?"

Evan went thoughtful. Eyepod-spray made his eye seem to dance. "Not even above the decimal. May not even grow. But the principals are all high-rep. The important people know."

"What?"

"What you said. Where you went."

"But not..."

"All of it? No, not yet." Evan chuckled.

"What?"

"Hope you weren't having second thoughts. Cause now we have to deliver."

Promises

It was official. Jere didn't like Russia. This time they were in Moscow, in the Universe Hotel, a horseshoe-shaped thing of chrome glass decorated in late 80's style. Jere wondered if there was a time, a few years back, when that had come back again, or if it was a fanatically preserved relic of those last go-go days before the internet age.

And he hated negotiating. After yesterday, they were exactly nowhere. Valentin (who the mediascape was disturbingly silent on the subject of, even when presented with current video for facial analysis) and his goons had looked at their plans, conferred gravely, and named a price that was ten times their highest projections. Now he and Evan were drinking Stolichnaya the disturbingly 80's hotel bar.

"Promise them more flights," Evan McMaster said.

"We don't have any," Jere Gutierrez said.

"And they're bluffing."

"What do you mean?"

"They got shit. You saw the shuttle. I coulda gone to school on that bus back in the 60s. They do tourist crap. They don't know Mars. Hell, they haven't even been to the moon."

"Yes they have," Jere said, thinking of that caulking gun and the tube of silicone, of those hard vinyl seats, of all the exposed aluminum, worn shiny in places from use. And yet they hadn't fucked up. They could do launches. They were doing half a billion dollars a year from stupid rich fucks who wanted to go up a couple hundred miles and look down on everybody and get spacesick and complain about the crappy food. And nobody had yet blown up on the launch pad, or depressurized in the Special! Value! Spacewalk! in ill-fitting old spacesuits that smelled like farts and BO.

Evan sat back, crossing his arms. "They been to the moon? When?"

"Uh, like, after us. Seventies?"

Evan smiled. "You kids. What do they teach you with in school these days? A DVD and chocolate cake? No Commies on the moon. Just us. 1969."

"The Russians did it too! Didn't they?"

"Nope. Never. Once we did it, they dropped their program and just did unmanned probes. Said that sending actual people, real humans, was a showboating capitalist move. They wouldn't stoop to it."

Jere shivered. "Shit. Don't scare me."

"I'm not trying to. You just need to know what we're dealing with. It's a poker game. And they're bluffing."

"If you don't think they can get to Mars, why are we here?"

"I think they can make it to Mars. They're just talking like its easy, like they did it a hundred times, like they already have the stuff on the drawing board. But it won't be easy. It will be hard. Especially on our budget. And they know it."

"So what do we do?" Jere said.

"We just need to bluff right back. Tell them we're going to do this every year. Every three months. Every shittin week if that's what it takes. Tell them what they want to hear. Then they'll tell us what we want to hear."

"You're going to lie to the mafiya?"

"No. You are."

Jere shivered. He had visions of black-clad thugs, like maggots in suits, showing up at his clean and elegant high-rise condo. "No," he said.

"I thought Neteno was the big maverick studio, willing to take any chance. With the biggest thing in the history of entertainment coming."

"We are."

"Then act like it, or I'll take it to Fox."

A rush of anger coursed through Jerry. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Because the studios knew he was doing something with space. The trend among the GP was low, below the radar, not even enough to spur another visit from the bank. But the studios knew, and the net regularly picked fragments of space-related convos from the Y restaurant, and Puck IV, and all the other lunch-places in town. Not enough to spawn any rival plans, his 411 software said. But enough that Evan had him by the nuts. His contract said he retained rights if the deal fell through.

"How do I do this?" he asked. "And live?"

"They're gonna have their setbacks, too, stuff we can put them over a barrel for. Once we've primed the

audience, they have to meet our schedule. Or all the advertising for RusSpace goes out the door. Their easy half-billion goes out the door. Because people get nervous, and they might want to go Virgin next time, cause they meet the deadline. Why did you think I went to see the Branson?"

"We can't afford Virgin."

"I know. I know. But that's what RusSpace is looking for: lots and lots of publicity for their space tourism biz. They want to send a hundred thousand people up, not two thousand. They want to send people to the Moon. Hell, they may even want to build hotels on Mars for all I know. That's where they'll make their money. If they can do this and not go completely bankrupt, they'll be smiling."

*And you think you'll draw them into some big web, some big thing where all paths lead to Evan,* Jere thought. "I wish I had your confidence."

"It's my life, too," Evan said.

*Yes,* Jere thought. *And you're more visible than I am.* He'd need to have some private meetings with their organizatsiya friends and drop some hints about how the disappearance of a high-profile studio CEO wouldn't be ignored, and how the concept was all Evan's in the first place.

*I will make sure it is your life. First, you fuck. First.*

"Ok," he said. "We bluff. Now, what's this the lawyers have come up with for the contract?"

"Aha," Evan said. He pulled out a palmtop and scrolled through a long document. "Eighty pages of gibberish. Printed, that is. They want real signatures in real pen."

"What does it say?"

"Essentially, it locks in the contestants. They state they are of sound mind and body, and they've designated us as their ward. They renounce citizenship of whatever country they're coming from, and claim none of any country on the earth. That keeps the governments fighting and tied up in court while we launch."

"What do they do when they come back? Live in airports?"

Evan grinned. "Not my problem. One other thing. The lawyers say we absolutely, positively cannot spin this in advertising. We have to tell people they are signing up to get killed."

"There are always volunteers."

"The lawyers had one other suggestion."

"What's that?"

"Start in the prisons. Public reaction will be less if they have a record, even if it's a nonviolent crime."

Jere thought about his time with Patrice, where he came very, very close to telling her what he planned. He envisioned her standing in front of the group of contestants, beautiful and perfect. "But they'll have less buy-in."

"Yeah, that's a problem. Do you think we can spin it?"

"Maybe. Depends on the person."

"I can look," Evan said.

"I'd be happier if most of them were genpop. And at least one an aspirational. Celeb, maybe."

"Patrice, maybe," Evan said.

Jere nodded and sipped his drink. There was silence for a time. Then the sound of an argument deep in the hotel, maybe from the kitchen.

"Why?" Jere said, finally.

"Why what?"

"Why are you doing this? Just the money?"

Evan sighed and looked away, to the cute blonde bartender. For a while, Jere thought he wouldn't answer.

Then Evan looked down at the table and said, "After a while, you get used to it. Not the money. The other shit. Having dinner with George Bush, 'cause you have your hand on the throat of the public. Fucking Mary-Kate Olsen, since you pay more attention to her at one premiere than her husband does all month. Picking up you office phone and asking for anything and getting it, 'cause you're on top, you're on fire. Why else?"

*Because you don't want your dad to look at you, with that look, that are-you-fucking-stupid look, ever again,* Jere thought.

They went back to serious drinking. Later, there would be women. Later still would be more negotiation. Endless rounds. Bluff and dare.

The real product of Hollywood.

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Contract

Patrice Klein lay beside Jere and looked up at the fake stars. He'd redone his ceiling with screenpaper, so they could look up at the same stars they'd seen, that night on their little private island. Jere was on his side, breathing into her ear. His flesh was smooth, cool, really the only thing about him in bed she didn't like. He always seemed to run at least five degrees cooler than her. His skin was never clammy, but it was like sleeping with a mannequin sometimes.

But he did thoughtful things, like the ceiling. Or maybe not so thoughtful, because they were here, rather than on their own private beach. And beyond the ceiling, the condo was all Jere, empty and colorless and grim. It needed someone to decorate, even if it was going to stay minimalist. Jere lived like a college kid that had come into a lot of money.

*Which, in a way, he was,* Patrice thought. *Except for the college.*

"Come with me," she said, not moving.

"Where?"

"To an island. For real."

Jere rolled over on his back, but said nothing. Suddenly Patrice had a clear vision, like a waking dream. Jere and herself, walking down an endless white-sand beach. Clear turquoise water lapping. Palms waving. In the distance, a bright white house, immaculate and gleaming. Their house.

She remembered dreams, long-faded dreams, of living on a real island with her man, endless perfect days of warm breezes and soft sand. Stuff from those days when she still slept in the frilly bed in her room in mom's house in the valley. Decorated for someone who wasn't yet a teen, even when she was in high school. Because there was no money.

She closed her eyes, thinking of Jere. They could do it. They could go away and live like that. He could sell Neteno and do it. Or maybe do it right now. And she could get away from the parties where everyone compared shoes and bags and designers, and sniped at anyone who was working, and speculated on how the latest rising stars had risen. She could get away from wondering where her next work was coming from, from promises made and never kept, even Jere had mentioned work, but where was it, where was all of her work?

"I'd like to," Jere said. "Go away."

Was that real longing in his voice? "Let's do it," Patrice said, her words coming fast. "Drop out. Get away. Buy a piece of Dominica or something. Get out of the race."

"No."

"You could do it!" Patrice turned to him. Jere stared up at the ceiling, not looking at her.

Jere sighed. *I can't*, was what that said.

"Why not?" Patrice said, the dream falling through her fingers like sand.

"I need you to do something."

"What?"

"The biggest thing in the history of entertainment," Jere said, turning towards her. His voice was soft and funny.

"What!"

Jere stood up, naked, and walked through the darkened room. Simulated starlight chased down his slim but well-defined legs. Patrice liked to watch him walk.

He snugged on his eyepod.

"No!" Patrice said.

"Sweep room," Jere said. "Highest level."

"Jere!"

After a few moments, he seemed satisfied. He took off the eyepod and came back to bed, kneeling on the covers like a little kid. "We're bringing back the reality show, and we're going to Mars."

Mars. Mars. For a moment it didn't register.

"Like, in space?" she said.

Jere nodded, and looked at her with wide, serious eyes.

"I..."

"I want you to be the lead," Jere said. "The one everyone will look up to. Everyone loves you."

Patrice imagined herself on screens, like posterverts for slam-interactives and linears. But with stars in the background, and maybe spaceships, like those old-time movies. It was a funny thought.

"You're kidding," she said.

"No. Serious. One hundred percent."

Patrice closed her eyes. Jere was a dreamer, in his own way. He'd brought linears back. Maybe this was the thing he needed to do that final push.

*Then on to the island.*

"You'll be the only actor in the group. The only one on Mars."

*The only actor ever on another world.* That sounded good. Real good. "And you'll come with me," she said.

Jere, who had begun to open his mouth, clicked it shut. His eyes darted from side to side, as if seeking a door out. "If you want," he said.

*Which meant no.*

Still. Money. Only actor on another planet. *He'd better hope I don't meet a cute geek on the flight to Mars, or he might not have anything to cuddle with.*

"When do I start?" she said.

Jere sighed. "I don't know. We can't advertise for a while, we're still putting it all together. Maybe six months, maybe a year."

"Promises don't pay the bills."

"I..."

"And I could get another job."

"Patrice..."

"Put me on retainer. I'll wait for it."

Jere sighed and lay down on the bed. For a long time, all he did was look up at the stars. Then, softly:

"I'll see what I can do."



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## Rupture

The Mississippi Chimera fiasco wasn't much of a thing, but it was a thing Jere could spin. Especially since 411 said he had to stop being the man behind the curtain, he had to travel, he had to express concern. So, on a wet February day in Mississippi, Jere found himself staring at the remains of a shitty little chimera crèche, hidden below a weathered and sway-backed hunter's shack buried in woods so deep they had to use flashlights to pick their way through, even in the day. The media had already peaked. It'd hopped from impersonators to locals to nationals to commentary and analysis to opinion pieces in less than 12 hours, and now, a day later everyone thought they had it all nicely sewn up and put away.

And they were right. There wasn't much left of the lab, just a few lifeless scraps of flesh in transparent tanks, things that probably would never have grown to maturity. They'd left the equipment behind, and Jere's eyepod tagged it all as several generations behind the latest. Just some good ol' boys, playing with cheap Brazilian tech that was moderately more interesting than moonshine. Dreaming of perfect angelic fairies, or cat-girls, to help them through the chill nights out in the woods. Nothing like the big Chinese or Russian cartels that claimed to be able to sell you whatever you wanted.

*I wonder how many chimeras are walking around in LA?* Jere thought. He'd seen cosmetic surgery victims that looked stranger than anything the Chinese and the Russians claimed to have done.

"Not even an atomic mapper. Or an atom-laser setup. Do it the old-fashioned way, needles and virii and stuff like that," the Mississippi state bio-hacker guy said. He wore a tan uniform with one of those smokey-bear hats. He looked like a state trooper, and spoke with a southern drawl that television was supposed to have eliminated, generations ago. Jere's eyepod tagged him as Reynald Peregrine, and scrolled some background data.

"Virii?" Jere said, pulling his face into an approximation of un-bio-schooled fear.

*Very good,* the 411 guy said in his whisperpod. *You look genuinely concerned.*

"No need to worry, we hosed it down before you came in," Reynald said, pointing to remnant crusts of the decontamination foam.

"Oh. Good."

"So why you here, uh, Mr. Gutierrez? I thought your network did, uh, dramatic stories."

"We do. We're also interested in expanding our scope."

Reynald shrugged and looked away. *Booorrrring*, it clearly said. The only reason the story was news were the crazy conservatives in flyover country, and their pet president who'd outlawed the tech.

Jere smiled.

*Stop that!* 411 hissed.

Jere went back to his mask of concern.

*Hope they didn't catch that,* 411 said.

Jere watched while they finished up with the deep-penetrant wallscans. They showed nothing. No hidden rooms filled with semihuman sex slaves, no closets with living fetuses bubbling away in vats, not even a hidden cabinet full of hybrid genomes. Just brick and concrete, just what it looked like.

*Good.* Jere looked relieved, and earned some more praise from 411.

"I think I'll head into town," Jere said. "Talk to some people there who knew the guys. Can someone give me directions?"

"Sure," Reynald said, looking relieved to be getting rid of him. "You walked in?"

"Yeah."

"You might need someone to walk you out. Don't want the second story of the day to be some major eex-ecutive getting lost and dyin in the wood."

Some snickers from the other biotroopers. Jere did his best to look all aw-shucks. Just like they would expect him to ape their motions, because he was a slick eex-ecutive and all.

*Any second now.*

"Dan can take you--"

Something heavy slammed into the building above them with a deep bass thump. Weathered timbers shredded with a sound like tearing paper. Dust sifted down from cracks in the floorboards above. There was a cry from above, a high yodeling that didn't sound even remotely human. It was the essence of sadness, of frustration, of anger.

"What the hell?" Reynald said, as the two other biotroopers ran for the ladder. The topmost threw open the trap-door, but it never finished ascending. It was ripped off its hinges by a huge, clawed hand, purple-veined and roped with wiry muscle. Jere caught a glimpse of a head like a naked bear, with translucent flesh hanging in folds over a wiry and well-muscled body. The thing's eyes were big, blue, and surprisingly human.

It reached down for the topmost biotrooper, claws threatening to shred both uniform and flesh. But a gun popped and it drew back, crying out in pain and terror. The gun popped again, several times in quick succession. It sounded very small, next to the volume of the chimera's wail.

The arm disappeared, and the terrible face drew back. One last creak on the floorboards, and a rustling sound, slowly disappearing into the woods.

The trap-door framed only tree-branches and slowly falling rain. The biotroopers all remained frozen, like a badly-posed still picture.

"Are you all right?" Reynald asked Jere, finally.

"I... I'm fine," Jere said.

*Good acting,* the 411 people said.

*Fuck you,* he wanted to say. That wasn't acting. That thing was fucking terrifying. For far too long, he'd wondered if the thing was their guy in the Japanese mechasuit and silicone exoskin, or if the drunk backwoods motherfuckers had actually came up with some giant evil half-bear, half-human chimera and grow it to term.

And he had seen the thing, surplus from some planned experiential reality interactive that never made funding, never saw the light of day. With a few quick changes by aging real-effects guys who would work for nickels and not talk for dollars, it had become the Terror of the Woods, the thing that Neteno would milk for the next eight weeks or so.

Jere tried not to smile as he thought of the weeks ahead.

Covering the hunters who hunt it. First glimpses, then encounters. Then the one courageous hunter (whose friend was in a hospital due to the thing) that almost, almost tracks it down. They could have to avoid killing anyone, but that was a piece of cake. The aerial surveillance even gave them a great excuse to drop battery packs to keep the mecha going.

Then, finding its lair. The little crevice in the rocks, decorated with strangely relevant posters and scraps of still-glowing wallscreen, and seeded with bits of a bear-human hybrid genome that would never live, but would make it seem real. And people would scream and cry, and say, it was human, how could you hunt it.

Maybe even the courageous child that befriends it, though that was a stereotype. They'd have to find someone not well-liked, rebellious, and pay them enough to go to Brazil for a memory repatterning. So they really would change. And everyone would say, look at this miracle, isn't it amazing, the thing truly wasn't bad, it might even be good, it might even be somehow net to God.

And then, finally, the big mystery, when it disappears. As if it never existed. Just some tracks, leading off into the distance. Ending at a stream. Or something like that. Half would celebrate, half would cry, a few would say it was a fake all along, but that was OK. A new legend was born.

*What do you want with Mars?* Jere thought. But it was just a stray muse. Chances like the Mississippi Chimera came along once in a lifetime. Try to orchestrate another, and people would figure it out. 411 had already drilled that into his head.

When they were topside again, Jere kept looking around, as if the thing might leap out from behind any tree. Their fallen topside compatriot was sitting on a pile of the wreckage, his rifle in his lap. Blood streamed down and coated one ear, but otherwise he looked OK.

At the crappy little rental Ford, alongside the rain-slick highway, Jere looked back into the woods. And they were creepy, he had to admit. Thirty feet in, the close-spaced trees blended to an impenetrable wall.

*Wouldn't it be ironic if there was something in there?* Jere thought. *Something we never found?*

But that didn't matter. He needed to go into town and play the role of the concerned (and now frightened) executive. He'd probably come in on the heels of the first inperson reports on the monster.

But the car wouldn't start. Jerry jiggled the card and tried again. Nothing.

"Your credit account is invalid," the car said, softly. "Please enter or state another account number."

Jere waved his wallet at the dash. "Scan all." Fucking accountants. Probably forgot to fund the Amex account.

"No valid accounts."

"What?"

The car said nothing. Jere toggled on two-way with 411. "What's going on?" he asked.

"There has been a major breach in your façade," a familiar voice said. Richard the dick, of course.

"What happened?"

"One of your hires. A hunter. Decided to talk. The nets are buzzing with how Neteno planted a monster in the woods."

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

"Run Neteno monitor," Jere said, activating his throatmike. His eyepod showed charts peaking on the impersonal, low-credibility axis.

"I know what you're thinking," Richard said. "It's just low-credibility stuff. But this is the biggest breach of confidence we've had yet. This has the potential to grow."

"So why can't I start my car?"

"I'd guess that China National Bank pulled its backing for your short- and long-term credit. Which would freeze pretty much everything."

"Then why didn't you reroute? We have assets! We have alternate credit!"

"I don't work for you," Richard said. "Bark at your employees."

"What do I do? About the leak?"

"I'll see what we can do about that." Richard broke the connection.

Jere tried to get through to Neteno, but their comm network was down. He had a moment to thank the fact that he was too lazy to ever transfer his comm billing to Neteno. Apparently his personal accounts were still good.

"Try again," he told the car. "Use personal accounts of Jere Gutierrez."

"The contract for this vehicle is for Neteno, Inc. Are you authorizing a contract transfer?"

"Yes!"

"Accepted." The car started and idled.

Jere pulled the car onto the highway and floorboarded it, pointing towards town. Then he called Evan.

"I can help," Evan said, his image looking at a wallscreen of Neteno buzz. "This is small time. My swarm can dirtify and negate."

"You think so?" Jere said. Hoping he didn't sound desperate.

"I know so," Evan said. "But this is outside the contract. This is a favor."

*You owe me*, was the implication.

"Do it."

Evan smiled, nodded, and disappeared. Jere, white-knuckled, drove on into the gray sheets of rain.

---

## Credibility

"You want the bull, you get the horns," Evan said. He was full of stupid old expressions like that.

Jere said nothing. They were in the London Underground, a pub-themed restaurant under Sunset that guaranteed no found media had ever been generated in their establishment. They ran discreet wallscreens that monitored their media presence, showing red flatlines.

"We had to tell 411 about Mars," Jere said.

"No we didn't! You panicked! You had to spend a little of your own money, so you just had to pick up the phone. Now, where are we? Fucked."

Jere shook his head. Evan's swarm -- and his public appearances -- put a patch on the Mississippi Monster campaign, so that no rational person would think Neteno had manipulated the reality. But speculation still simmered below the surface, and CNB still had them on a credit freeze. Jere'd dipped into his own funds to keep the Mississippi opps going, and now he was dry and upside-down on all his accounts, and it looked like the sponsors were going to bleed him on the uncertainty angle. Which meant the whole production might not earn out. At least not enough to matter.

*So of course he had to tell 411 about Mars.* He had to tell them they had something else, he had to get their confidence back.

"If your numbers were better, maybe they would've backed us," Jere said.

"My numbers are fine! We got the Russians down, didn't we?"

"I don't know if I trust that contract. And what about all the other stuff? What are they going to do on Mars? What are they going to wear?"

"It doesn't matter."

And Evan was right. Go online, look up 411's investment picks and pans, and there they were, right at the bottom: Neteno, Inc.: Unnamed Space-Based Campaign (Mars). Which meant nobody would back them. Sponsors wouldn't line up. Because everyone looked at risk management first. And if the project wasn't endorsed, it was dead.

"What about Ron?" Evan said, after finishing his Guinness.

"Not a chance." Jere pictured his dad's grave head-shake. *Have to provide for the family and all, ensure their future, you know how that goes.*

"You sure?"

"I'm sure!"

Evan held up a hand and sat back, silent.

*Doesn't anyone take risks anymore?* Jere wondered. Does everything have to be quantified and measured, analyzed and rated? Somehow, they got through the twentieth century without 411, and they'd even had the

radio and TV and internet booms. There had to be someone out there, someone who would take a chance, someone who'd even think 411's recommendation was for pussies, for cowering little men.

*Which we have all become*, he thought, feeling a flush of anger.

"Can't we turn it into a populist campaign?" Jere said. "I mean, there's what, four hundred million people in this country? Or hell, open it up worldwide. A billion people, two bucks each."

Evan sat up, but quickly slumped again. "No. You'll never get a billion. Or ten million to give you two hundred. Not in time. Not before they start wondering what's happening with the money, before the IRS comes in, starts auditing, before it all collapses. You remember the Big Wall?"

"Yeah."

"Same thing."

Jere sighed. They'd even started building it, down on the Mexican border. There were still some rusting steel plates in a few places, where they hadn't been stolen for raw materials.

Something tickled the back of Jere's mind, something from Evan's initial pitch. The way the ideation charts peaked for a certain section of the population, right at the top levels of attention and motivation.

"The rabid fan," Jere said.

Evan sat up again.

"Tell me there aren't big businesses owned by rabid fans."

Evan shook his head. "Wrong profile. Can tell you that right off. You ain't gonna nab Proctor and Gamble or Starbucks by betting the CEO's a geek. More likely technical, software, engineering, stuff like that."

"So?" Jere said. "Maybe they can help us build it, too!"

"They aren't populist, though. Nobody will recognize the logos."

"So what? You think anyone watches this shit for the logos? Come on, Evan, the brandistas have melted your fucking brains."

Evan sat back and nodded. "You may be right. Fuck. Maybe we have them build it, get some momentum, add bigger guys later. Promise them a making-of special, something where all their geeks can smile and show their bad teeth. Yeah. They might even go in bigger, cause they're the ones making it."

Jere leaned over the table, clenching his fists. "And we tell them, right up front, 411 thinks we're crazy, and it'll never work. That they've already dismissed it, filed it away, put it in the shitcan."

"Shitting on their dream," Evan said. "That'll drive them nuts! We do this right, we might be able to get one big fish to finance the whole deal!"

Jere smiled. He didn't know about that. But they had a plan. A good plan.

*I hope it works*, he thought.

---

Fish

They even dressed for the part.

Jere wore a thrift-store white shirt with a thin black tie, ten years out of date, with zero-prescription glasses in the thin-rimmed style of five years ago. Evan wore a sweatshirt with a ragged Linux penguin on it. Jere worried that it was too much, but Evan told him, *It's never too much, that's how these people are.*

Their target was Edward Muchney, of Munchney CarbonWerk, the guys who were trying to get the space elevator working, fer sure, you betcha, just one more test this time. In the meantime they'd managed to get a whole bunch of Asian cities, from Guangzhou to Osaka to Manila, to go for their carbon nanotube high-wire taxis, so you could hire a little car and float across the city, serenely above the packed traffic below. Thousand-foot-high concrete and nanotube pylons, spaced more than a mile apart, held the ultra-tough cable. They'd tried to get LA to buy into the idea a few years ago, but dumb arguments about earthquakes scotched the plan.

But despite the LA setback, word was that Atlanta was gonna buy, and maybe Sao Paolo, and Muchney Carbonwerk was riding high.

Even more importantly, Edward was the peak of the peak of their target audience, a rabid fan who didn't even try to hide it. He owned something like a quarter of Second Life, and half of Third, and probably all of half a dozen VR communities, where he passed out favors, such as flying and private islands, to his friends. He was a member of the Mars Society, the Planetary Society, and the Transhumanists. He'd been to the Russian orbital hotel eleven times, and he'd even tried to negotiate with the Chinese to take him to their base on the moon. He even wrote very bad science fiction that rotted on an old-fashioned textblog he'd last updated in 2017.

Edward was a tall, thin man who sat in a grim aluminum office of a low industrial building in Mojave. He sat back in his creaky old brown-vinyl desk-chair and eyed Jere and Evan suspiciously. He wore two of the latest eyepods, Apple's shiny silver teardrop that promised full retinal coverage and bone-conduction sound in a single package. There were whispers that it was available with either a somatic block, for full-immersion viewing, or even somatic wiring, so the user could experience a full range of sensation in their worlds.

*And if anyone has it, Edward does,* Jere thought.

"I have no social graces," Edward said. Then he stopped. Nothing in the room moved, except for the dancing data reflected from the man's eyes.

Jere was first to speak. "I. Uh. I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"That was a warning," Edward said, closing his eyes. "I'm getting bored."

"Mr. Munchney, I--"

"Why do I have to always do this?" Edward said. "Here. I'll tell you. Get to the point."

"We want you to finance our Mars expedition," Evan said.

Edward leaned forward, his forehead furrowing. "I thought it was that. No."

"But--"

"No."

Jere expected this. He stood up. Dragged Evan to the door, over the other man's protests. He opened the door, paused, and said, softly, "I'm sorry. They win, Evan."

He was halfway through the door when Edward called out, "Who wins?"

Jere didn't dare smile. He turned back to Edward. "The little minds. The safeniks. The crying whining fucking babies who live in their safe little suburbs and keep us from becoming everything we can!" He let his voice rise near the end, and his last "can!" echoed through the barren office.

Silence for a moment. Jere turned and made to leave.

"Wait."

Jere stopped and turned.

"This is all an act."

"No it isn't," Jere said, going back to his seat, leaning forward, his voice low and hard. "Of course, you think it is, because 411 has crammed you full of lies."

"411 is the most reliable information network and risk--"

"You're spouting their fucking slogans!" Jere said.

Edward's mouth clicked shut.

"How did you make it?" Jere said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "By listening to what they said you could do, what was safe?"

"Of course not, but--"

"There's no but. You didn't even give us a chance to show our hand. We were going to tell you that yeah, 411 is against this, they say we're full of crap, they say you'll lose all your money if you throw in. And that's exactly why you should do it."

"Why?"

"Because it's going to work. And Edward Munchney is going to have his name plastered all over our expedition, you're going to be on Mars, standing there, with nobody else!"

Edward said nothing for a long time. He licked his lips. His eyes darted this way and that, scanning realtime data.

*He wanted it, oh he wanted it.*

"The numbers don't make sense," Edward said. "Nobody has any correlations."

"Five years ago, would \$250k for a week in orbit make sense?"

Edward shook his head. "But this is a matter of scale. It's new. Nobody has ever done this before."



*Gotcha.*

"Exactly!" Evan said, coming to stand next to Jere. "The feds promised by 1980. They coulda done it by 1970 with Orion. Then they promised 2018. And the Chinese said they'd do it by 2015. Even the Japanese and the Euros had their timeline. Virgin's made some noises, but they and the Russians are too busy scraping the money out of nouveau-riche assholes to worry about going deeper than orbit. So, who's going to do it?"

Edward just goggled at them. Finally, he reached up and turned off his eyepods, pop, pop, and looked out at them through clear, steady gray eyes. He looked relatively young, in that way that people who never saw the sun looked young. Pasty-white and babylike.

"You call this an expedition. Others are opining game-show," Edward said.

"Does it matter how we get there?"

Edward sighed. "I feel like I'm being manipulated."

"Of course you are!" Jere said. "We're manipulating you. But so is 411. Where would you be, if you made all your decisions based on their recommendations?"

Edward nodded. "The numbers are incredibly loose."

"We know that. This is an evolving thing. But if we commit to this, we can do it. Jere and I have committed. We want you to, as well."

A nod. Then silence. Then: "How much do you want."

"All of it," Jere said. "We're in at two-fifty. We need a billion."

"Not possible."

"Don't you want to go farther than orbit, before you die?" Jere asked. "Wouldn't you like to set foot on Mars yourself? An entire new world, open before you."

"You're offering a slot as a contestant?"

"If that's what it takes."

Edward smiled. "It would have to be more than a contestant, if a whole new world was open before me."

"We--"

"Yes. I know. You'll promise me everything. Stop now. You've convinced me you're for real, despite your really bad costumes. How much do you want? Really?"

"All of it," Evan said.

"Please."

"As much as you can. We have one shot at this. It has to be a big number. A big number gets attention. Attention gets us sponsorship."

"Attention makes the show," Jere said.

"I need to discuss this with my wives," Edward said.

*Oh, shit.*

The Wife Defense. The Real Decision-Maker Ploy. Jere knew they were cooked. Nothing stood against that. He'd seen it a million times, growing up. Dad always hauled that out when he wanted to get rid of you, so he could call you back with a, *Man, I'd do it, but I'm so sorry, the wife just won't let me.*

"I would expect a decision-maker such as yourself--" Evan started. Jere kicked him in the shin.

"I understand," Jere said. "You know how to reach us. Can I ask for a decision by tomorrow?"

Edward nodded. "Of course. I'll let you know. One way or another."

In the car, Evan grabbed Jere by the collar. "You let him go! I could've--"

"You could've done shit," Jere said, pushing Evan back. "He pulled the wife routine. He either wanted us gone, or he really is that whipped. There're other fish."

"We coulda landed him!"

"You want to go back in there?" Jere asked. "Go right ahead. Don't expect to be part of Neteno when you come out."

Evan grumbled, but settled down. Then, the big shit-eating Evan-grin: "Wonder what he meant by 'wives.'"

Back in LA, they found out. Apparently Edward had seventeen wives, one real, and the rest virtual. There was a lot of speculation which of the virtuals were actors and which were just bots. Jere scrolled through the images of Edward's wives, smiling faintly. What a strange world they lived in.

*Since you've shown an interest in Edward Munchney, his earbud whispered, New media is available to purchase.*

A list scrolled in his eyepod:

ARGUMENT WITH BETTY (ARCHIVE, 10 MINUTES AGO)

ARGUMENT WITH PRISCILLA (ARCHIVE, 3 MINUTES AGO)

ARGUMENT WITH SAMIETHA (ONGOING)

AVAILABLE ON GEEK ALERT NETWORK, \$150 EACH

Jere looked at the list, for a moment not knowing how to feel. Then he sucked in his breath. Could that mean what he thought it meant?

He sighed and looked up at the big Neteno sign above his office. And waited.

Seventy minutes later, Edward called.

"I can't do a billion," he said. "But I can do four hundred million. And I may have contacts that can leverage the rest. But I have no social graces."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I don't want to be on camera. But I want to go."

"Get us the rest of the money, consider it done," Jere said.

And then he sat there, not taking the calls from Evan, because this was incredible stuff, this was powerful, this was insane. To trump not one wife but seventeen.

*This is how we do it, he thought. This is the Neteno way.*

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## Length

It was just gonna be another day with Jere, maybe out for a nice little lunch at The Electric Café or another of those places where you were mirrored in the Virt, so she could keep her image out in front of her fans, because after all a retainer was a retainer but popularity was another thing. But Jere turned it into a drive way out into the desert in his little Cadillac SUV, with a photographer who smelled like tequila and liked to lean between the front seats and look down her dress. Probably had a dozen flyeyes flitting about in the SUV, recording every damn thing, but that was something that Jere wouldn't notice, because he was simple that way, the media mogul who really didn't get media at all, didn't understand how they could use your image if you were popular, if you were Rated, if you had a Name.

Just a few publicity stills, he told her. Face in pixels, stuff like that. And that was OK, but Patrice would still rather spend her time with Jere, if not on an island, in a place well away from smelly photographers.

And when they got out to the freezing Mojave, where they had windmills and rockets and stuff, another guy joined them, a really old guy trying to look young, it was always easy to see by their wrists, they might get the hands but they never got the wrists, and dead wrinkled flesh hung there like flesh on a turkey's neck. He smelled funny too, in his own way, a mixture of vitamins and HGH and testosterone and whatever else the salons were pumping into guys these days. Jere introduced him as Evan. Evan gave her a very thorough once-up, once-down, then look-off-into-space-like-I-wasn't-lookin look.

Then with the spacesuit. Patrice took one look at it and shook her head. Like something out of a documentary from the beginning of time. Bright orange, with scuffed metal gauntlets and a helmet that scrunched down to a little silvered faceplate. Patrice held it out.

"I'm supposed to put this on?" she said.

"That's the idea," Jere said, in his I'm-being-patient voice.

"How are they supposed to see my face?"

"Who?" Distracted.

"The viewers!" Patrice said. "Your audience. The people who come to see me."

Dead silence. The wind kicked up right then, making Patrice's hair fly out of place. She brushed it back, hoping this crap was over soon.

"Just try it on."

She did, making a point to put it on over her clothes, so perv-boy photo-man wouldn't have any more flyeye pix to wallpaper his room with. Posting them, fine. But when she might be in some private gallery, no.

The suit smelled like an old man had died and been buried in shrink-wrap. From the men's expressions, it looked about as good as a Neo-Young-Earther's padded coveralls. She crammed the helmet on her head, tried to take a breath, and quickly took it off.

The three men stood, hands on hips, frowning. The oh-shit-it-didn't-work look.

"She does have a point," Jere said.

Evan frowned. "I still think we need to let the selection process run its course," Evan said. "Starting in the, uh, institutions."

"Don't change the subject. We're here for publicity images. We can't use this."

"Nobody's going to pay to see me running around in this," Pamila said.

"And how do we identify the teams?" Jere said. "Numbers? Man oh man, how boring. Even guys in marathons, you can see their faces."

"We haven't yet decided on the events," Evan said.

Jere waved him away, as if swatting a fly. "This just isn't working. We can't use it. Not even for publicity.

"Isn't there a better-looking spacesuit? I've seen movies where they look good," Pamila said.

Jere laughed. "Problem is, those're movies. This is real life. Those suits'd kill you--"

Jere kicked Evan in the shin. Pamila laughed. Like she didn't know it was going to be dangerous. They both looked at her. Evan leaned up against the SUV and looked off into space.

"Sorry," Jere said, coming up to her.

"You'll make it up to me."

A brief grin.

Evan came over. "There might be an answer. Mechanical compression suits. There's a fossil article about them on space.com and some follow-up. They might've made some progress on them."

"Great!" Jere said. "You're in charge of looking into it."

"Best thing, if they work, they'd be real cheap."

Jere gave Evan an STFU look. Pamila laughed again. They both looked at her as if she'd grown a boob on her forehead.

"It's dangerous," she said. "I know."

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## Inheritance

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Getting the call at midnight, with Patrice lying next to him, was one of those moments. When you reach out for your eyepod as it does its little shrill-and-dance, and hesitate, because you know it isn't Evan, or some dumbass telemarketer in Bombay that got his time zones wrong.

His hand almost tingled. *This is bad news*, it seemed to say. *Leave it for morning. Don't pick it up.*

But of course he'd picked it up.

And there was Ron--dad--crying into the phone, his voice low and hoarse. Saying, *I thought she was sick. Saying, The doctors asked when she had her heart attack. Saying, And I said, what heart attack. I thought it was flu and she thought it wasn't anything and by the time I took her in, it was too late, too late.*

Jere didn't remember driving to the hospital. He remembered the deserted 3:00AM parking lot, and the look the all-too-human lobbydroid gave him. That knowing look.

Seeing her laying there, in that half-darkened room, mouth open, still, so still, not here anymore... Jere closed his eyes. Wishing he could scour his eyes with steel wool, wanting to turn his eyepod to the happy-stupid channels, get a somatic wire installed, and forget the pain, the loss, the void.

He cried. They took him to a sterile little room, like a conference room at a low-rent manufacturing outfit.

*Mom's gone.*

It made no sense. None. The built-in treatments in every cigarette...

*Didn't always work*, said the doctors.

And if you started on the new formula, it was like quitting, almost, like a clean slate...

*Except she might not be smoking the new ones*, the docs said.

Mom, at sixty-seven, was gone.

Dad came in then, like he planned it. "I can't get ahold of your sister," he said.

Suddenly, rage. Why couldn't she be here? Why couldn't she be available? Was she out fucking her husband on some goddamned beach? And dad, coming in, as if Jere'd be ready.

Jere wailed and went at him, but somehow in my lunge my hands turned from taloned claws looking to shred to soft and helpless hands wrapped around him in an embrace. Jere cried against his heaving chest, and realized:

*Dad's crying. Dad is crying.*

That scared Jere more than anything. He pushed away and went to collapse in the chair again. It creaked once, a loud cry in the still room.

"I'm sorry," dad said.

"For what?"

Nothing. Jere thought he wasn't going to say anything. Then, through a sob, "I should've taken the damn things away from her. I should've put in cameras. I should've gone to therapy with her, anything to get her to stop!"

"Sixty-seven," Jere said.

"Yes, sixty-seven, sixty-seven, sixty-fucking-seven! I should've been the one who went." Dad shook a hand at the ceiling. "Fucking God bastard, shoulda taken me!"

"Dad."

"It's true. The shit I've done--"

"Stop!"

"I can say--"

"Shut up!" Jere yelled.

Dad closed his mouth with a click, and gave Jere a strange look, almost anger, almost respect. He shook his head and went over to put a hand on Jere's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So am I."

There were no forms, no retinal prints, nothing. They asked if we had planned for a funeral. Then we were out in the chill April night, with the mist swirling around the orange sodium lamps.

Mom was gone.

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Rumor

"Fuck you, Evan." Jere yelled, once he'd escaped deep into the house. "You ever lose family?"

"Not much of a family guy," Evan said.

"And you never had any friends, you goddamned crocodile?"

Silence.

"You musta had friends. What, hey, you dinosaur? How old are you, anyway?"

"None that mattered," Evan said, in a low, dangerous voice.

"Evan. This is a wake. For my mother. I'll be back on the job tomorrow."

"I just thought you'd want to know the good news. Richard Perez is joining our team. Evan's image was joined by canned video of the dataspook from 411, saying, "I'm amazed by what you're doing with our data. The way you're cross-correlating it, identifying the strong antis, hitting them with specific stuff, this is great, I'm happy to work with you."

Business crashed down on Jere, like a shipping container full of Volkswagens. "He's just gonna take our ideas."

"So?" Evan said. "He's already spreading rumors about how 411 is sandbagging our project, and as an insider they have a veracity index of 0.83. We already have bites from a couple-a not-gonnas. We need to schedule meetings."

"Not today."

"No. But. It's, like, great news."

"Great. Now leave me alone."

Jere clicked off his eyepod, hard off, no network access at all. What he should've done in the first place. But no matter how good Evan's news, it didn't make the program whole. They had maybe three-quarters the funds they said they needed, which was probably less than half the funds they really needed. And after the first whales, the rest of them were bargainners. And Jere didn't know how many times he could sell logos on the outside of the ship and featurettes and exclusive rights before the whole mess collapsed. Especially now that the Russians were saying, well, yeah, we were a little, um, overenthusiastic about our delivery dates, and if you want to run it in 2020, you're gonna have to forget that, we're looking at 2021 now.

So, back out to the great room, where the perfect April day was at odds with the downcast glances and low tones of the guests. Wakes were supposed to be happier times, moving-on times, but the hurt was still too immediate. Dad sat in a big, tall-backed, very uncomfortable-looking chair in a corner. He'd always hated it, but Mom had stopped him from ever throwing it out. He seemed to be almost folded in on himself, packaged and parceled and ready to be put away.

*Last time you saw him here, you wanted him dead, Jere's mind whispered. So his assets could be free.*

Jere shook his head to dislodge the terrible thought. He hadn't really wanted his dad dead. No. Not really.

Eventually, he went over to see the old man. White stubble coated his cheeks, as if he'd forgotten to shave. Ron looked up at Jere with jittery eyes.

"How you holding up?" Jere said.

"Good, good."

Silence.

"No. Bad. Want this to be over."

"I can send everyone home," Jere said.

"No. They have to be here. It's OK."

"Are you going to be ok, here alone?"

A nod. "I'm never alone," Ron said. "There's the housekeeper, the cook, the gardeners..."

"You know what I mean."

Finally, the glimmer of a smile. "You don't have to send the men in white coats and hide the knives, if that's what you're asking."

Jere shook his head. "Not exactly."

Dad looked up. "How are you doing?"

"Angry."

A nod. "Business-wise."

"You don't want to know that. You don't need to know that. Not now."

"If I think about that, I don't think about Estancia."

"Great. Business is great."

Silence. Then: "You're a terrible liar."

"What do you want me to say? Things are crap? We can't meet our budget? We haven't landed enough suckers? Evan's calling me at mom's wake with our latest hope -- rumors?" Words poured out of Jere. "On top of the Mississippi thing, the CNB thing, and our steadily-dropping 411 rating? You really want to hear that?"

A wry smile. "Ain't business grand?"

"No."

"You could fake the whole thing. Put 'em all up in a Brazilian resort, send up a couple dummy rockets, run it in CG. Someone did that, like, what, fifteen years ago or so."

"No." Jere said.

"Nobody'd know the difference."

"I would. No. We aren't going to fake it."

Ron was silent for a long time. When he looked back up at Jere, there was something in his eyes, something like that time Jere'd told him to shut up. Almost respect.

"You're an idealist."

"Yes."

"Ideallists get run over in the street, insisting they have the right of way."

"Yes."

Silence again. Then dad chuckled. Almost a real, genuine laugh. Jere wanted to ask him what it meant.

But he didn't.

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Killing



A week later, dad had Jere and Evan both come to the house. Evan tried to guess the why all the way there, chattering in Jere's earbuds like the prototypical Aunt Gossip. *He's going to try to buy the company*, he said. *He's going to try to talk you out of the show*, he said.

Dad was sitting out on the upstairs balcony, looking out over Los Angeles. April had gotten warmer, and he was wearing an old short-sleeved T-shirt that was inscribed with the name of some long-dead band, Weezer, which looked like a bunch of skinny geeks that would sooner be beaten up than be rock stars. He glanced at Evan, smiled at Jere, and said:

"I want in."

For a long time, there was no sound except the rush of traffic from the freeway, far below. Ron smiled and looked from Jere to Evan and back again, as if they were all old friends.

"You want in on what?" Jere said.

"The show. Winning Mars."

"Is that what we're calling it?"

"Sure. Why not. It's what it is, isn't it? Winning Mars."

Jere risked a glance at Evan. Evan, open-mouthed, looked back at Jere.

"You want in?"

"Yes. Hello! Is my own boy thick, or what? I. Would. Like. To. Become. An. Investor. Thank you."

"What about the family?"

"What about them?"

"Their security! Your money!"

Ron looked away and was silent for a long time. Then: "I want in."

*Ah. No explanation. The assumptive thing. Dad wants in, so you let him in.*

"What if we don't want you in," Jere said. Beside him, Evan made a little gasp of protest.

"So everything has magically turned?" Ron said. "Everything is sunshine and roses? In one short week?"

"We don't need your help." Jere could sense Evan staring at him. But he didn't understand. If dad was in, there was no way he could ever look at the old man and say, *I did this myself*.

*But what are your alternatives?* Jere asked himself. Neteno was a long way from sunshine and roses. A long, long way.

"I can help," Ron said. "I can invest. I can bring investors. I might even be able to sway the banks. I have reserves. Why don't you want to use them."

Dad, pleading. As alien as dad, crying.

"May I talk with my business partner alone?" Evan said.

"Of course."

Jere followed Evan, even though he knew what he was going to say.

"We need his help," Evan said. "Might as well pack it in now if we don't have it."

"I know."

"Then why are you being such a dick?"

"I just... you wouldn't understand."

Evan leaned close. "Take his help."

"Or we can fake it," Jere said, softly.

Evan paused for a moment, then looked at Jere intently. "Yes. We could. I can call Virtefx and we can stage the whole thing. Do you want me to do that?"

Matter of fact. Like it didn't make any difference. That was Evan. *If it makes me powerful and its cheaper and I can use someone else's money then that's fine, let's do it, call it a day, and be done with it.*

But that wasn't what Neteno was like. Neteno was going against the popular wisdom, using data in different ways, taking chances. That was what Neteno was about.

"No," Jere said.

Evan waited, tapping his foot on the hardwood floor.

"We'll take the money," Jere said.

"Yeah!" Evan said, pumping a fist in the air.

"Don't be so happy."

"Why not?"

"Now it's not our show. It's dad's."

Evan shrugged. "Depends on his percentage, doesn't it?"

Jere laughed. "You don't understand at all."

They went back to Ron, who hadn't moved from the balcony. As if he was expecting this. As if he planned this. He smiled at them and said he envisioned them having a great business partnership. And he was happy to be getting back into it, after so many years.

Jere accepted with as large a smile as he could. It felt like his face was being stretched in strange and terrible dimensions.

"So what do the contestants look like?" Ron said.

And there went the afternoon.

## TWO: AUDITION

Paul

Keith Paul woke that morning, staring at the cracked and rain-stained ceiling of his cell, and thought, one hundred ninety one days.

*I could do that standing on my head.*

Still, one hundred and ninety-one days of staring at the ceiling, eating bologna and white bread sandwiches, smelling the farts of Jimmy Jiminez in the bunk below him after a dinner of bland beans and fried chicken, and squinting at the sun for a couple of hours a day in the exercise yard was one hundred and ninety one days he would spend not in a bar, not in his own apartment, not with Jimmy Ruiz and Keira Montoya and Britney Jackson and George White, not with the open road before him beckoning.

He licked his lips. *Freedom.*

Of course, one of his friends might have been put away. He didn't like to use the computers here. They looked at everything. And, every once in a while, they'd call you away and say, you know, that stuff you were selling didn't really exist. And oh by the way, you have won another six months in our establishment. Or no, you only thought you got into the cam network. Don't try again. One more year for you. And half the readers didn't work anyway.

Or they might have a good game. One that would work this time. If they hadn't been so greedy last time, they probably could've milked that offshore bank-spoof for another year. Maybe enough to step away. Maybe enough to be satisfied.

*One hundred ninety one days.* He could remember that. He was always good at math. Numbers weren't bad. Unlike letters, which would slip away when made into words.

The snailmail guy came down the corridor, banging once on the steel bars in case anyone was asleep. Keith ignored him. He never got any snailmail. That was for the guys not smart enough to get out before they got old. He stared at the ceiling thought, for the millionth time, of what he was going to do when he got out. Find the nearest bar. Jaeger. Unless Keira or Jimmy would pick him up. Find a decent terminal with an earpiece so he could listen in private. That would be a good enough start.

*Bang!* The bars clanged.

Keith sat up in bed, almost striking his head on the ceiling. Jimmy looked up at him from the bunk below and shrugged. The asshole guard -- a new one, Keith didn't recognize him, but they cycled in and out quickly -- with his stupid little paper-cart pointed at him. Keith.

"Got the wrong guy," Keith said.

"Nope. It's for you." Asshole mail-guard shoved a big, thick envelope through the bars and waggled it impatiently.

Keith hopped down off the bunk and reached for it. The guard drew it back, fast, through the bars. "Not so

quick. Sign first."

Keith took the little notepad and scrawled the little house-with-family that served as his signature. Asshole mailguard looked at the glowing sketch on the screen, then to the big envelope, then to Keith, and waggled his eyebrows.

*Yeah, fuck you, I can't read*, Keith thought. But he said nothing. Guards talked to guards. He didn't need to get on their shitlist. Or one hundred ninety one days would become three hundred seventy four days in a real big hurry.

Asshole guard shoved the package at Keith. "Enjoy that now," he said.

"Fuck you," Keith said, when asshole guard had gone on down to the next cell.

"What is it?" Jimmy said.

"I don't know," Keith said. The envelope was already open. Keith shook his head. Like they could send him a paper gun, or cardboard knife. He reached in, pulled out a quarter inch of cheap paper, fronted by one creamy-smooth sheet with a familiar logo on it: the stylized Neteno "N", above an old-timey media player timeline.

"So what is it?" Jimmy said, coming to look over his shoulder.

"Something from Neteno." The rest of the pages were filled with close-packed text, with numbers in front of every paragraph. Keith recognized that. It looked like stuff he signed when he got credit cards. A legal contract.

But card contracts didn't have thirty-eight pages.

*Click*. Something connected in Keith's mind. *The kiosk. That was it. Their wacky show*. Almost six months ago, the guards had brought in a shiny aluminum kiosk, like the kind they use for making alibis to your wife or girlfriend. It had a deep purple camera-eye on an articulated stalk and a big flatscreen. They'd set it up in the lunchroom for about a week and let people talk to it. While it was flanked by Richey and Washington, the two most assholish guards in the entire prison.

There was always a big line for it. The dudes who'd talked to it said the girl they talked to was smoking hot. But that could be a chatterbot. So Keith had ignored it for six days.

Then Washington and Richey came to get him. They dragged him in front of the kiosk, where the purple camera-eye followed him, like some creepy alien in a sci-fi show.

"You want pretty boys, here's the prettiest," Richey told the girl on the screen.

Keith smiled. He knew he was good-looking. The girls always liked him. They said he had broad shoulders and a Dudley Do-Right chin, whatever that was. They were always wanting him to take off his shirt and walk through the house like that.

And the one on screen was noticing, too. She was a cute little blonde, that white-blonde like you see from some Swedish girls in the pornos. Keith wondered what color her bush was. Not smoking hot like everyone said, but nice, with a round face and full pink lips. The monitor cut off just before her tits.

She looked him up and down. The purple alien eyeball followed her gaze. She looked at him for a long time,

her mouth slightly parted.

"So why do you want to be a contestant for Winning Mars?" she asked.

"Is that what you ask all the men?" Keith said, sliding into his sexy-deep voice. Even though he couldn't read, he'd always had a wonderful ability to parrot. It had kept him from being thrown out of many hotels he shouldn't have been in.

The girl laughed. "Actually, yes."

"I'm afraid we haven't been formally introduced."

The girl paused, and her eyes widened, just for an instant.

Point to me, Keith thought.

"I'm Cassandra Wasserman," she said. "And you are?"

"Master Keith Paul, at your service." He gave her a comedically low bow. The eye followed him. He had a sudden urge to snap it off its arm.

She giggled. "You're courteous, at least."

At that moment, something passed between Richey and Washington. They looked at each other, bottom lips slack as if held down by invisible fishing-sinkers.

"Hey, step it up!" Washington said. "There're other suckers."

"Yeah, get to the point," Richey said.

Cassandra cleared her throat. The camera turned to look at the guards. They crossed their arms and tried to look tough.

She turned the camera back on Keith. "So, why do you want to be a contestant?"

"It is my highest ambition, dear lady! Anything to be next to your radiance!"

Another laugh. "I'm not going."

"Then I shall hear none of it! I refuse!"

"You don't want to be a contestant?" Cassandra looked disappointed.

"Not if it takes me out of your sight."

She shook her head. "I don't know what to think of you. But I like. Can I put you down on the list?"

"If it makes you happy, yes."

"Great!"

"Are you done yet?" Washington said, hanging over the screen.

"Yes," Cassandra said.

"Goodbye, fair one," Keith said.

Washington came around to escort him back to his lunch, glowering with promised future revenge. "What was with all the flowery-talk?"

Keith just shrugged.

"Fucking ham."

"Sometimes the spirit--"

"Ah, shut up," Washington said, pushing him down onto the bench. Keith let him do it. He watched Richey and Washington drag a few more guys over, but the shadow of Cassandra's face never seemed to smile as much as it had for him.

*She liked me.*

But what had she said? Winning Mars?

Keith shook his head. He only had three hundred and fifty seven days before he got out of East Valley Correctional. That was what mattered, not some tart in a box.

"It's the show!" Jimmy cried, bringing Keith back to the present. "You're on the show!"

"What show?"

"Winning Mars."

"What's that?"

Jimmy's face closed up, like he'd just bit a lemon. "You don't know what it is, and they want you?"

"Just tell me."

"It's a reality show."

"Reality show? Like, old-time TV?"

"Yeah. They're bringing it back. But they're going to space. To Mars."

"To Mars? The planet?" Keith felt something like a cold hand grip his guts and twist. And they were picking prisoners? That meant everyone was gonna die. And there was probably no way out of it. He riffled through the meaningless words.

"Whatsa matter?" Jimmy asked.

"Mars? Space? They're sending us to die."

Jimmy looked surprised, as if he'd never thought of that. "But if they pick you, you get out early."

*Early? As in less than one hundred ninety one days? Keith stood up straighter. And if he was out, that didn't mean he had to go on the flight. They might not even put him in a real jail.*

"What does it say?" Keith said, handing the documents to Jimmy. Jimmy looked at it and shook his head. Pointed at the camera in the cell. "Sorry, man. Too many assholes watching. I tell you the wrong thing, they have my nuts."

"What'm I supposed to do?"

"Take it to the library," Jimmy said.

"We have a library?"

Jimmy just looked at him and shook his head.

At lunch, Keith discovered they did have a library. It was staffed by a young guy with a big mop of black hair who was actually reading an old-fashioned book. He took one look at Keith's papers and shook his head.

"You lucky fuck," he said. "Reader's over there."

The reader was an old cranky thing that didn't even explain the big words. But it did tell Keith he was accepted as a contestant on a show called Winning Mars, and if he signed the papers, he would be out of jail in a week.

There were lots of words he didn't understand, but he didn't care. He took a real live pen from his real live librarian and signed his little house-and-family mark to it.

Seven days. Seven was better than one hundred ninety one. And he was sure he wouldn't have to go to Mars.

Not a chance.

---

Play

Ron made them fly out to Detroit, sketching on napkins the whole way. Jere sat back and closed his eyes, willing sleep. *This is dad, turning my shit into his own*, he thought. Evan leaned forward and asked questions, as if he was really interested.

"Why GM?" Evan asked. "Aren't they #2?"

"Two or three," Ron said. "Doesn't matter."

"Why not Toyota as a sponsor?"

"These aren't sponsors."

"What are they?" Evan asked.

"Partners."

"What's the difference?"

"Partners're gonna develop technology. Plus pay for logos."

"So why not go #1, get Toyota?"

"Don't know anyone at Toyota. And I'm in no mood for Japanese politeness. I don't need someone smiling and saying yes, yes, yes, when they really mean 'get the fuck out of my office, you uncultured roundeye asshole.'"

A pause. Then, Evan's voice: "So you know someone at GM?"

"Several someones."

Evan shut up for a while, then started asking questions about the sketches. Jere tried not to listen, but the words crept into his brain.

He still didn't know why they couldn't stick with the original plan of dropping everyone on Mars and having them run a course to a specified endpoint. As in, on foot. Throw some cliffs in there, and you have a good show.

The only problem with that, the tech geeks told him, was they only had guesses as to which cliffs might be passable, so he might end up with five teams all staring up at a big vertical wall, marooned. Plus, then the team with the best physical strength and stamina would win. And it wouldn't be much of a team thing then, either, unless they did some really stupid stuff like make two of them carry a third.

And, of course, a footrace wasn't good enough for dad. He took one look at the plans and got out a red pen. A real red pen. He printed stuff, marked it up, sketched on napkins. He wanted some kind of rolling thing people could drive, like a 4x4. He wanted something that people had to fly. He wanted them to put the stuff together, and for the assembly to be part of the time. And he wanted an on-foot part too. Five different routes.

The Russians looked at the suggestions, howled about having to do five different drops, and raised the price. Ron offered to fund the increase.

And that was, finally, when Evan looked at Jere and mouthed, *I see what you mean*.

And Jere mouthed back, *I told you so*.

And dad showed them his flyeye footage of their silent conversation, and said he'd appreciate a little more respect next time.

"After Detroit, we can head to Chicago," Dad said.

"Why?" Evan said.

"Talk to Boeing."

"You know someone there, too?"

"No."

Evan said nothing.

When they got up to the Renaissance Center, though, Ron's friend, Henried Wenger, the Senior Vice President of Vehicle Development, Specialty Division, North America, who was a squat fireplug of a man who looked like he'd been poured into his seventeen-thousand-dollar suit, just shook his head.



"Mars? Are you kidding? How much are you expecting to pay?"

Ron looked surprised. "I... I think this is an excellent way for you to show the reliability of your vehicles in tough environments. Imagine what it would do for your image."

Henried's expression went dark. "So you're expecting us to pay?"

"It's an unprecedented promotional opportunity. I'm sure if we could talk to the right people in marketing, they'd fund it."

"I'm sure if you could talk to marketing, they'd tell you to go pound sand," Henried said. "This new experiential advertising... they aren't spending much on new programs. Put a few cameras in cars, give em away, pay an editor, call it a day. It's too easy. Plus, the fanboy-rallying's always good."

"I really wish you'd consider what you're giving up," Ron said. "When Pathfinder ran reliably far past its rated life, do you know what that did for NASA's image?"

"Jack. They ain't around today, aren't they?"

Ron shut his mouth with an audible click. Jere had to stifle a smile. Seeing his dad shut down was funny, but it also meant a door had just closed in his face.

"We'll have to take it around," Ron said. "Toyota. DaimlerChrysler."

A shrug. Then a sigh. "Ron, I'd like to. I really would. If it was my decision alone, I'd do it. But they're just looking at budgets too close these days. If that means you have to shop it, shop it."

"I'd really rather it be here."

Another shrug, and a perfectly manicured smile, somehow sad.

"Think on it," Ron said. "We'll call back tomorrow."

"The answer'll be the same."

Out on the pavement, on the muggy August day, Ron stamped his foot and clenched his hands into fists.

"Fucker!" he said. "He's still pissed about that little expose I did, a million years ago."

"What was it?" Jere asked. "Can we use it?"

Ron looked at him. "At least you're thinking in the right direction. But no. It's not a big deal now. Employee sexworkers."

"At GM?"

"No, at a big law firm he used to be at."

Evan stirred. "He was a lawyer?"

"Yeah, why?" Ron asked.

"You aren't gonna sell a program like this to a lawyer. He's thinking about how many ways his friends in GM legal can hang his ass."

"So? And I suppose you know someone better to talk to?"

Evan smiled. It was a slow, terrible thing. "As a matter of fact, I do."

Ron did an almost picture-perfect double-take. "Why didn't you say so before?"

"You never asked."

Ron turned around and headed for the RenCen again. He stopped when nobody followed. "What are you waiting for? Let's get back in there."

"This guy, you don't meet in an office."

"Who is he?"

Evan shrugged. "An ops guy, but a higher-up. But he doesn't meet in his office. Not if you want to do real business."

Ron sucked air through his teeth. "Golfcourseware," he said.

"Not exactly," Evan said. "More like stripclubware. And we aren't selling CRM, anyway."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jere said.

The two older men looked at him, shook their heads, and went back to their conversation.

Which is how they ended up in Fast Eddie's, a shitty little strip club built into the usable half of a half-burned apartment building in downtown Detroit. Tattered "Urban Renovation" banners hung from the roof. A multicolored neon sign hung in one cracked window.

"He comes here?" Ron said, looking doubtful.

Inside, though, the runway was beautiful polished marble, and the bar was a chrome and glass artwork. And the girls were as perfect as surgery could make them. Flyeye-zappers popped in every corner of the bar, and heavy lead-foil offered some proof against line-of-sight wireless. Jere made himself drink a single beer, slowly, away from the dancing flesh. They made Patrice look like the girl next door.

Their whale came in at 10:30, and a whale he was. He was a large African-American man wearing a gold-trimmed red jogging suit and a very large gold Rolex.

"That's him?" Ron said, when Evan pointed him out.

"Yep."

"What is he, a mob boss or something?"

"Oh ye of little faith. Just remember this is a chance meeting. Take my lead. Don't go off-script."

Ron just looked at him.

"Got it?"

"Ye-es," Ron said, drawing it out.

"Go," Evan said. He stood up and threw open his arms in a big expression of surprise. "Thalos!" he shouted. "Thalos Winnfield, is that you?"

Thalos looked up, frowned for a moment, then broke into a big gold grin. He stood and lumbered towards Jere, in that strange and graceful way that very large people have. They met in the middle of the room, a collision of flesh, with Ron and Jere orbiting like little moons.

"Evan! What brings you back?"

Evan looked sheepish. "Business, actually."

"Business? With who?"

"You, actually."

"Me, Thalos?"

"You, GM."

"What you doing with us?"

"Nothing," Evan said. "Let me introduce my colleagues--"

"Wait. Nothin?"

"Thalos, it doesn't matter. Probably best we go to Toyota anyway. This is Ron Gutierrez--"

Thalos held up a big hand. "Wait! Wait! Toyota? What's this shit?"

"Well, they have motivation. The Chinese on the moon and all... Thalos, this is a long story."

"And I want to hear it," Thalos said, gathering Evan in one big arm and herding him towards his table.

When they were situated and introductions made, Thalos ordered a bottle of thirty-year Macallan and sat back. "So what's this crap about Toyota?"

"Thalos, it doesn't matter. You probably wouldn't be interested, anyway. I bet GM engineering has its hands full, just trying to keep up."

A nod. "You said it. Hybrids, hydrogen, fuel cells, E85, geez, whatever happened to good old gas? But you're still gonna tell me what you're doing."

"We're sending people to Mars, and we need vehicles for them to drive."

Thalos's face went completely slack for several long moments. Then he guffawed. "Oh. Man. You had me going."

"No. We're serious."

"Wait. Wait. You work for NASA now? I thought you were just a Hollywood asshole."

"I'm still a Hollywood asshole."

"No. Wait. Wait. Hollywood is taking us to Mars, and you want to buy GM cars to drive there?"

"No. We want you to design the vehicles. And pay us for it."

Thalos sat back, suddenly serious. "You're not kidding."

"No."

Silence for a time. "Fuck. Wow. You're right. Toyota would do it just to spit in the Chink's eyes. Which means we gotta do it instead."

"Can you?"

"Tell the engineers it can't be done, and stand back."

"But can you get it approved? On the up and up?"

Thalos nodded. "Yeah. Shit, you should see the money we piss away for schools and their engineering programs. Yeah. We can do it."

Evan gave a sigh of relief. "We have a deal?" He held out his hand.

Thalos's hand ate Evan's. "Deal. Come by tomorrow, we'll talk to the techies. Fair warning. Whatever you get won't look like a car."

"We're not expecting it will."

They stayed. They drank. They groped. And, when it was all done, Ron asked Evan, "What does Thalos do?"

"As little as possible," Evan said.

"What's his title?"

"Senior Executive Vice President, Vehicle Line Assembly and Liason, Reformed UAW."

"Can we trust him?"

Evan smiled. "If he says it can be done, it'll be done."

And indeed, the next day, they had ink on paper, and even a publicity release. Jere could already see the press release. *GM Sponsors Mars Shot*, or something like that.

And it was great seeing old Ron shut down.

But it made him feel even more lost, between two great men.

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Patrice

Patrice's locator found Jere at the Porsche dealer, buying one of their new little gumdrop-cars. Patrice wrinkled her nose. She never understood what Jere saw in the stupid things. They were expensive, but they were uncomfortable, and small, and loud, and fitting any kind of luggage in them was nearly impossible, which meant he had to take the little Caddy SUV on long trips anyway, and...

But that didn't matter. She got in her own little Kia and paid maxtax to take the Fast405 down to Newport Beach, pushing the warnings that flashed when she hit 88 miles an hour, threatening tickets for another mile an hour over. It cost her over \$160 to go from Westwood to Newport, but it was worth it, because she caught him, stylus poised over a signscreen, with a rack-suited salesman trying to hide a grin, behind his big aluminum desk.

"What're you buying?" Patrice asked.

Jere dropped the pen and looked up, eyes wide like a kid who got peeking up skirts. "I, uh..."

"I thought you had to save money."

"He qualified," the salesman said, giving Patrice his god-I-hate-wives-and-girlfriends look. He picked up the stylus and held it out to Jere, but Jere ignored it, looking at Patrice.

"I thought everything was going to your show," Patrice said.

"This doesn't matter," Jere said, looking down at the desk. His voice was soft and rough and low. His I-just-had-a-fight-with-dad voice.

"Ron?"

Jere snapped back to look up at her. "Not this time."

"What, then?"

He looked at the salesman, then back to her. "It doesn't matter."

Patrice glared at him. She hated Jere when he got this way. He was a pusher, a thinker, someone who'd made himself into a big man. But he had these times when he just got into that fatalistic funk, that oh-woe-is-me shit, that she couldn't stand.

She crossed her arms. "I got another offer."

Jere looked at her. Sighed. Stood up. "Let's talk outside."

The salesman leapt out of his seat, as if spring-loaded. "Wait a minute! Aren't you going to sign?"

"I'll be back."

"Then why not sign now, get the final prep started--"

"No."

A frown. "I don't know if I can guarantee you the price that I quoted if--"

Jere paused at the door and turned back to the salesman. "I'll be back. I'll sign. And it won't be a dollar more."

The salesman shut up. Patrice smiled. That was more like it. That was her Jere.

Outside the dealer, by the candy-colored jelly-bean cars, Jere turned to face her. "What is this shit?"

"Fuck you, Jere!"

"Fuck me, what?"

"You won't talk to me like that. Like I'm just an employee! We got more than that!"

Jere clenched his fists, and his face went a deep purple-red. "Patrice, you *are* an employee."

"Not just. Not *just*!"

Jere rolled his eyes. She knew what he was thinking, all the old phrases about mixing business with pleasure, dipping the pen in the company ink. "Look," she said. "I got an offer. A good one. I have to consider it."

"You're getting paid scale."

"Yeah, but not scale plus expenses and residuals."

Jere frowned. "Who is it?"

"Glitchwerke."

"The sequel to their 'Ten Days in Africa' interactives?" Jere said.

"I hate it when you use that damn eyepod."

"I know."

Patrice crossed her arms and said nothing. Let him stew. Let him download all the financials and run the analysis and try to tell her it wouldn't pay residuals. It was a job, in front of a camera, getting her face out in the world. Not waiting for something that might never happen.

"We can't pay you more," Jere said.

"But you can buy a Porsche."

"We have to pay the other contestants, and Dad's got plans for Mars, and Evan's still trying to get Boeing to fold, and I'm spending on the Russians--"

"Other contestants?"

A nod. "Yeah. You didn't think the show was just going to be you, did you?"

"You said I would be the only actor on Mars!"

"You will be. The rest are just schmoes. Hell, the only confirmed so far is a convict."

"You're using convicts?" Patrice heard her voice rise into a screech.

Jere held up his hands. "Just a couple. Most're just gonna be schmoes."

"But I'll win."

"Your team. Maybe."

"Who's on my team?"

"We don't know yet. We're still taking contestants."

"I don't get to pick them?"

A sigh. Jere put his hands on his hips. "Frankly, Patrice, no."

"So now it won't be just me that wins. And there's gonna be others on the show. Convicts, even. You aren't making me want to exactly, like, leap on the rocket."

Jere grinned. "And, in a couple of months, we start training in the high desert."

"Desert? In the summer?"

"It'll be winter by then," Jere said.

"So I'll freeze."

"Wear heavy clothes."

Patrice felt tears welling. She stamped her foot. "This isn't funny, Jere!" she said. "This isn't funny at all. I have an offer, a real offer, and I have to make a decision."

"Based on profitability analysis, I doubt if Twenty Days In Africa will make residuals."

"I knew you were going to say that!"

Jere looked at her with hard little eyes. There was silence for a long time. Finally, he said, "Patrice, I understand you want to get out in front of the audience. Maybe we could step up pre-publicity--"

"There hasn't been any publicity!"

"Exactly. So if there is some, and your face is on the cover, is that enough?"

"It's not like being in a major interactive."

"And being in a moderately-sized, mundane-experience interactive is nothing like being able to say that you're the only actor to have ever been on Mars."

Patrice frowned. Jere had a point there. It was the key, the differentiator, the thing that would make the casting directors sit up and say, *Wow, we have to have her.*

And how many actors would line up behind her, if she stepped out.

She smiled. Fucking Jere. So smart. So smart at that.

"Now can I go buy my car?" Jere said.

"It won't be that easy," Patrice said.

"What does that mean?"

"You're going to have to shower me with gifts. Chocolate. Dinners. You may even have to pay attention to me."

Jere's tense pose softened. "Of course I will."

"I mean it!"

"I will. But first, let me get myself a gift."

She let him go back into the dealership, thinking, *Asshole*. Thinking, *Brilliant asshole*. Thinking, *You just threw away a real gig*.

She looked up at the clear blue sky. If it was night, she'd have Jere point out Mars.

---

Real

*I can't believe I'm doing this again*, Jere thought, as the chill Russian stewardess strapped him down into the vinyl schoolbus-seat of the hotel shuttle. The cabin still smelled of raw aluminum and grease, and, faintly, of puke. Jere wondered if it could still be his.

This time, he was the only one on board.

The stewardess made sure his belts were tight and went forward into the pilot's cabin. When she didn't come out, Jere realized she wasn't a stewardess. She was a pilot. Just Jere and the Russian ice queen, headed for the Hilton-RusSpace hotel. In the interactives, a setup for a kinky time with the ice queen. In reality, Jere's hands were too slick with sweat and his heart was pounding much too fast to think about any kind of tryst. He could think about only one thing: Kevin Cho.

Jere'd watched the Kevin Cho thing evolve over the last few weeks with half an eye. Thinking, *I wonder if Neteno can do something with this*. Knowing it would be dangerous in the wake of the Mississippi thing.

Kevin was a biological virtuoso. He'd been the one to design the little mini-Godzillas that swept Japan and the United States. From lizards, or something. But they stood up on their hind legs and waved their little arms at the kids, and even voiced tiny little cries that were high-pitched echoes of Godzilla's famous scream. That was the kicker. The animals themselves were cute, but the scream was what made people run to the pet stores and buy them in droves. And they bought the accessories--little model cities with little model cars and little model people that their mini-G could stomp around in, microcams so they could record its adventures, memberships in videocommunities where people shared their best stuff and rated it, or even paid to be on the mini-G channel. It had made Ling Kung Biodiversity billions of dollars, and even managed to melt the Chinese-Japanese relationship for a little while.

Maybe it was the billions that set Kevin off. Maybe it was his boss, driving up to work in his multimillion-dollar custom-made Ferrari, that did it. Or maybe he was just an idealist from the start. Maybe he wasn't just marking time in Ling Kung. Maybe he'd been learning to do what he really wanted to do. The media had tried to spin it both ways, pointing to old blogs where he talked about how there was no reason for us to need or want oil any longer. But Jere looked at those, and they seemed to be just passing college



arguments, the kind you got into when you were a little too smart and still thought you could change the world. It didn't seem to be the work of a man who had a deep-seated need to take down the world economy.

But, whatever the reason, he'd taken a little trip to Iraq and injected an oil-eating bacterium of his own design into one of their most prolific oilfields.

They didn't find out about it until days later, when all that came out of the pipes was a thin brown slurry, like melted chocolate ice-cream. Analysis showed the bacterium. Oilfield records showed Kevin where he shouldn't be.

And, in one moment, Kevin had succeeded in becoming The Most Hated Man in the World, with Muslim extremists and the American president and the various parliaments of Europe all calling for his head. Russia, self-sufficient on oil, had made a few rude noises, but the damage was done. Kevin had already booked a week-long visit to RusSpace's orbiting hotel, territory that no country claimed. And he'd brought weapons. Handguns that looked almost alive, and shot black greasy stingers full of curare.

Jere watched the American nukes fall on Iraq, flash flash flash, three in quick succession, to sterilize the oilfield to a depth of a thousand feet. Flying cams showed the ground rippling like the sea, ahead of the blast, as the brilliance seared their pixels to black. And the Iraqi government, profusely thanking the United States for their help. Surreal, raised to the power of infinity.

And the scary thing, the newscasters and inpersons said, in hushed tones, is they didn't know how deep the bacteria had gotten, or how interconnected the oil fields were, or if the nukes would really sterilize it. And they wouldn't know for many years.

Up in orbit, Kevin said a few plastic words about how we should have let the bacteria take its course, how we shouldn't be dependent on oil, how the sooner we moved to a true sun-based bioeconomy, the better it would be for the planet. And he reiterated his desire simply to stay there, to become earth's first expatriate.

Nations howled for his blood. The Russians ranted, but Jere knew they couldn't really do much. It was Russian government versus organizatsiya, which meant stalemate. RusSpace made noises about wanting him out of their station, but they were selling media rights for bigger numbers than their weekly ops.

*And they know this is the best publicity in the world, Jere thought. When this is over, they'll have a dozen orbital hotels. Hell, they'll have fucking resorts.*

The one catch: after his statement, Kevin stopped talking. He said he'd speak to only one person.

And that was Jere Gutierrez.

*And now here I am, going to talk to the nut,* Jere thought, as a huge hand pressed him back in his seat. He was ready for that. He was even ready for the sensation of falling. He felt the room flip. He felt his stomach flip. He filled the bag twice before they docked with the RusSpace hotel.

He went forward to the hatch without waiting for his pilot. She joined him there with a wry smile. Probably thinking he was going to get killed. Or maybe drawing some kind of bizarre connection between Mississippi and the Oilfield Incident.

"He's in his cabin," a big, portly American with mutton-chop sideburns said, when Jere entered the hotel lobby.

"Yeah, go get him," said a girl, who Jere hoped was the fat American's daughter.

"Calm, calm," their Russian host said, pushing his hands down at the floor.

"We are calm," the girl said. "We just want to go home."

Jere checked his gear, a little head-mounted camera that connected to his eyepod. Which, itself, connected to nothing. The pathetic network connection between the hotel and earth had been severed. Which was fine by him. Because they couldn't exactly sell the footage if it was beamed all over the net.

Jere still remembered Evan and Ron, eyes wide, lips slick in anticipation of money. *What do you mean, you don't want to do it?* Evan said. *That video is worth tens--hell, hundreds--of millions. Because we're the only ones who got it. Nobody else. This shit never happens, not anymore.*

*It'll make up for the Porsche,* his dad said.

And so now he was standing outside the door of a madman's cabin. It was the same one he'd stayed in. Jere's heart pounded, and he heard his breath rattling in the back of his throat.

He knocked on the door.

"Come," said a voice within.

Jere pushed through. The door seemed to swing in exaggerated slow motion, as if time itself had become unbuffered. He half-expected to see a muzzle flash, and feel a bullet slam into his body like a wrecking-ball.

But there was just a man, tall, slim, dark-haired, sitting hunched-over on the little bed. In his lap was something that looked like a gun, if guns were grown in fields on big gnarled gun-trees. He didn't even look up at Jere.

"Can I come in?"

"Please." Looking up at him. The man had strange brown-green eyes that didn't show well in his publicity photos, sunken cheeks, and a mouth that curved down at the edges in a permanent frown. His dark hair was ratty and thinning, even though he couldn't be more than thirty-five years old.

Jere slipped into the room and propped himself in a corner. He put his hands behind his back to hold himself away from the wall.

And to be as far away as possible from the thing on the bed.

"Thank you for coming," Kevin said. "I understand you didn't have such a pleasant time on your first visit."

Jere just looked at him. *Questions, anytime now, he thought.* But his mouth remained stubbornly closed. He imagined himself silent through the whole interview. *Boy, that footage would sell.*

That did it. "Why me?" Jere said.

"I thought it would be obvious."

"It isn't."

"You're the visionary. You're the one leading us to Mars."

Jere's mouth dropped open. That was the last thing he'd expected to hear. "It's just a reality show," Jere said.

Kevin's downturned mouth spread into a wide grin. "That's OK. Keep telling them that."

"We could be faking the whole thing," Jere said.

"But you aren't. I looked into it. You aren't faking a thing."

Jere shook his head. "I still don't get it."

Kevin gave him several seconds of that surprising grin, then sighed. "Ask your questions. The ones everyone wants answered."

Jere nodded. "Why'd you do it?"

"I already explained that."

"So you did it because you think we shouldn't be using oil?"

"There's really no reason for it," Kevin said.

"Over fifty percent of the world's energy still comes from oil," Jere said, reciting statistics that were stored locally in his eyepod. "It would be an irrecoverable shock to the world economy to lose that overnight."

"It wouldn't be overnight. And it wouldn't be an irrecoverable shock. They keep oil cheap, so other forms of energy can't compete. They keep it cheap, because they can control it."

"Who does?"

"Every government that's chasing me."

Jere frowned. "That's almost the whole world."

"Exactly the reason I want to expatriate."

"So you'll... stay here, the rest of your life."

"No. I want to go farther."

"The Chinese moonbase?"

Kevin snarled. "The Chinese will never let me on their moon. I'm still an American to them. And not a Party member. And I don't wear a uniform. And they're addicted to oil, just as bad as everyone else."

"Where, then?" Jere's voice was soft. He knew the answer.

"Mars."

There was silence in the small room. For a long time, the only sound was the rush of air in the ventilators. Kevin was the first to break it.

"I want to be a contestant," he said.

"We aren't going to stay."

Kevin looked at Jere. His weird brown-green eyes appeared to be focused on something very far away. "I might."

"You'd die there."

"That's OK."

Silence again. Then, again: "Make me a contestant."

Jere sighed. He imagined whipping out a contract and having Kevin sign it, right there and then. *Spin that, Evan*, he thought. He imagined Oversight officers surrounding Neteno. He imagined a brief, bright nuclear flash. No. There was no way.

"I can't do it."

"Yes you can! I read your contact! You're making expats. They're your wards. I can sign it and stay right up here until it's time to leave. I can even help you build your transport. You're assembling in LEO, right?"

It would be the biggest publicity to ever hit Neteno. It would be the end of Neteno. Because no matter what Ron said, there was such a thing as bad publicity. When it got so big it ran you over and spit you out like a bag of trash on the freeway, it was bad.

"I can try."

"There's no try," Kevin said. He raised the little wood gun and pointed it at Jere. Jere's heart thundered, a million miles an hour. He noticed that the barrel glistened slightly, as if wet.

"I..."

"You'll do it!" Kevin screamed, leaping off the bed. He took the gun and pressed its muzzle against Jere's neck. The barrel was warm and slick. Jere felt his gorge rise again.

"Say it!" Kevin said. "Give me your word! Say it! We don't need paper! We don't need screens! Your word is good enough."

"I..." Jere began.

There was a sharp *ping!* from somewhere in the cabin, then a scream like a giant teakettle. Kevin made a small noise, deep in his throat and fell against Jere. Jere wrapped his arms around the other man to hold him up, and felt something warm and wet spreading on his back.

"Kevin!" Jere pushed him upright, but the other man's legs buckled. His eyes were wide and blank.

Jere pushed himself away. Many things hit him at once as Kevin crumpled to the floor. His hands were covered with blood. The teakettle noise still wailed. His ears popped. He felt light-headed. There was a tiny little hole in the aluminum wall, right below the porthole. And something, gleaming and metallic, floated outside the porthole itself.

*There was a hole in the wall.*

There was that teakettle shriek.

Jere's eyes flew wide, and he scrambled out into the hall. He could feel the air flowing towards the cabin door. He shut it, but it buckled inwards and didn't stop the flow.

In the lobby, they shrieked at his blood-soaked hands.

"He killed him!" the daughter/wife/girlfriend said.

The portly guy nodded. "Good deal."

"We're leaking!" Jere cried.

"Leak?" the steward said.

"Yeah. Someone shot Kevin. Through the wall. From outside."

"Outside? Is not possible!"

"Is possible," Jere said. "Now go fix!"

There was a whispered conference in Russian. A guy wearing the uniform of RusSpace came down with a handpad, looking concerned. That broke it up. Jere wasn't surprised to see them running down the hall with a sheet of plastic and silicone.

Back on Earth, the video sold for fifty-seven million dollars to the Netflix delivery system, which posted 745,000,000 paid accesses in the next twenty-four hours.

"There's the size of your Mars audience," Evan said.

"Or bigger," Ron said.

But when Jere went on the boards, they fed disturbing things to his eyepod.

*Of course, it's a Neteno thing, they said. Does anyone ever believe them anymore?*

*Probably orchestrated the whole thing. I bet Kevin never existed.*

*But the bombs.*

*Were YOU there? Easy enough to hack the Found Media.*

*But Kevin existed. He did the mini-Gs.*

*Do we know that, for sure?*

*And, most disturbingly: I bet their whole Mars thing is a load of shit.*

Glenn

When Glenn Rothman got the big thick envelope from Neteno, he knew what it meant. He didn't even bother taking it up the drive to the house. He tore it open right there. Old Lady Pellerman, his crazy next-door

neighbor, watched him from across the street, where she scrabbled in her mailbox for something that wasn't spam.

And he'd sign it right there too, he thought, sign it and show Elena, once and for all. He'd look down at her from Mars and thumb his nose at her. He pulled the letter out from a big paper-clipped bunch of legalese.

Dear Mr. Rothman,

We're pleased to accept both you and your wife Elena as contestants on our upcoming reality linear, *Winning Mars*.

*Wait.*

During the course of our review, we found that both you and your wife had applied to our program.

*Oh, shit.*

We're pleased we can accept you both. Your accomplishments in the field of extreme sports are extremely impressive, and we believe you will be a very competitive team.

*Shit oh shit.*

Please note that this offer is for both you and Elena. If either of you, for any reason, wish to decline this offer, please consider it void. The contract is only binding with both of your signatures. We do not anticipate you'll have a problem with this stipulation. However, we did want to clarify. Please sign, notarize, and return these documents by February 12, 2021.

Sincerely,

Jere Gutierrez

CEO, Neteno, Inc.

"Shit!" Glenn screamed.

Pellerman glared at him from across the street.

He didn't care. "Fucking Elena!"

"Watch your mouth!" Sharp, in that squeally old-lady-tone that drove Glenn up a wall.

"Watch your hemorrhoids!" Glenn snapped, and raced back up to the house.

Glenn called Elena. No answer. Just the smooth impersonal voice of her attendant. Of course. Probably because she knew it was him. He called her backup home number.

*Our old number*, he thought.

No answer. Another attendant. *Fuck, couldn't Elena have a little bit of personality and use her own voice?*

Glenn paced back and forth in his little office. He should go over to her house -- their old house. He should call Neteno. He should get them to reconsider. Because Elena would never go with him.

But they would never do that, would they?

Would they?

He twisted the simple gold band he still wore. It was polished smooth, inside and out, by much twisting. If he could just speak to Elena in person, he might be able to convince her to do it, just this once. Not like they were married. Just a business thing.

Because this was the biggest thing out there.

*If this is the biggest thing, go big*, Glenn thought, remembering the words of Mr. Henry, his high-school football coach and mentor. The guy who led him into extreme sports.

Glenn sat down at his computer and paid a locator a hundred bucks to get a GPS read on Elena's phone. It mapped to a location at the foot of Boulder Canyon. Satphotos showed it to be a parking lot. The parking lot where they left the car, back when they used to do Lady of the Light on Solar Dome. Glenn remembered those climbs well. The up-and-out, the rock alive under his fingers, just inches away from the end. His heart, like a well-tuned motor. Elena, above him. And then finally at the top, alone, looking out over Boulder and the foothills to the plains. On a clear day, it was almost as if they could see Nebraska. Sitting through sunsets with Elena, huddled close as the sky pulled the heat from the rock.

*She was climbing.*

Glenn slammed the Neteno contract down on the table, turned to the back where the signatures went, scabbled for a pen, and scrawled his name. He would take it to her, already signed. He'd say, *You're the only one holding us back. All we need is a signature. Just one signature, and we've done the biggest thing in the world. Off the world. If you can't do it for me, do it for the endorsements. Do it because it's something nobody else can do.*

Glenn shoved the contract into his back pocket, grabbed his bag of climbing gear, and headed out for the trailhead.

Which is how he found himself, two hours later, watching Elena try to kill herself.

Of course, she wouldn't see it that way. For her, it was just being aggressive, just going max-out. That was the way she was. She always pushed it. Whether it was Tibet, or Scotland, or just a little climb right outside their hometown, she always tried to do more. Climb once, time it, try it again. Try to make that time better. Try a harder route. Or do stuff like she was doing now.

Glenn stood on the ledge to the right side of Solar Dome, looking up at Elena scabbling on the clean steep face of the Lady of Light. Not an insane route, not by a long shot, but challenging, mainly edges and side pulls with a long crux reach rightward for thin fingers. The stone was decent, nothing more. Careful and slow, it was safe as houses. Fast and loose, like Elena liked to do, and you were looking at turning yourself into ketchup right quick. Fast and loose on a winter day when the sun was warm but the rock was cold, where there were still little pockets of ice gathering in cracks and crevices, was insane.

*The sun may be warm, but the rocks know the weather*, Mr. Henry's voice whispered to him, from the distance of many years.

Glenn wanted to shout. But he knew you didn't shout. Not even if you thought you had to. He imagined her starting at the sound of his voice, slipping, falling . . . there would be nothing he could do but watch.

A terrible little voice said, *And she can't sign when she's dead.*

Glenn pushed that voice away and set to climbing. Starting was difficult, blank for the feet, and he had a terrible moment where his fingers seemed to find purchase, then peeled rock when he started to shift his weight. He pushed hard against the cold stone. He imagined he could hear it, laughing at him.

*Slow and go, slow and go.*

When he chanced his next look up, Elena was moving through the narrow slot that led to the top. She looked down at him, her eyes dark beads. But he knew she saw him.

She sped up her pace.

*Great*, Glenn thought, and continued climbing.

The slot was icy, and Glenn's numb fingers felt nothing as he pulled himself up. Footholds slipped and peeled. The rock itself seemed to be against him. He paused, and panted, and waited for Elena's dark eyes to look down at him. He imagined her standing there, hands on hips.

But she never looked down, and a more grim thought came to him. Maybe she was already on her way down. Avoiding him.

Glenn climbed a little faster.

When he reached the top, Elena was sitting on the cold stone, pants flapping in the wind around her slender legs. She looked out over the foothills to Boulder, hands wrapped around her knees. Like those nights he remembered.

Except she was now alone.

Glenn went to sit beside her, but she looked up at him and said "Stop."

She was so beautiful. Big dark eyes, set in an elfin face with high, perfect cheekbones. Arms like a dancer, with powerful muscle hiding close under flesh. Her brown hair, almost black, was longer than he remembered it, almost shoulder-length, and she let it fall free.

*Stupid, really*, Glenn thought.

"I know what you're going to say," Elena said. "You almost killed yourself, blah blah, you need to be more careful, gnar gnar."

Glenn started to sit down.

"You can't sit by me," Elena said, scrambling to her feet. She backed away from Glenn, like they were two prize-fighters circling each other in the ring.

"What are we going to do, then?" Glenn asked. "Dance?"

"No. And we're not gonna fuck. I see you're still wearing your wedding band."

"Some of us can hope."



Elena blew air out her nostrils. "I know why you're here. I got it, too."

"All you have to do is sign it," Glenn said. "Then we're going to Mars."

"We. Barf."

"Elena..." Glenn started, then a flare of anger made him say, "Why'd you even have to enter? I would already've been signed off and on my way to LA!"

"Don't be so confident, superman."

"Why'd you have to enter using our last name?" Glenn said.

Elena stopped pacing. She grinned. "Labels don't matter. Too lazy to change it."

"Is that it?"

She laughed. "Don't read anything into it. I'm not pining for you." She held up her hands, to show them bare of rings. "And, speak of that, why'd you have to enter? I'd be signed and on my way to Hollywood, if it wasn't for their stupid pair-or-nothing clause."

Glen just goggled at her.

"You know, I bet they did it on purpose. They saw both of us, said, 'Hey, this is a great-looking couple,' saw we were divorced, and said, 'Man, you can't ask for more conflict than that,' and threw us this curve."

"You think we're a good-looking couple?"

"One of us is."

"One isn't a couple."

For a while, there was only the sound of the breeze, and the hum of civilization, far below. Glenn and Elena continued to circle the top of the dome.

"Well, if they're rigging the game, there's only one way we can get back at them," Glenn said.

"Let me guess. Sign it."

"No. Don't play by their games."

"Act the happy couple, you mean." Elena sneered.

"Act like two people, in business together," Glenn said. He reached around to his back pocket and pulled out the contract, now rumpled and sweat-stained. "I've already signed. All it takes is one more signature, and we're on our way to Mars."

Elena looked at the contract, and cocked her head at him, as if amused.

"If you can't do it for me, do it for yourself. This is the big thing. The biggest thing. Bigger than Everest, bigger than freeclimbing Half-Dome, bigger than marathoning the Utah desert, bigger than swimming the English Channel."

"Have you read it? The contract?"

"No."

That amused look again.

"Don't fucking laugh at me!"

Elena laughed. "I'm not." She reached into her bag and drew out a sheaf of papers, neatly folded. "It's just that I was going to say the same thing."

On the back page was her signature, neat and clear.

*Elena Rothman.*

When they'd signed each other's contracts, Elena went to sit down on the rock. Glenn made to sit down beside her.

"No," she said.

"You're kidding."

"Not at all." Smiling up at him, in mock innocence.

Glenn stood by her for a few minutes, then went back down the rock. If he could have Elena and the signature, great.

He grinned.

But, for the moment, the signature was enough.

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Science

"I thought they found life on Mars," Jere said.

Evan rolled his eyes heavenward. It was 4:11 AM, and they were screaming down the 5 at triple-digit speeds in Jere's Porsche. The scrub-brush at the side of the road whipped by, ghostly gray streamers disappearing into taillight-red twilight. They were in that no-mans-land between Stockton and Santa Clarita where the land falls away and you could believe you were the only person in California, at least for a time.

Jere frowned, seeing the look out of the corner of his eye. It was Evan Shows Off time again. He loved to do that. "What? They didn't? Talk, you fucking know-it-all."

"They still don't know," Evan said. "There was that micrometeorite thing, but they're still arguing about it. Some of the scientists say that the microstructures they're looking at resemble ancient bacteria, and some of them say it's wishful thinking. Typical science tempest-in-a-teapot."

"What micrometeorite? They brought something back from Mars?"

"They found in Antarctica."

Jere frowned. He couldn't wear his eyepod at night, not in the car, so he couldn't ask it to confirm what Evan had said. He hated being disconnected. It was like losing part of your mind. "What does that have to do with Mars?"

Evan shrugged. "Scientists say it was a piece of Mars, blown off the planet by a meteor. Eventually it landed in Antarctica."

"And they can tell that shit? That it's from Mars? How do they do that?"

"I don't know the details."

Jere snorted. "I thought you knew everything."

Evan went silent for a long time. There was nothing but the hum of the tires and rush of the wind and song of the engine. When Jere thought he was going to just let it go, he cleared his throat and said, "What's important is that the scientific community is interested and want to give us a bunch of money."

"Funny thinking of Mars as a science thing."

Evan shook his head, and then said, almost gently, "It's too bad we can't wait a few years. Do it in '26. The whole fiftieth-anniversary thing."

"Fiftieth anniversary of what?"

"Viking. 1976."

"What's Viking?"

Evan shook his head again. *The fucking walking encyclopedia*. "Viking 1 and Viking 2 were the first probes we landed on the surface of Mars. We, the United States, that is. In 1976. For the bicentennial. They did some experiments that, again, some scientists say indicated life, some say they didn't. They're still wrangling about that, too."

*We put shit on Mars fifty fucking years ago?* Jere thought. No wonder some people were getting rabid about going themselves. "We're still on for this year?"

"So far."

"You don't sound so certain."

"They're being a bit cagey. I think they're still trying to cope with the business after you and the Kevin stunt."

*It wasn't a stunt*, Jere thought. The United States was still denying having killer satellites, or satellites full of killers, in orbit. But Jere knew what he saw, and someone had clearly shot through the cabin from the outside. Someone who didn't care very much whether it had ended in explosive decompression.

More silence. In front of them there was nothing but darkness and stars and the dim outline of mountains. Jere pushed the car to 130, 140, 150. The blur became a haze of motion, almost surreal.

"So what do you think about the Berkeley proposal?" Jere said.

"It's crap."

"Why?"

"Like, duh. Berkeley probably can't even design the right experiments package. They're a liberal arts school."

"Why'd we bother seeing them?"

Evan gave Jere his don't-be-stupid look. Jere recognized it, even out of the corner of his eye. "Because they asked. Because if we're talking to them, others'll be interested."

"So we get another school."

"No."

"What?"

"We might see some other schools," Evan said. "But we fish from industry. That's where the money really is."

"Who?"

"Siemens. Or IBM. Maybe Nanoversics. Maybe even someone like Google, with their 300-year world domination plan. Someone big, with deep pockets."

Jere nodded. Berkeley had offered them quite a bit of money. With someone like IBM in on a bidding war, how high could the stakes get? And God knew they needed the money. Expenses kept creeping up, especially now they had to start thinking about training, launch, and ongoing support.

"It's coming together," Evan said. "You're getting some great contestants lined up, now that we're off the convict frequency."

"I didn't know Keith and Samara would be so problematic."

"Nothing you could do. At least we still have one. And the Glenn and Elena thing is brilliant. This is just like the shit we used to do, back in the day."

Ah. Now the congratulatory Evan. The politician, the manipulator. *He should run for Congress after all this is over.*

Still, Jere couldn't help smiling, a little. "It'd be great if Glenn and Elena got back together, then won."

"What do you mean, it'd be great?" Evan turned around in his seat, so he could look directly at Jere. "I thought that was what you were planning. Give 'em a cash offer to kissy-kissy, then make sure they finish first."

"If they win, they win."

Evan's mouth popped open. "You aren't going to run this real, are you?"

"It *is* a reality show."

"That doesn't mean it's real. Fuck. Run this real, Keith is gonna win." Pissed. Angry. The real Evan, at last.

"You don't know that."

"Yes. I do know that. That's how it works. Nice guys finish last. Assholes finish first. And Glenn is the fucking definition of a nice guy. Fucking pussy-whipped nicey-nice asshole. I'd've thrown his bitch wife off the rock a long time ago."

"Whoever wins, wins. I won't throw it."

"You're being stupid."

"That's fine with me."

"Then get prepped to see Keith standing on the podium. How're you going to spin that?"

"If he wins, I'll think of something."

Evan turned back in his seat, and slumped down so his knees hit the dash. "Better start thinking now, then."

Silence. Nothing but them and the open road.

Mike

*This is less of a party than a wake*, Mike Kinsson thought, as he stepped out onto the back porch of the house he grew up in.

His parents had gotten the banners right: Farewell Mike! Win Mars for Us! Upward and Onward! And the yard was done up in a cool motif, with fresh-printed tromp l'oil canvasses of Martian terrain covering the normally bright-green grass, and panoramas of Martian sky and horizon hung at the back of the yard from the tall juniper trees. They'd set round tables with brilliant blue tablecloths in the middle of Martian scene, in almost surreal contrast to the reds and salmons and pinks of the printed landscape.

They'd even gotten the music right. As he walked out onto the porch, the bump of oldstyle rap was replaced with Gary Numan's redo of his famous song, *Cars*.

"Here on my Mars, where every-thing has gone right..." Numan's electronically-smoothed, seventy-year-old voice rang out across the yard, turning heads. Eyes settled on Mike. He shrugged, feeling a small thrill of fear.

*Time to run the gauntlet*, he thought.

The crowd was a mix of neighbors and relatives. Neighbors probably because you couldn't have a party anywhere these days without offending someone, so you had to have the invitation trail, and the disclaimers, and the legal notices that you might play music at a level where others might hear, and that you could not guarantee they might not get offended. Apologies in advance, and all that.

Mike's parents lived in a small, flat neighborhood of fifty-year-old ranch houses in San Jose, part of the first wave of building before the Silicon Valley days. It was a pleasant enough neighborhood with mature trees and ruler-straight streets and homes set back behind broad expanses of front lawn, with generous-sized back yards they'd build two houses on these days. Most everyone there was old, and conservative, and remembered the days when you tolerated a little stupidity from the neighborhood teens now and again. But you never knew, so you invited them anyway.

Mike nodded at the neighbors, shook a few hands, and took a few perfunctory congratulations. Most gave him that close stare that people used when they were inspecting something unusual and maybe a little dangerous, like a jeweled 17th-century dagger or a vial of the Three-Day Death. Mike remembered almost none of them

except for the Ettslers, who'd gone gray-haired and stooped in the years he'd been away. He remembered Mr. Ettler as a tall, gaunt man with salt-and-pepper hair. Now his hair was almost completely gray, and he stooped almost to the level of his wife, who blinked out at him through amazingly clear blue eyes.

Then it was on to gauntlet one. Grandparents part uno. Mom's mom and dad sat at one of the circular tables, drinking some kind of straw-colored drink. Mike looked up to see dad happily bartending behind an antique fake-woodgrain portable bar, running margaritas in a blender. Dad didn't drink, but he enjoyed getting other people drunk.

"So it's off to Mars, is it?" granddad Murray said.

"Why?" Grandma Murray said.

Mike tried to smile at them. It felt like he was trying to stretch a wooden mask. "Yes, off to Mars," he said.

"Astronauts used to do that," Granddad said.

"Yeah, not you," Grandma said.

"It's a different world."

"Ahm. Yeah." Granddad Murray had found a groove he could fall into, like an old-fashioned turntable. "Can't say I understand a whole lot about it anymore. Can't say I like it that much."

"We were talking about Mars!" Grandma said.

"Oh, yeah. Mars."

"You talk him out of it!" Grandma said, glaring at Mike.

Granddad blinked and focused. "I know I wouldn't do it," he said. "Not even if someone put a gun to my head. And I was in 'Nam."

Mike rolled his eyes. Anything to get granddad off that frequency.

"I can't," Mike said. "It's a done deal. I signed the papers."

"It's never done," Granddad said. "It's a damn movie studio, not the government. It's not like they can put you in jail."

Mike frowned. *You didn't see what I signed, Granddad. You don't know what they can do with me.* "It doesn't matter. I want to go. I'm going."

"It's dangerous," Grandma wailed. Heads turned towards them, then quickly snapped away.

Mike knelt down to look in her eyes. "I know. But it's something I believe in."

"We should fix the problems here at home before we go to other planets," Grandad said.

"Then we won't ever go anywhere!" Mike said, standing again. He'd heard all those arguments before. First from Gina. Then from his boss. Then over the phone from family. Now in person.

"You don't have to shout," Grandma said.

"I'm sorry. But I'm doing this, and nothing's changing that."

Granddad nodded. "It's good to have something to believe in."

"Right."

"It's just, well, it's too bad yours is so *out there*."

Mike clenched his fists. Yes, I know. I should've become a stockbroker or a lawyer or something safe like that. You've been telling me that since I was old enough to understand. Maybe longer, for all I know. So why don't you go back up to San Francisco, to your safe house, and your safe life, and don't worry about me?

"I'm sorry you don't understand," Mike said.

"I never understood 'Nam, but I did go. I remember--"

Mike looked up at his dad. "Oh. I think dad wants to talk. I'll be back later."

"We may not be here," grandma said. "We have a concert in the city in a couple of hours."

"Yeah, the Second Stones are playing."

Barf, Mike thought. And they'd probably have him do that, have implants to get Keith Richard's canned thoughts running around in my head, so I could ape his work.

Dad was mixing some kind of nuclear-orange-colored drink when Mike walked up. "Martian sunrise," he said. "Want one?"

"No."

"Your loss." He set it on the bar, where it was soon scooped up by a passing neighbor.

"You didn't have to go all out like this," Mike said, gesturing around at all the Mars-ephemera.

"Of course we did," Mom said, coming up behind dad. She smiled brightly and batted her eyelashes. She was still a very attractive woman, though in the last few years she'd decided to stop battling the gray that streaked her hair. It made her look ten years older than Mike remembered. He thought it was a little sad.

And what she said was spot-on. Of course they had to go all out. This was what they did best. The guilt. *See what we do for you*, they were saying. *How can you leave us, how can you go against our will, when you see all we do for you*.

"Are you ready?" dad said.

*Oh yeah, and we won't mention it, so you'll feel even more guilty.*

Mike sighed. "Look, I know you're worried."

Mom and dad exchanged glances. "We're not--" mom started.

"Yes we are," Dad said. "What about your job? Can you get your job back when you get back?"

"No," Mike said. Yahoo had been very clear on that. Even thought they'd sponsored other employees to videoblog from Africa, or explore the Antarctic, or five dozen other stupid things that meant they couldn't really do their job, they had no interest in Mars. Mike's boss told him, *It ain't worth going higher. Something happened. They just aren't interested in this.*

"That's too bad," dad said. "Though you could probably get a job pretty quick with the experience you have."

"I guess."

"If he gets back," Mom said, her face crumpling into an agonized mask. "You might die!"

"I know."

Silence for a bit. Then, dad: "Do you really? Have you looked at the odds they're giving for this thing?"

"No."

"You should."

Mike shook his head. He'd never looked at them, but he knew them, because people spouted them all the time. But those were the odds the bookmakers made, the guys who looked at horses or athletes or any of a dozen other things that had no real investment in winning.

When you care, it's different, he thought. He looked around the perfectly manicured yard, to the perfectly-kept little house. It wasn't much, but it was worth millions.

*Why chance it?* friends had asked. *Hang on, take the house when they're gone, call it a day. You're an only child, nobody'll be fighting for it other than you.*

"You should think of us," dad said.

"You should think of me."

Mike's parents goggled at him, open-mouthed. Which was the perfect entrance for Grandparents dos, the Kinssons. Grandpa Kinsson was a large, red-faced man. He sloshed the remains of one of dad's Martian sunsets in the general direction of Mike. Mike was able to avoid the streamer of orange liquid. "He's stunned by the prize money," Grandpa Kinsson said. "What's it up to now, Mike?"

"I don't know?"

Grandpaw Kinsson gave a big, roaring, booze-smelling laugh. "Right, right. I think it's, what, twenty million?"

"Closer to thirty," Grandma Kinsson said.

"That's enough to tempt anyone. Smart boy."

Grandpa Kinsson owned parts of seventeen wineries in the Sonoma and Russian River Valleys. He'd been nothing until the California wine collapse. Then he'd gambled, and won big. Now he drove a white Ferrari, like some overweight ghost of improbable TV shows past.



*And you're one to talk about improbable TV shows, Mike thought.*

"Excuse me," Mike said.

"We're offending him," Grandpa Kinsson said.

"No. I've got to take a piss."

And he did. But on his way to the bathroom, he passed his old room. His ten-by-twelve universe, where he would stare up at the glow-in-the-dark star chart that Grandpa Kinsson had got him one Christmas before he was rich. Where he slept under covers printed with aliens from old science fiction movies, watching those same movies on his prized video iPod. Because even then he could look out over that perfectly manicured lawn and walk down the plastic-covered carpet of his perfectly manicured house and sit at the dinner table where you ate slowly and carefully because that was what was mannerful, and that was what you did. Because he knew everything was safe, even then, and he wanted to get as far away as possible. Even though they made fun of him for doing well in science. Even though they called him geek and nerd. Even though he had to struggle ten times as hard to do well in math than in English or even Chinese.

All that was gone now. His room had been wiped clean, painted in a light lavender color, with a frilly white bedspread on his old twin bed. The closet door, formerly pocked from thumb-tacked posters, was flawless and smooth gloss white. Even the ceiling had been retextured with that cottage-cheese stuff they used in very old houses.

Mike went to the closet and opened the door. It was empty, except for three unused hangars. It smelled like new paint.

*What does this mean?* he wondered.

He shook his head, feeling hollow inside. When he rejoined the people outside, he pushed his face into a smile and held it there. He even accepted one of the sickly-sweet Martian Sunrises that dad was pushing on people. He couldn't finish it, but it made the smiling a bit easier.

*Only one more gauntlet left.*

Mike sat and waited for Gina, smiling. He was determined to be smiling when she came. She was late, but that didn't mean anything. She was always late.

When his dad came out of the house, shaking his head, Mike knew something was wrong.

"Come on in," Dad said, beckoning at the house. "You have a message."

"Gina?"

A nod.

Inside the house, Gina looked out at him from his parents' tiny thirty-inch flatscreen.

"Gina, if you can't come, I--"

"Mike, I'm sorry I can't make it--" Giggling in the background. Gina clipped on an earring.

She was getting ready to go somewhere.

"--but I wanted to say goodbye, or farewell, or whatever--" more giggling interrupted her, and she turned to look at whoever it was. "Stop it! I'm talking to Mike!"

He was watching a recording.

Unintelligible conversation from the side. "Okay. Mike. I mean, good luck. I hope you win. See you when you're back."

But I won't miss you in the meantime, she was saying.

Mike stood and watched the recording, all the way through. By the time he was done, both mom and dad were watching with him.

"Weren't you going to give her a ring?" mom said.

Mike nodded.

"I'm sorry," she said, her eyes filling with the first real tears.

*I'm not*, Mike thought. *Hurt, yes. Sorry, no.*

He stayed. He drank. He got in arguments.

Finally, when it was night, he stood out in front of the house and looked back at its clean and tidy façade. Clean white light spilled out from the windows onto the front lawn. The walkway, flagstone, had razor-sharp edges. Not a blade of grass was out of place.

From inside the house, his mom noticed him looking, and raised a hand in tentative wave.

Mike waved back at her, then turned to where his ten-year-old Corvette waited at the curb. It was weighted down with everything he felt he had to bring. He'd be in LA for three months, training.

Then off to Mars.

*To Mars.*

---

## Sponsors

"It seems like a lot of work for just a show," said the asshole from Proctor & Gamble. He was your typical lifer executive, with baby-smooth hands and a soft voice and lacquered-in-place hair and an oh-so-conservative black Armani suit that probably exactly matched the dozen-or-so black Armani suits that hung in his closet, or were trusted only to the highest level of bioproof, DNA-sampling-insured cleaners. He tapped his perfect shiny nails on the model of the Can, sprouting its ring of eleven transport pods.

*God save me from execs who think they're smart*, Jere thought. Send them to the golf course and the cocktail lounge, where the conversational bar is comfortably low, and they can dazzle the gold-diggers with boring tales of imagined high adventure in the boardroom.

But they didn't really have a choice. It was scrape-the-bottom time. Pitching to anyone who might be interested in having a logo on the ship, or product placement at convenient places throughout the voyage. A step up from in-stream advertisers, but not much. Today was the big-box guys. Proctor & Gamble, Altria, Johnson and Johnson, even Foodlink.

They were in the Neteno boardroom, which had been transformed into a neomodern interpretation of a 70's NASA workroom, redone on a much greater scale and budget. A movingink banner was cycling through imagined Marsscapes and the logo for Neteno's Winning Mars, and models of the Can, the drop and transpo pods, the Kites and the Wheels and the Returns hung from the ceiling or were suspended with cheap magnetic trickery.

"Are you launching from Russia?" said the Foodlink rep, a young thin guy in an uncharacteristically rumpled gray suit.

"That's the plan," Jere said.

"You're sending up this entire thing from the ground?" Foodlink-guy said. Jere glanced at his eyepod display and saw his name was Paul Morees, and that his background was red-flagged with tech markers. Degrees in chemical engineering and financial analysis.

*Fuckasaurus. A ringer.* He was trained in more than the art of taking other people's money. Jere eyeblinked over to the current Winning Mars mission plan.

"We're doing a distributed launch, multiple modules to low earth orbit, then assembly and launch to Mars from there."

"With gravity slingshot?"

"I don't think we'd want to scrape the top of the Sears Tower," Jere said. Paul gave him a thin grin, as if saying, Point to you. The other executives looked at each other and shrugged, or pretended not to hear.

"Your mission plan has changed, what, seven or eight times since announcement?"

Jere nodded. *Yes, and we're taking anything that's even marginally ready to fly.* Refurbs, leftovers, even end-of-lives for the unmanned stuff. Jere wouldn't be surprised if they ended up launching fucking first-gen Space Shuttles, if the price was low enough, or the Russians thought they weren't bolted down. He forced a smile. "One of the main differences between show business and industry is our flexibility. We have a showtime, we have a packed house, and the curtain is going to open at a set time. We do whatever it takes to ensure that the show goes on."

"Even if it means sacrificing safety?" Paul said. The other execs leaned forward, lawyer-honed lawsuit-sense undoubtedly tingling.

Jere forced his face to stay neutral. "Not at all. Every single contestant gets shuttled to orbit by the most reliable transport system ever designed: the RusSpace Orbiter."

"What about the rest of the flight?" Paul asked.

"We're using the most conservative, most-tested technologies available. Take the ring. It's a standard component of the new RusSpace orbital hotels. And we're saving four module drops by incorporating all the Return pods into a single big softlander. The Transpo pods are as simple and reliable as they get, just a big bouncing ball. Almost everything we're doing has been used -- and proven -- multiple times. We're using some of it in new ways, but never in ways that will compromise safety."

"Probably what they said about the Titanic," the Proctor & Gamble exec said.

Jere forced his smile wider. *Of course someone's going to die*, he wanted to say. *Probably lots of someones.*

But they needed the money.

"Of course we don't claim infallibility," Jere said. "Unexpected things can happen."

"In which case, what's our recourse?" Paul said.

"We have extensive hold-harmless clauses," Jere said. "In the case that any contestant can manage to bring suit against us."

"I've seen your contract," Paul said, flickering his eyes down to the floor.

*And you're not complaining,* Jere thought. *Don't think we don't notice that.*

"Who's signed so far?" Paul asked.

"I'm sorry, but that's confidential. If you want to buy into a prospectus package, we'll discuss that further."

Paul nodded.

*And you aren't saying anything about that, either, are you?* Jerry thought. Because you know this is the deal of the century. Even if it goes bang on launch, it's worth it. And if we make it all the way back, you have more publicity than you've ever dreamed.

"What you don't see is the most important part," Jere said. "The personal touch. The people who will actually make this happen."

"You already have your team picked?"

"No. Not at all. I just want to show you what the teams might look like. Because I know you have this idea of a bunch of spacesuit-cladded guys hopping around on a dead planet. Boring, right? Well, no. Our friends at Nike outdid themselves on this one. Evan?"

Evan McMaster entered the boardroom through the double doors at the back, accompanied by a trio of young women wearing cosmetic squeezesuits and headers. Brilliant white and crystalline transparent, they looked like nothing more than young women strutting in leotards and wearing plastic bubbles on their heads. The suits hugged every one of their curves, making them seem impossibly perfect, unattainable, unreal.

There was a collective gasp from the execs, and Jere smiled. It always worked that way. They didn't expect this.

"I don't see how it will work." Paul again, of course. "You're trying to use mechanical compression to eliminate the need for a pressurized suit? Won't that kill the wearer?"

Jere draped an arm around one of the women and smiled. "Do these ladies look dead to you?"

"No, but... those aren't real suits, are they?"

Jere smiled. He'd memorized this one, too, but he usually let Evan take it. Because he could be so condescending. It stopped more questions.

"They use the same principles," Evan said. "And it is a very old idea."

An image of a Space.com article, circa 2005, circa prehistory, appeared on the Neteno screenwall. Contextual tags highlighted the most important points of the article, and an overlay showed a comparison between the imagined suit in the article and Neteno's version.

"Oh," Paul said. His voice was soft, almost inaudible.

*Gotcha*, Jere thought.

"I still don't get it," Proctor and Gamble's asshole said. "Why don't they look like the Chinese astronauts on the moon? Their suits are huge."

"The moon is a vacuum," Evan said. "Mars does have a thin atmosphere."

"So?"

"So it makes our job a lot easier. We can provide pressurized air through a small backpack only to the face, which makes the whole suit much less bulky. The pressure required to maintain body integrity is provided by the special form-fitting polymer of the squeezesuit."

"Showboating," muttered one of the other execs.

"No," Evan said. "Not at all. Which would you rather look at--this, or some old Chinese taikonaut in a wrinkled-up old body sock?"

"Your contestants may not look that good."

Evan smiled. "The squeezesuit is of variable thickness. We can make a wide variety of body types look good. And it provides an excellent palette for logo placement."

He snapped his fingers, and logos appeared at strategic spots on the suits. Spots with high visual magnetism, to use the geek phrase. One of the girls spun to reveal a P&G competitor's logo emblazoned over her buttocks. All the better to remind them that if they didn't take the chance, someone else would.

Oh, they loved it. Jere could see it in their eyes. They were sold. They would talk tough and haggle and try to make friends and wheel and deal, but they had them. They'd try to score some free rounds of golf at the best LA courses, or nights out at Matsuhisa, or dark times in dens like the ones under Wilshire, but in the end, they would buy. Just like Panasonic and Canon and Nikon fighting over the imaging rights, Sony and Nokia and Motorola fighting over the comms deal, Red Bull and Gatorade fighting over the energy drink part of it, hell, damn near every single nut and bolt was being fought over.

Jere smiled. *Go ahead*, he thought. *Talk. Then shut up and give us your fucking money.*

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Nandir

For Nandir Patel, coming back to Hollywood was a little like coming back to his hometown -- and discovering that it had been populated by the undead all of his life, and he had simply never noticed.

He'd grown up in Studio City, in the San Fernando Valley, the huge suburban sprawl that crept north from Los Angeles like a skin condition of houses and single-story industrial parks. As a kid, he'd cruised with friends down Sunset Boulevard until it turned into Highland and plunged into the heart of Hollywood. He'd smiled at pretty girls from the backseats of cars, and, sometimes, once in a while, met them later at a party or a bar. And, once in a very long while, he had taken them home, to crawl through the screenless window to his

bedroom. Where every movement seemed to make the tiny fifty-year-old squeal like a car alarm, where his parents room, all the way across the house, seemed much too close for comfort.

Because mom and dad believed. They believed in the old ways from the old country, things Nandir had never seen. They even believed in all the United States crap. They'd come to the States in the 90s, before it had gone insane. Before 911 and Homeland Security and the Twelve Days in May and Oversight. Before the money had crashed. When Nandir's millions would carry him through the rest of his life, instead of being just enough to make others jealous and himself unsure of how long it would all last.

And the thing was, they still believed. Even after everything. They said, *This is a great place to live*. They said, *Our son is so successful*. They said, *We're so grateful for everything we have*, in their soft voices that they'd tried to scour clean of any trace of Indian accent. And they still lived in the same little house in the same flat part of the Valley, and still worked for the same software company that Nandir had once almost bought, just because he could.

But he never remembered Hollywood being so clean, so bright, so tourist-oriented. As if everyone had been swept away and replaced by robots who only knew how to smile and say, *Yes ma'am*, and *Yes, sir*. As if hordes of feral Roombas crept out at night to polish the glittering sidewalks, the shining bronze stars, the perfect blacktop.

*It is perhaps related to the Hollywood Rewound branding campaign currently running in major media channels*, Nandir's earbud whispered to him.

Nandir started. It was the first time his experimental inference software ever correctly guessed his thoughts. But why was it talking like some demented UCLA professor?

"Informal voice mode," he said.

"Sure," his earpod said.

A young girl from a tourist family, fat and unstylish in that inimitable flyover-state way, turned to look at Nandir. Her eyes flickered up to his eyepod/camera.

"Daddy, is he an interactivemaker?" she said.

Dad, clad in a multicolored, horizontally-striped shirt and black flannel sweatpants, turned to look, open-mouthed, at Nandir. His bottom lip curled down like the business end of a pitcher. He blinked at Nandir, perhaps running him through some mental database of people seen on the late-night shows.

"Nah," he said. "He's nobody."

Nandir smiled at them as they walked out of the lobby of the Hollywood Roosevelt and onto the street. The girl stared back at him, but when he waved, she snapped her eyes forward.

"What's 'rewound?'" Nandir asked his inference software.

"It's a term that refers to the process of returning a magnetic tape to an earlier time-marker."

"I thought I put you in informal mode."

"Sure."

"What's 'rewound?'"

"It's a term that refers to the process of returning a magnetic tape to an earlier time-marker."

Nandir sighed. "What's 'Hollywood Rewound?'"

"It's a branding campaign that aims to return Hollywood to an imagined golden age, of high social and moral standards."

"Wow, that's dreaming."

The software said nothing, which Nandir thought was probably for the best. He still had a lot of work to do before it was even a tenth as good as InPersonator, the software he'd sold to WErU two years ago. If it wasn't for the big Neteno dinner, he'd be up in his room, doing just that.

They'd said to meet at 6:30 in the lobby. It was 6:43 by Nandir's eyepod, and he was still the only contestant there. Unless he'd missed someone in the briefing that morning. Which was entirely possible. He had a poor memory for faces.

At 6:50, one of the other guys arrived. He was a tall, thin man with dark hair and glasses. The universal sign of the geek. Nandir smiled at him, wishing he remembered his name.

"You're the owner of InPersonator, aren't you?" the guy said.

"Was," Nandir said. "Sold it two years ago to WErU."

A nose-wrinkle. "I don't like their system as much."

Nandir nodded. "It has its drawbacks."

"Yours was more flexible."

"You were a user?"

"Evaluator. I worked for Yahoo." Eyes cast down, as if embarrassed.

"Worked?" Nandir said.

"Yeah." A pause. The guy held out his hand. "I'm Mike Kinsson."

Nandir took it. His hand was warm and slick with sweat. "Nandir Patel."

"Nandir. Yeah. I remember. But didn't you make a lot of money? Why are you here?"

*Why am I here?* Nandir wondered. Because even with my pile of money, I don't think I'll be able to live the rest of my life comfortably? Because my current software is a little, well, undeveloped? Because no matter where I go, whether it's here in California or New York or even my little research park in South Carolina, I just can't seem to get comfortable?

"Twelve months of uninterrupted coding," Nandir said.

"Oh. Yeah. Wow, you could probably get a lot done."

"Why are you here?"

Mike looked away, and pulled his bottom lip between thumb and forefinger. "I... it's what I always wanted to do."

"Be on a reality show?"

A head-shake, violent and decisive. "No. Go to space. Mars."

"A true believer."

Mike took a step away. "You think it's funny."

"No," Nandir said. "I think it's admirable."

Mike looked at Nandir for a long time, studying him with his dark eyes. "You really do?"

Nandir nodded. "I really do."

Mike closed his mouth, as if he didn't know what to say about that. Finally he nodded.

And, with that, it was like they unleashed the rest of the contestants upon them. They walked, en masse, down the rough Spanish-tiled floors. Nandir recognized the hard-looking man that everyone said was a convict, the two pretty blondes that everyone said were lovers, and the business-suited blonde from Neteno.

"You should compliment this person, and ask them out to a neutral location, such as a coffeehouse."

"What?" Nandir said.

"You should compliment this person, and ask them out to a neutral location, such as a coffeehouse."

"What what?" Mike said.

Nandir held up a hand. "My software. It needs a little work. Inference software, why did you suggest that... your last suggestion?"

"You appear to be attracted to this person."

Nandir felt a blush warm his face. "I'm not."

"Your autonomic reactions appear otherwise."

"I'm not. That was an incorrect response." Nandir looked at Mike, then quickly glanced away.

"Correction noted and incorporated into the database. Thank you for your input!"

Nandir rolled his eyes. He was about to apologize for his software when the business-suited blonde announced, "Okay, we're heading out to Miceli's. Anyone who doesn't know where it is, make sure you're with someone who does."

"Do you know where it is?" Mike asked.



Nandir nodded. "Yeah, I grew up in the Valley."

They ended up with one more guy, a stocky Asian who ran after them as they headed out the doors of the hotel. "I go with you?" he asked.

"Sure," Mike said.

They walked for a while in silence, then the Asian guy said. "I know you, you the software guy."

Nandir rolled his eyes, then turned and gave the guy a smile. "Yeah. And you?"

"What?" the man looked confused.

"What's your story? Where you from?"

The man beamed. "Phillipines," he said, nodding vigorously. "I'm Romeo Torres. Wanted to go to space for long time."

"You should talk to Mike. So did he."

Romeo looked at Mike, beaming. "You did? You see future?"

"I'm not a fortune-teller."

Romeo looked confused.

They ended up that night on one side of a long table, in a restaurant hung with thousands of basket-embalmed wine bottles. A buffer of one chair on either side of the table separated them from the rest of the group.

Geek repellent, Nandir thought. It's like anti-gravity. We repel everything near us.

"Insect repellent can be purchased at most major sporting-goods stores and a large percentage of drugstores. The closest confirmed stock is at Highland Drug, approximately 0.15 miles away."

Nandir smiled. "That is an incorrect response," he told the software.

Both Mike and Romeo looked at him, then went back to their conversation about the Chinese on the moon, their moonbase, where they were going, diverting asteroids, terraforming Mars, and lots of other things that Nandir didn't really understand.

*They were crazy.*

And, he knew, they were probably the people he'd end up being teamed with.

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Lease

Jere walked through the front doors of the Neteno building, then stopped, clenching his fists.

In the lobby of the Neteno building, Gen3 Interactive was busy constructing its shining glass-and-wallscreen office. Blue-jumpsuited men scurried around, peeling protective films and polishing screens like broken shards of glass set into the gleaming wood floors. Farther back, offices hid behind milky translucency, revealing shadowy movement and the outlines of uncomfortable chairs.

"We're the future, when you get right down to it," said a kid, his head shaved and glowing with advertisements. A tiny replica of the floating Neteno sign circled his head, just under the skin.

Jere forced his hands to relax. "Last I heard, you were still subleasing from us. Not subleasing *to* us."

The kid shrugged, wopping his lips into an exaggerated oyster-shell of unconcern.

"Who are you?"

The kid's eyes flew open. "What? You don't recognize me?"

"Should I?"

"I'm Ren Carstairs."

Jere's eyepod lit with data, but he recognized the name. The extravagant creativist of Gen3, the one who was always getting kicked out of parties for having his hand up the wrong person's pants. Then letting the flyeyes follow them home, for instabuzz on the nets.

Jere nodded, and turned to the elevators.

"We'll have this whole building in six months," Ren said.

Jere forced himself to keep walking. At the elevator, he stared at his reflection in the polished stainless. It was wavy and distorted, as if he was made of rubber and being pulled in many different directions by invisible hands.

*It's appropriate*, he thought.

He'd spent the last month taking the elevators past the empty floors of his building, trying to ignore them. They'd add programs soon enough, they'd add staff, the building would buzz again with something more than Capitol ghosts.

But the new programs were few and far between, because they had to look real. And getting that balance between looking real and being interesting was tough. Sponsors fell out, bids went down, and opportunities decreased. Their war chest for Winning Mars seemed adequate, but the fucking risk managers were twisting their nuts again. Dad claimed tappage, in that high and tight voice that said, *I'm fucking stressed, don't push me*. Jere'd thought he had much greater reserves, but the voice was real. He was tapped. Or at least thought he was. So it was back to the banks with their double-digit interest rates and smiling managers and sleek cold-blooded sharks in business suits from 411, justifying it all.

And so, that day. *We believe your office liabilities need to be offset. We believe that you should consider selling the building, or at least subleasing.*

And so, Jere spent an hour walking through the unused floors, past the oh-so-streamlined modern office desks that still bore the smudges of hands and elbows, past the chairs that still smelled faintly of farts, past the detritus of a team gone: cubicle-walls that still bore the odd printout or snapshot, a pile of papers in the middle of an empty conference room, one lone flatscreen glowing bright blue.

Gen3 was the first to come. When Jere heard it was an interactive company, he grimaced and hoped they wouldn't sign. But they did. Jere looked at their offerings online, half-expecting to see another Mars game on their roster. Half a dozen Mars reality games had already appeared, from outfits as big as EA and as small as a

six-person studio in Russia. None of them had done well on the market, which both thrilled and terrified Jere. Thrilled, because he could think, *They're waiting for the real thing*. Terrified, because he could think, *They don't give a crap about the whole idea*.

When he was terrified, Evan would trot out the charts and graphs that showed yes, people did care about the whole idea, it was still a peak on the great plains, it was a huge idea, it would set them up for life.

What was more interesting were the linears that worked the same themes. Unabashedly CG, they played out the idea of a reality show on Mars. The more ambitious of them were based in realtime, run by actors who were living in the simulation. Those linears had all showed a sharp peak in traffic on introduction, followed by a falloff steeper than the falling stock prices of the first internet boom. As if people were looking for something they couldn't find.

*As if they were waiting for something real.*

Jere certainly hoped so.

"You're still thinking about those assholes downstairs," Evan said, when Jere walked into the office they shared.

"I am not."

Evan pursed his lips. "Don't worry about them. Six months, a year, tops, and they're gone."

"Don't tell me the schedule slipped again."

"Ok, I won't."

"Evan, goddamnit, we're missing the sweeps!"

"So we miss the sweeps a little more. There's nothing we can do about it."

"What is it this time?"

Evan shrugged. "Components don't exist for something or another. Have to wait for some dork in California to make them up again."

"California? We can't run in China? Russia? Fucking Africa?"

"No. You don't get it. Some of this leftover crap we're using is old. Real old. Like, so old some of the components were drawn on paper by guys with pencils. And some of the machining and other steps are lore, stuck in the head of someone who used to charge Lockheed a hundred dollars for a bolt."

"A hundred dollars? So?"

"In 1985."

"Ah. Fuck. So we can't pay them to move a little faster?"

"Apparently part of the lore is you get stock only from a certain place, so we're waiting on the foundry."

"Do you think it'll really make a difference?"

Evan looked at him, in that it's-your-fault way of his. "This is for one of the passenger modules."

"Aha. Okay."

A quick nod. "Thought you'd say so."

Jere went to his desk, sat down, and looked up at the Neteno sign, spinning serenely.

"Do you want to hear the other news?" Evan said.

"Is it good?"

"Mainly."

"Crap. What's bad?"

"Don't you want to hear the good news first?"

Jere sighed. "Sure."

"All the contestants are comfortably ensconced in Independence, complaining cheerily about the shitty hotel food. Do you believe this town doesn't have a restaurant?"

"This is good?"

"It's progress. And Keith hasn't managed to kill anyone yet."

"But?"

Evan flashed ironic teeth. "With the asshole, there's always a but. Pun not intended. Keith did, however, manage to turn his teammate into something closely resembling humanburger."

"The other crook? I thought they didn't know who each other's teammate was."

"Yes, the other former convict. Terry. He's now out of the game. Says he'd rather go back to jail. And yes, they aren't supposed to know, but if you were Keith, who do you think you'd get paired with? Anyhow, everybody is now shitting peach pits that they might get paired with him."

"What do we do?"

Evan sighed. "I don't know yet. Find someone else, I guess."

"Even though they've already started training?"

Evan shook his head. "They haven't been trained to do shit, except eat and complain."

"Then do it. Find someone."

Evan smiled. "Way ahead of you there, chief."

*Then why'd you ask?* Jere thought. He considered asking Evan who he had in mind, but decided he didn't want to know.

Not yet, anyway.

---

Geoff

Geoff Smith didn't want to go home, but he knew he had to. So he borrowed Dave's bodysuit and spent his time in *AnOther Worlds*, hunched near the console for maximum bandwidth. Dave was cool to let him stay in his apartment in Hollywood while he picketed Neteno, but now that their contestants had been selected, every morning he would drop some kind of comment about how it'd be nice to get his apartment back to himself again.

Geoff could see it, a little. The apartment was tiny, and muggy, and had that old apartment-smell, like a mixture of ground carpet and wet dog. He had to sleep in the living-room, while Dave had the single bedroom. So yeah, it would probably be cool for Dave to get the place back to himself. But Dave also worked all day, sometimes twelve or fourteen hours, wrangling computers for some insurance company or something like that. So he really wasn't home that much. And when he wasn't home, why should he care that Geoff was around?

Truth was, Geoff didn't want to go home. His mother had a little house up in Palmdale. And Palmdale sucked. And living with Mom sucked. Of course, it was only temporary. As soon as he got a job paying a reasonable wage, he'd be out on his own. Maybe even in his own condo. Where he could have his own kitchen, his own dining room, his own game room. His own console, and his own subscription to EA's interactive library. He might even be able to invite Laura, the waitress at the Lancaster Café, down for a game of *AnOther world*. Maybe. If she didn't get in the way too much. If she didn't expect him to be all romantic and sappy, like the guys in the movies.

Geoff looked around Dave's apartment and sighed. He did have to go. Sometime. But maybe he could look for work down here, and then move when he found a job. It would be better than going back to Mom.

At first, his plan to get on *Winning Mars* seemed to be working. He did a video of himself explaining why he should be chosen for the show -- not the real reasons, of course, just the ones he thought they wanted to hear -- and sent it to Neteno. For some reason, parts of the video appeared on the tubenet a few days later, set to 80's music. Eurythmics. Til Tuesday. Things like that. People made fun of him in the video comments. Geoff was about to comment back when a strange thing happened. A whole bunch of people got together and lobbied for him to be on the show. *Fat Guy Goes to Mars*, they called the cause. Not exactly flattering, especially after he'd lost those 10 pounds, but Geoff didn't really care how he got on the show, as long as he got on it. He agreed to a *Fat Guy Goes to Mars* interview, and talked earnestly about why he wanted to go -- again, not the real reasons. But then an even stranger thing happened. *Far Guy Goes to Mars* shriveled as a group. They left really nasty comments, about how he really wasn't all that funny without the music.

That was when he went a little nuts, he knew. He filled out every form on the Neteno site. He wrote stories about what he would do when he got to Mars, with realistic scenarios about him dying from lack of oxygen. He did a little machinima thing about him going to Mars and meeting the Martians. He started his own *Help the Fat Guy Go to Mars*, and he showed up in a fat suit at the Palmdale mall, wearing a sandwich board. People laughed and pointed. Some of them signed his petition. He made up other names. He sent the whole thing to Neteno.

At ComicCon in San Diego, he figured that he'd wear the same board, but when he did, he was booed and people threw food at him. Apparently a lot of them wanted to be on the show, too. Neteno had a thing with Patrice Klein on the show floor down there, and the place was mobbed with people filling out little touchscreens and broadcasting their own linears, and handing in their own petitions.

Patrice was beautiful. Geoff wanted to go up to her and tell her how beautiful she was, and how he wanted to be her partner for the show. How he was the right partner for the show. So he braved the smelly vinyl and leather-clad crowd and stood in line forever and finally got pushed forward to meet her. She wasn't looking at him when he stepped onto the little circular stage under the bright red lights. She was taking a drink of water from a little plastic cup without even a water-makers logo on it, and frowning at her little plastic jellybean watch. But then she turned to him and smiled, and Geoff had a sudden moment of epiphany. He could feel everyone in the crowd looking at him. Looking at him, because he was standing next to Patrice Klein, and Patrice Klein was going to Mars, and he had to tell her why he had to go with her. Because she was smiling, and she was perfect, and there was no way she couldn't believe.

"I have to go to Mars with you," he said. His voice sounded forced and desperate, and he licked his lips.

"Well, you're direct, at least," she said. The crowd tittered, as if hearing what she said.

"I have to go! I'll show them there's life on Mars!"

Patrice looked a little surprised, and the crowd seemed to go silent, as if waiting for what he had to say. Geoff rushed ahead. "They're hiding it all. NASA. The Russians. Everyone who's been there. Ask Arthur Clarke. The trees. They have pictures of the trees. There's life, and I'm going to show it."

Patrice's eyes went wide, but she said nothing.

"Clarke's dead, dumbass," called someone from the crowd. And Geoff realized, right there, what he'd done. Their words were being amplified and played into the crowd. He'd just managed to ignore it the whole time he was there. Because the other people weren't important. They didn't have anything to say.

But his words had gone into the crowd, and he'd gone and done it. He'd told them the real reason he wanted to go to Mars.

Geoff turned to face the crowd, open-mouthed, just as an ice-cream cone smacked him in the face. At first, all he felt was the cold and pain, and he wailed and clawed his face. Then he saw the remains of the cone laying on the floor, and the trail of ice-cream (it looked like chocolate mint chip, but he wasn't about to taste it, oh, no) going down his shirt, and realized what had happened.

"Get outta there, nut!" someone called from the crowd.

Geoff looked from them to Patrice. Patrice had stepped back several feet, and held a hand over her mouth, as if she was trying to keep from laughing.

Geoff ran.

He spent the rest of the day berating himself for having said why he really wanted to go to Mars. Now, hundreds of people knew his real reason. Some of them might even be from NASA or other government agencies. There was no way they'd let him on the flight now. Because he knew they were covering it up, and now they knew he was out to expose them.

Someone in the crowd had taken video of his performance, so when he came home, he was taunted by people on the networks again. For a little while, they linked back to his first video, and his popularity soared. But it was short-lived. Soon he was nobody, all over again.

When the agents didn't come to take him away, Geoff decided to press his campaign a little further. He found a friend via the goonet who had a little place in Hollywood. Dave. Geoff took the bus down to his place, then

walked a mile to the Neteno building. He remembered looking up at the orbiting letters and thinking, this is it.

They let him go up to the executive waiting room, no problem. But then he waited. And waited. And waited. Hours passed. People went in and out, but they didn't call him. He waited until people were starting to leave for the day. They said, we're sorry, we forgot about you, come back tomorrow.

Geoff came back for three days after that. Eventually, he talked to someone who he suspected was a secretary, in a little meeting-room where an outdated screensaver played on the laserprojector. The probably-secretary listened to him, nodded, and said he'd get back to Geoff.

Geoff carried a sign: WILL GO TO MARS FOR FOOD, and paced back and forth in front of the Neteno building. The police came and told him to go away. He sent them photos of himself, with Mars 'chopped into the background. He played lots of AnOther World. At night, Dave helped him put his story on the nets. But the story fell on a dead network. Nobody seemed to care.

When they put all the contestants down at the Hollywood Roosevelt, Geoff thought of taking his sign down there. But he knew the police would put him in a cell this time, a cell maybe filled with rapists and murderers and drunk drivers. So he went down to the Roosevelt and sat in the lobby and watched the lucky ones stroll by. Patrice was there, radiant and perfect. She never looked at him. Which he figured was good.

*But we would have been perfect together,* Geoff thought.

Now they were at some super-secret training facility. Geoff had watched the bus leave the Neteno building and head up the 101. Knowing that was the end. Knowing he wasn't ever going to be on the show.

Knowing, now, that he really had to go home.

There was a sharp knock on the door.

Geoff froze.

*Knock, knock!*

Maybe Dave hadn't paid his bills. Geoff held his breath.

Muffled swearing came from outside the door. Then, harder, *Knock knock knock!*

A voice: "We know you're in there! Open up, Geoff!"

We know you're in there, open up, Geoff? A thousand little images cascaded through Geoff's head. The police had found him. They were going to take him away. Dave had left all his bills to him. They'd found out about his little AnOther World scam. They were going to put him in a jail cell with rapists and murderers and drunk drivers.

Then, an even more frightening thought: Maybe it was NASA, come to put him away. That would make sense. It took them a long time. But they were the government. Kind of slow. They'd finally realized they couldn't have someone saying there was life on Mars, and they were going to prove it.

Geoff went to the window. Outside, there was an old-fashioned fire escape. He tried to push open the window, but it wouldn't slide up more than four inches. He slid it down, then up again, banging it against the top of its frame.

"We hear you in there! Come on, Geoff!"

Geoff banged the window, but it wouldn't budge. He went into Dave's little bedroom and checked the window there. Same thing.

He went back into the main room, expecting to be yelled at through the door. But everything was silent. He went to the door and looked through the little fisheye lens. It showed nobody in the hall.

Geoff went to open the door, then shook his head. No. Oh no. That was what they would expect. He went to the window and tried to figure out why it wouldn't go up.

He'd just found the clamp on the counterweight line when a key scratched in the lock and the door opened. Two men in identical gray suits stepped in the room. Geoff started and gave a cry like a little girl.

"Are you Geoff Smith?" one of them asked.

"No!" Geoff said.

The other sighed and looked at a handscreen. "Yes you are."

Geoff felt his heart hammering. "So?"

"So we've got good news for you. Winning Mars has had a contestant drop out. If you're interested, we have a contract for you."

"You... you do?"

A smile. "Yes. Hell of a thing, finding you. Ever heard of cellphones?"

"Mom doesn't believe in them."

One of the greysuits looked puzzled. "How old are you?"

"Thirty." Geoff answered automatically.

"Wow. Anyway. We have a contract. Are you interested?"

Geoff took the contract from them, half-expecting it to be a trick, for them to try to put handcuffs on him. But it was just a contract. On paper, like they said it was. He scanned it quickly.

It was real. They wanted him! For Winning Mars!

"Give me a pen," he said, in a quavering voice.

They watched as he signed the contract on the greasy bar. Dave would be so happy to get rid of him.

Geoff smiled. *And I'll do it, he thought. I'll prove there's life on Mars.*

Astronaut

Russia was almost normal for Jere now. He almost didn't feel the awful winter chill in Moscow, or notice the goats on the road at Baikonur. He didn't mind grabbing cold-slick vinyl seats as their drivers deftly slid around



potholes on the treacherous black-iced roads, potholes that looked as if they could hide black bears, potholes that looked like they could swallow the car, potholes so big and deep and dark they might have gone straight through to some beautiful tropical beach in Brazil.

Now they were back at Baikonur for a meet-and-greet and get-some-video with the guy who was really gonna run the show, John Glenn. Not really John Glenn, of course, but that's what everyone called him, 'cause he was old and happy and fit in that creepy way that people who let themselves get old had. His real name was Frank Sellers, another good generic white-boy name, seemingly like all the other astronauts who had ever come out of NASA.

Frank was one of the concessions they'd won. The Russians could build it, fine, anyone could get parts in orbit, fine, but for the big shot, when the Can was assembled and it boosted out of orbit to Mars, it had to be an American pilot. The Dick was ever so happy to show Jere the charts and graphs that tied nationality of pilot to return on investment. They could win with any pilot, but if they wanted to win big, they had to have an American. They could be flight crew, doormen, janitors, whatever, but the pilot had to be American. The Dick always had lots of charts and graphs. Jere always felt like he was hiding the big ones in his back pocket, the ones that would say, *If you want to win really big, you need to have Glen and Elena win*. He expected Evan and The Dick to trot them out before they sent the teams down to Mars, and lobby one last time to throw the game.

*What will you do, if they show you a really big number?* Jere wondered. He shook his head. He didn't know.

They waited in the awkward RusSpace lounge for Frank to show for his interview, Jere and Evan and Ron and the cameraman, whose name Jere had forgotten. But the time ticked by, and there was no Frank. Evan managed to have the cute RusSpace receptionist page him. After half-a-dozen tries, a gruff voice barked out of the speaker.

"What do you want?"

"It's time for your interview, Frank," Jere said. "Remember? Neteno? The guys who're paying your salary?"

"And damn little that salary is! I got problems here. Your talking-head stuff can wait."

"No it can't. We're flying back today."

A sigh. "Look. That stuff doesn't mean anything. You want to fly, I need to work this thru."

"I thought you were a pilot, not ground crew," Evan said.

"I do what I need to do."

"Tomorrow?" Jere asked.

"Doubt it. I gotta go to orbit soon, to work the problems I'm trying to work down here for real."

Ron leaned forward. "What kind of problems?"

"Crap. Where do I start? The Can's a mess, and we haven't even got the pods on it. Electrical is fubar, we're having some hull integrity challenges, and they're arguing about whether or not the air system is robust enough, to start."

"Air? On a journey this long?" Ron said, his face drawing down into a frown. He looked at Jere as if it was his

fault. Jere silently cursed himself for allowing Ron to come along.

"Yeah, yeah, the length's the problem. Longer the voyage, the more pain to start. But we always work through it."

Ron turned to Jere. "Let's go film him in place."

"What? You mean like, documentary style?"

"Yeah. We shoot it MOS as he's doing... whatever the hell he's doing, then do narration. The heroic Frank Sellers, giving his all for the cause."

Evan nodded. "It could work."

Frank, from the speaker: "What are you guys talking about?"

"We're coming to see you," Ron said.

"I don't have time for your interviews!"

"We don't need an interview. We'll shoot around you, documentary style. We won't even get in the way."

Silence from the speaker. Jere could imagine Frank trying to find a flaw in the plan. Then: "Make it quick."

They went to the shack near their next launch, an aged RusSpace freight rocket that was destined to become part of the Can. Jere had the cameraman take video of the grimy rocket. The only clean things on it were the Winning Mars logo and the Mars Enterprise 7 vehicle ID (some money from the Roddenberry estate, not that it mattered, the final mess might have a big ol Mars Enterprise logo on it, but it looked like a big trash can, squat and ugly and lumpy and dirty, and that's what everyone called it.)

In the shack, Frank was hunched over an array of flatscreens. Some of them showed images of the partial Can in orbit. Some of them showed 3-D charts and graphs, like alien landscapes. One of them showed an interior shot of something with a spaghetti-mess of cables floating in air. Blobs of something like water or oil also floated in air. Two Russians wearing those funny little fur hats they liked were sitting next to Frank, wearing VR goggles and mumbling in Russian into throatmikes.

Frank looked at each of them in turn. His mouth was turned down at the edges in a perpetual frown. His gaze flicked mechanically from person to person, as if assessing each of them for signs of weakness.

Jere knew that Frank was ex-military, Air Force. He'd been on the astronaut program back in the Shuttle days but he'd never actually flown a mission. Something about the Shuttle blowing up in the 80's. So he wasn't really an astronaut, he was a wannabe-astronaut. Jere smiled as Frank looked at him.

"Do your shot," Frank said, and turned back to what he was doing.

"Perfect," Jere said. "Stay right there." He went to tell the cameraman to get set up, but he was already doing so.

"Is that the Can?" Ron said, stepping forward to lean over Frank, pointing at the interior shot on one of the screens.

"I thought you weren't going to bother me," Frank said.

"Dad, get out of the shot!" Jere said.

Ron and Frank both glanced at him, then glanced away. "Is it the Can?" Ron asked again.

"Part of it," Frank said.

"Doesn't look too safe."

Frank made as if to stand up, then sat down again. "Of course not. It's not finished."

"Is this mission safe?"

Big smile. "Of course."

"Then how come you're having so many problems?"

"Ron--" Jere began.

"Shut up," Ron said. Even the Russians stopped chattering and looked up.

Ron turned back to Frank. "I'm concerned."

Frank shrugged. "They'll make it work," he said.

"It doesn't seem very confidence-inspiring."

Frank laughed. "If you could have seen half the stuff I saw behind the scenes at NASA, boy, you wouldn't worry. These are good guys. Smart. They'll figure it."

"Which is why they need your help."

"Look. I don't have to do this. I'm helping. 'Cause this is what I love to do. You're making me love it less."

"Ron, let it go," Evan said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Let everyone do their job."

Silence for a moment, his dad's body spring-loaded under the pressure of Evan's hand. Then he relaxed. "You're right. I'm sorry. Please continue."

White-hot anger surged through Jere. Evan and his dad. Like old pals. Listening to Evan. Not listening to him.

He pushed the anger down and worked with the cameraman to set up the shot. Frank scrolled through other images on the flatscreens as they shot, sometimes talking in Russian on his own throatmike, or taking long pulls from a bottle of vodka covered with Russian lettering. Jere shook his head. Just have to edit it out.

And, a little more softly, in the back of his head: *He's our fucking pilot! Should he be drinking?*

But there weren't any other options. If there were, Neteno would have taken them.

The cameraman got his shots and they headed out.

When we were back out in the freezing cold again, and well away from Russian ears, Ron turned to Jere and said, "Would you fly in this thing?"

"Of course," Jere said. Not a bit of hesitation. Not a bit. He knew how to deal with his father, and uncertainty wasn't the way to do it.

The older man looked up and down the Enterprise 7, standing like a dirty needle on the launchpad, and shook his head, but said nothing.

"We're on schedule?" Ron asked Evan.

"So far," Evan said.

Even later, when they were back in the car for another freezing, terrifying ride back to the hotel, Ron spoke again.

"Do you get the feeling that Frank wants this to work a little too much?"

"How's that?" Jere said.

"He's an astronaut. But he never flew."

"So?"

A frown. "So maybe he wants to fly. Really badly."

"Sometimes a little enthusiasm is a good thing," Evan said.

Ron turned to Jere. "What do you think?"

*Pretend to consider, then answer.* "I think it's good we have someone who loves what he does."

Silence from Ron. Then: "I hope you're right."

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Loner

"Help!" Geoff's voice came faintly, far behind Keith Paul.

Keith smiled. Fucker was probably stuck in that little chimney of rock that he'd just scrambled up. Worthless geek. Ahead of Keith rose another steep slope. Beyond that, the little white flags that indicated the finish line. He didn't dare glance at his watch. Oh, no. He was faster yesterday than the day before, and he'd be faster today than yesterday.

*Because I'm going to win.*

"Help me! Keith!"

Keith shook his head. Like he was gonna turn back. *I don't need a fucking teammate*, he kept telling the contest pukes. *I put Grimes in the hospital, you want me to do that to this one too?*

"Mr. Paul!" Faintly, as he started scrambling up the loose rocks. They rose sharply up near the end. Keith pushed hard with his legs, dancing as the rocks shifted under him. He kept hunched over, so the fifty-pound pack wouldn't pull him back and send him tumbling backwards down the slope, like the first day he'd run the course. Not much of a pack, really, but it extended farther out than a normal pack, and a lot of the weight was at the top, which made it tricky.

They said the actual packs would be lighter on Mars, and that he himself would be lighter, too, and that they might have to relearn everything they were doing here, but Keith couldn't really imagine it. He couldn't worry about it. If he did well here, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, he'd do even better on Mars.

He was going to win the thing.

Up and over the top. The big gray shadow of Mt. McKinley rose in the distance, bisecting a passing cloud. The sky was cheery deep blue, like the kind of shit you saw in postcards and travel pictures from boring assholes, but the air was cold. Keith shivered and pushed on, fast down the slope. The end-of-the-route flags fluttered happily in the breeze. One of the show pukes sat on a folding chair behind a table with plastic jugs of water Gatorade on it. He looked up at Keith as he made his way down the slope, then took a little handscreen and wrote something on it.

*Fucking prick*, Keith thought. Probably something about Geoff not being with him.

*Well, you shoulda given me someone who can keep up*, he'd tell them. *You're not gonna slow me down with this geek.*

The action-sports assholes came over the ridge ahead of Keith, moving fast in their funny little Spandex suits. The chick was a hot one, if you liked them like steel, with corded muscles that stood out on her legs and arms, and a tight little round ass and decent-sized tits. But she was a monstrous bitch, wouldn't even talk to him. Not even when he was being nice and asking about all the climbing and shit she did. She just looked at him in that fucking almighty-superior way, just like the blue-haired bitches buying groceries at the Whole Foods, where he'd worked for a summer. *No, not the plastic, the pay-per*, they'd say, all high and hoity, as if he'd offered them a bag made of compressed dogshit.

Except the action-sports bitch said nothing at all. Even though she'd shoot her action-sports asshole companion in a moment, if she had a bottle of tequila and a shotgun handy.

Keith sprinted towards the end flags, even though he knew they were on different timetables, and it didn't matter at all who got there first. But seeing the action sports assholes running for it, he couldn't help running for it, too. Especially that bitch. Her long legs pumped, fast, muscles bunching like steel cable. Keith caught the flash of her eyes, briefly, as she looked up at him.

She pulled out in front of action-sports dude. He reached out for her as she passed, as if to hold her back.

Keith smiled. *How's it feel, asshole?*

One hundred yards. Keith was slightly ahead. He thought. It was hard to judge distance. The action sports bitch had pulled twenty feet in front of the dude.

Fifty yards. No. She was closer. Shit. Keith leaned into it, pushed his screaming muscles even harder, felt them turn into something like red-hot lava in his legs, burning.

But he didn't seem to run any faster. Elena was closer to the ending flags. She was.

*Come on! Come on legs!* Keith pleaded with his body.

Twenty yards. Ten.

The action-sports bitch ran through the flags. She threw her hands high in victory, and high-stepped off her velocity, her feet throwing up little puffs of orange dust.

Keith and the action-sports dude almost collided as they went through the flags. Dead heat. No winner.

*No, you're a loser*, he told himself, looking at the spandex-suited woman, now bent over and panting in the scrub.

"What was that?" showpuke said. He wore a name badge, but Keith had long since stopped trying to decode them. It didn't matter anyway. "This isn't a race! There isn't a winner here!"

Keith smiled, taking big whooping breaths.

"It was fun," action-sports bitch called, still bent over.

Showpuke frowned and tried another tact: "Where's Geoff?" he asked.

"Fell down... a hill... died," Keith said, between huge breaths.

"He... what? He did?" showpuke said. His hand jerked towards his handscreen.

"Yeah... big mess, splat!"

Handscreen went to mouth. Showpuke's eyes were wide. In the distance, action-sports dude and bitch were circling each other, like fighters in the ring.

"No," Keith said. "Not dead... got himself stuck. What was my time?"

Goggle-eyes from the showpuke. "You... what... time?"

"Yes." Keith tapped his watch. "Time."

"What about Geoff? You have to go back and get him!"

"I don't have to do shit. Time?"

"If he's stuck, he might be hurt."

Keith nodded. "It's possible. Time?"

"No! We have to go get him."

Keith pretended to look thoughtful. "If you tell me my time, maybe I'll get him."

"12:08.5." The showpuke said.

"Cool," Keith said. He'd shaved another fourteen seconds off. Progress, progress. He grabbed a Gatorade and headed for the Neteno van, parked in the shade of a large boulder.

"Hey!" Showpuke said. "You said you'd go get Geoff."

"I said 'maybe,'" Keith said, not turning around.

"But... you said!"

"I changed my mind." Keith said, smiling into the distance.

He heard the showpuke arguing with the action-sports assholes. From the tone, they were telling him to fuck right off. That made Keith's smile grow. They got it. They were the ones to watch. It was always good when the competition got obvious.

Because hey, you never knew when your climbing gear might have a little problem. Or when someone might be just a little ahead of you on the course, setting up some little surprises.

He remembered Jimmy, trying to talk him out of staying on the show. But that was stupid. They paid him more to sit on his ass than he'd ever made. And there was the big prize, the thirty million or whatever it was supposed to be now.

*One chance in five isn't bad,* Jimmy had agreed.

*One chance in five, hell,* Keith said. *I'm going to win it.*

*Can't count on that,* Jimmy said.

But Keith had just grinned. He was going to win. He knew it. He could feel it. Everyone else here was soft. While they were going back to get team-members who'd fallen down, he'd be moving ahead. While they were arguing which way to go, he'd be getting farther in front.

Eventually, Geoff made it over the ridge, and the showpuke stopped chattering into his handscreen. His gray clothes were streaked with orange dirt, and his hair stuck out in odd spiky angles, but he didn't seem hurt. He walked, slowly, down the slope towards the finish flags, casting low-lidded glances in Keith's direction from time to time.

Maybe he'd quit today, with the big boo-hoo face he was wearing.

Keith smiled. *If not today, soon.*

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## Schedule

"What the hell does Timberland know about making space suits?" Evan said. He shuffled through the documents on his deskpace, arranging and rearranging them as if trying to make them into something he wanted to read. He rubbed his face, pulling it into a comic mask of fatigue and frustration.

*Why should you care?* Jere thought. You have the easy job. I need to keep this studio running in this fucking lean time. Nobody believes anything we do anymore, and the world, for a change, was quiet. Not much real stuff to leverage. Things were boring in the world. And boring, for Neteno, wasn't good.

And I get to sell these second-tier assholes. You're too good to do that, apparently. You just deliver the news that the schedule's been pushed, then stand back when the sponsors start to pull.

*So. Fuck you, Evan. Fuck you very much.*

"They'll pay to do it," Jere said.

"Another prime sponsor." Sarcastically.

"What, like you're suddenly worried about our contestants?"

Evan shrugged and stood up to pace. "RusSpace finally got back to me."

"And?"

"And we're fucked."

For a moment, the word didn't even register with Jere. Then he heard the phrase like a physical blow. "Fucked! What does fucked mean, like they won't do it? Don't tell me they're pulling out. Don't tell me we just boosted a ton of shit into orbit so they can make another goddamn hotel at cut-rates, when our whole show turns to shit."

"No, no. They still want to do it. But it's going to cost three times what we thought."

Jere's stomach surged and bucked like a demented roller coaster. Three times. That was impossible. They were taking residuals on future value of the Neteno building. He'd sold options on his condo. And the big money was already getting cold feet. GM and Boeing pulled out when the schedule last slid. So now it was Kia and Cessna for the Wheels and the Kites. Good names, yeah, but not blue-chip. Maybe it would boost the ratings, that bit of risk, that added chance...

Evan nodded. "Yeah, it's a shit cocktail, all right."

"We can't do this," Jere said. His voice sounded hollow and faraway.

Evan shrugged. "We have to."

"No. You don't understand. We can't do this. Unless you and dad have tons of money stuffed up your ass, we're baked. RusSpace gets their orbital hotel on the cheap. And we get shit."

Evan was silent for a long time. Finally: "There's no more money."

It was Jere's turn to be silent. He tugged at his hair and paced the room. He looked up at the scrolling Neteno sign, but it was long-gone, reprogrammed and sold to another company. Now they just had big plastic letters lit by LEDs, like everyone else.

"So what's the problem this time? RusSpace lied again? They fucked up? What?"

"No." A sigh. "Dick ran the analysis. For once, the basic designs look solid. It's the testing that's killing us. Five drop modules, five backout pods, five Wheels, five Kites, the big package of Returns, a ship with a fucking centrifuge, for God's sake, goddamn, it's a lot of shit to do!"

"So what do we do?"

"We scale it back." Evan said, not looking at him.

"What? Take it to three teams?"

"No. Scale back the build and the test. Leave out the backout pods, for example."

"What happens if the team can't make it to the Returns?"

A slow smile. "Tough snatch, said the biatch."



"What?"

"Before your time." Another shrug. This one slow, lazy, nonchalant. "If they can't make it to the Returns, they probably can't make it back. Plus, they signed the waivers."

"But... will this get us to budget?"

"I don't know. But we could do more."

Jere's gut felt like a giant spring, knotted and twisting. "What?"

"Skip final test of the Kites and the Wheels. All they are is a bunch of fabric and struts anyway."

"And?"

"Leave the spinner down on the ground."

"How are the contestants supposed to stay in shape if they don't have gravity?"

"We'll put in a whole lot of Stairmasters. They can exercise. And we get another sponsor."

Jere felt his lunch straining to come back up on him. *How much more can we sell out?* He wondered. "And?"

"And, that might get us back on track. Or so say our formerly communist friends."

"Will they guarantee it?"

"They aren't guaranteeing anything anymore. But I think it's a lot more likely that we'll make the budget if we drop some of the fluff."

Fluff. Yeah, fluff. Just a bunch of safety gear. Nobody will notice.

"We have to make a decision," Evan said. Jere stopped and looked at him. Now, there was no uncertainty. No hint of doubt. No humanity at all in his leaden eyes.

"I don't know," Jere said.

"It's this, or BK. You said it yourself."

Jere felt something in his eyes. He rubbed it away. "We're gambling with people's lives."

"Someone's going to die. Probably lots of someones," Evan said, softly.

Jere started, as if he'd just grabbed a live circuit. *So this was all grandstanding from the start? All an act? Orchestrated and manipulated to achieve the desired result?*

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Of course it was. *That was what they did.*

"We'd be taking a huge chance," Jere said.

Evan shook his head. "What's a bigger chance? Trying to scrape more money, or making a few changes?"

A few changes. Nothing big. Nothing major. Nothing we won't be crucified for if someone dies and it comes out that we did this crap at the last minute. Their trial might have a bigger audience than the whole Winning Mars thing. Maybe Neteno could get the rights to that.

"Can we do this clean?" Jere said. The words seemed to come from very far away. It was like he was not speaking at all. "Can we make it look like we never had plans for the centrifuge, the backout stuff, all that?"

"I'm sure we can arrange something."

"Are you sure?"

"Russians are some of the best data-manipulators in the world. I hear they helped the president with that little indiscretion last year, the one you can't find on Found Media anymore."

Jere let the silence stretch out. Evan watched him intently. In the dim light of the office, his weathered features could have been the craggy face of a demon.

"Do it," Jerry said finally, softly. Hating himself.

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## Loss

The people at Bob's Pizza Restaurant in Independence looked at Patrice and Jere with open-eyed stares. No quick little sidelong glances, I'm-really-not-looking-at-you-don't-really-care-about-you stuff like you got in Hollywood, when the locals brushed shoulders with real celebrities, but real holy-shit-what-are-they stares.

And they're probably just looking at us because we're strangers, not celebrities, Patrice thought. Jere's sleek little Armani jacket and perfectly-faded but ultra-clean jeans clashed with the sea of dirty plaid and denim, and nobody but Jere wore an eyepod. Patrice liked to think they were looking at her because she'd been in interactives, but she hadn't done anything for the past eighteen months, and people's memories were short, so they were probably just looking at her because she was one of the wierdos out jumping around on the rocks, getting prepped for some Hollywood thing they didn't really care about.

"I'm sorry," Jere said, looking down at his pizza. Big pools of orange grease gathered in every piece of heat-curved pepperoni. She imagined Jere looking at his reflection in those polka-dot mirrors.

"About what?"

"This place," he said. "I wish I could take you somewhere better."

"It's the only game in town, other than Samwiches."

"Yeah. Still." He looked up at her. His eyes seemed sunken, and his gaze was faraway.

"What's wrong?" Patrice said.

Jere tried a smile. It fit like a fat guy's suit on a stickman. "How's your training going?" he asked/

"Not so good," she said. "I don't like Geoff."

"Who's Geoff?"

"The geek."

"Which one?"

"The one with the sandwich-board."

Jere nodded. "I thought you were with the lesbians."

"I was. They didn't like me. They said I was slow. So they put me with Geoff. Because creepy-guy didn't like him."

"Is Keith giving you any trouble?"

Patrice shook her head. "No." Other than some good eyeballing at the hotel in the morning, as they passed in the lobby. But, since security took him aside, he hadn't said anything to her.

"Good."

"You should hire Damon Hur," she said.

"Why?" Jere said, blinking.

"He's a good actor. We could be the actor team."

"You like Damon now?" Sitting up, looking at her in that oh-shit way that guys have, when they think they're about to be upstaged.

Patrice smiled and grabbed Jere's hand. "No. Not as much as you. We'd just make a good team, I think."

"Oh." Still that look.

"Jere, you don't have to worry about me!"

Just a look, neutral.

"Though I do have another offer," Patrice said. "It's a really good one too, first-run, Vice City 10. They'll give me front cover, and input on advertising and tie-ins." She couldn't resist. She wanted to see Jere wave his hands and say, *No, you can't do that! Don't do that!* He was so easy to tease.

But, this time, he just looked down at his hands. His mouth worked, as if he wanted to say something, but no words came out.

"Jere?" she said.

"Maybe you should take it," Jere said. His voice was soft and faraway.

Patrice started. "What?"

Jere looked up at her. His eyes sparkled, as if brimming with tears. "I said, maybe you should take it. It sounds like a hell of an offer. It's a Gen3 title, isn't it?"

Patrice's heart thudded, quick, like rain. "Quit teasing!"

"I'm not. You should take it."

"Jere, this isn't funny."

"I'm not kidding."

Patrice squeezed back tears. "Yes you are! Yes you are!" She pounded the table with her fists, twice. More eyes swiveled to stare at them. She could feel the locals' gaze, hot on the back of her neck.

"Patrice, what's wrong?"

"You are! You are! This was supposed to be a joke, don't you know?"

"You mean you don't have another offer?"

"Yes! I do! I get them all the time. But I don't want to take them! They're just for fun, just a tease. I'm teasing you, can't you see that?" Tears started flowing in earnest, and Patrice scrabbled in her purse for a tissue.

Jere looked as if someone had clocked him in the forehead with a sledgehammer. His mouth hung open. His eyes were slightly crossed. He got out of his chair, and came to put his arms around her. Patrice shrugged him off and stood up, backing away.

"You were serious?" Patrice said. "You want me to do Vice City?"

Jere stood with his arms wide, as if he didn't know what to do with them. "Yes," he said. "I was serious."

"Why?" she wailed. "I was really trying on the courses, and they just got the big rolly-things out here, and they're always falling apart, and I know I'm not good at them, but I'll get better. I'm trying! I really am!"

Jere's eyes were filled with tears. She watched as one began sliding down his cheek. Fast, darting, it disappeared under his chin.

*Why is he crying? I don't understand this,* she thought.

"It's not that," he said.

"Then what is it? Why are you crying?"

Jere wiped at his eyes, then looked down at the floor. "I can't... I can't let... you miss any more opportunities."

"What?" It sounded like he was going to say something else, then caught himself.

"Take the gig," Jere said.

Patrice suddenly felt very cold. "I can't believe you're saying that."

"I... Patrice... we can still be together."

She saw her billing, The only actor ever on Mars, flying away. She saw the chance at the money, very decent money, flying away. She saw all the sponsorships and gigs and tie-ins and merchandising, flying away.

"What if I want to stay?" Patrice said, slow and cold.

"I don't think you should give up this opportunity."

In other words, fuck right off. Which explained why he wanted to take her to a fancier restaurant. Which explained why he'd come all the way up here to see her.

"I see," Patrice said.

"I... Patrice, this doesn't change anything between us."

"That's what you think," she said.

She turned and walked, slowly, out of the pizza place. Leaving Jere to the eyes of the locals.

*Fuck you, Jere, she thought. Fuck you all to hell.*

---

## Oversight

The spooks came on a rainy November morning, less than three months before launch. Jere was still trying to convince himself that making the August sweeps would be better than February, that all the other networks would be showing repurposed or reedited stalties against their shiny new program.

The rags liked it, saying Neteno would probably take the sweeps. The sponsors were less excited, because no matter how you sliced it, there was less access in the summer. People would be on vacation, doing things down here on good old planet Earth, and they wouldn't care what was going on almost a hundred million miles away. So now a lot of the sponsors wanted guaranteed access levels or kickbacks or better position or whatever.

Jere got about fifteen seconds notice. Dad came hustling into his office, heel-toeing it like someone had a gun in his back. His eyes were wide. He sat down in one of the chairs opposite Jere's desk.

"We're having a meeting," Ron said.

"What?"

A quick glance towards the door. "Don't kick me out. You need a witness."

Then, loudly. "The hell with the sponsors, let them whine about prices."

"Dad?"

His father gave him a desperate, wide-eyed look, like an actor hamming it up in an old linear. But little beads of sweat stood out on his brow.

Something like a giant cold hand grabbed Jere in the pit of his stomach.

"Yeah," Jere said. "Let them complain."

Dad nodded, smiling grimly.

Two men walked through the door of Jere's office. Which in itself was wrong. Sharon shouldn't have let anyone through.

They wore indistinguishable blue suits and cheap black ties. Their eyes were heavy and dead and immobile, like they'd seen everything that Ron and Evan had put together, but they were young, not out of their twenties.

Both wore cheap black eyepods. They also small gold motion-holo pins that flashed and gleamed as the eye morphed into a world and back again. Underneath the holo were the etched letters: **USG OVERSIGHT**.

*Oh holy fucking shit*, Jere thought. He struggled to keep his expression neutral.

"Mr. Gutierrez?" One of them said, stepping forward to the desk and flashing his ID. Jere looked at it. It was one of those new fancy holo things that they were trying to sell to everyone, but this one had a big NASA logo and a discreet little eye next to it. He didn't see the name.

"Yes," Jere said.

Agent #1 turned to his father. "And you, sir?"

"I'm Ron."

"Ron..."

"Gutierrez."

"Ah. The father. We didn't know you had a stake in this."

"Then you aren't doing your research, young man!"

Silence. Agent #1 turned to Agent #2. #2 pursed his lips. "Our discussion is to be with Jere Gutierrez."

"And me," Ron said.

"We have the capability of removing you."

"Because I'm such a threatening old man?"

Another glance. "You may remain."

Jere blew out of breath. *Make nice, remember. Even if they are your biggest competitor. Or, in this case, even if they can make you disappear.* "Would you like a seat? Coffee?"

Agent #1 sat. The other remained standing.

"What's this all about?" Jere asked.

"Your program. Winning Mars."

"Why?" *Humor defines the individual.* "Would you like to be a sponsor?"

No reaction. Not even a glance. Agent #1 said, "There will be no program."

"What!" Jere and Ron said, at once. Ron stood up, and Jere waved him to sit.

Agent #1 just looked at them, his expression neutral. "We will not permit the launch."

Ron laughed. "We've already sent most everything up for assembly. What exactly are you going to stop? The passenger shuttle? Are you going to shut down RusSpace, too? On Russian soil?"

"No. Enterprise shall not launch. Or maneuver."

"What? Why?" Jere said.

"Enterprise would be an effective terror weapon, if it was dropped on a city."

"A terror weapon?" Jere said.

"That's stupid!" Ron said. "We're going to go through all the trouble of putting together a ship in orbit, only to bring it down again? Why not just launch a nuke from the ground?"

Agent #2 allowed a thin smile. "And you have access to a nuke?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Still, you recognize the implied threat."

Ron colored an ugly beet-red. "No! Don't be stupid."

Agent #1 held up a hand. "You must acknowledge the possibility that someone could take over Enterprise. If it was turned back on the US, how big a crater would it make, say in Washington DC? Or New York, for that matter?"

Ron's face had turned red. "That's... idiotic!"

"What do you want?" Jere asked.

"We want to prevent any possible attack on the United States."

Ron nodded, sudden understanding gleaming in his eyes. "China."

"Excuse me?" Agent #1 said.

"China's bitching about our program, aren't they? They don't want to lose face because they said they'd go to Mars and didn't, and now a bunch of miserable capitalists are doing it for a TV show!"

"Free-access linear," Jere couldn't help saying.

"Whatever. I bet that's it, isn't it?"

Agent #1 shrugged. "It is your option to speculate."

"So what do you want?" Jere said.

Agent #1 looked politely confused. "I'm afraid I do not understand."

"How do we launch? What do you want from us to make it happen?"

"You don't launch," Agent #2 said. "There is no negotiation."

Agent #1 leaned forward. "However, if you turn the program over to us, we would provide proper acknowledgement of your role in this endeavor."

"We can't do that!" Jere said.

"We are not offering a negotiation," Agent #2 said.

"What about our sponsors? They'll come for our heads. Hell, the Organizatsiya will come for our heads, too! We can't just hand this over to you."

"I'm sure we can work out an arrangement with the Russians. They do share some of our commitment to eliminating terrorism."

Jere slumped back in his chair. Oversight could do almost anything they wanted if they called it terrorism. He could be picked up and whisked away and never seen again. He could have everything taken from him piece by piece, a Job job. Or worse.

Taking their offer might be the best bet. Of course, he'd have to get Evan in on it, but maybe there was some way to profit from it anyway. When you were talking deep pockets, the government had the deepest pockets of all. Maybe they could spin it...

"No fucking way!" Ron said. His face was almost purple. He levered himself up out of his chair and went to tower over the seated agent. The standing one tensed, but didn't move.

Ron poked a finger in Agent #1's chest. "We're not going to Mars to plant fucking flags!"

"Dad--"

"Shut up." Low and deadly.

"Did the fucking pilgrims come to plant fucking flags?" Ron said. "No! They came to get away from bureaucratic fucks like you! You assholes had your chance. How many billions did we give to you shitpoles? What did we get for it? Our lunar rovers in Chinese museums! A bunch of rusting hardware crash-landed on Mars. Thanks. Thanks a lot. Now it's our chance!"

Jere watched his dad, open-mouthed. He was frozen in place. His mind gibbered. *We're dead, maybe we can get a flight out, where do we go...*

"You're going to throw your lives away on this?" Agent #1 asked. "For this show? This is just a publicity stunt! A linear!"

"Is it?" Ron had gone wild-eyed. Jere thought of prophets, energized by the power of God.

Agent #2 stepped forward quickly and put his hand on Agent #1's shoulder. He bent and whispered something in his ear. Agent #1 nodded and stood. Both of them now faced Ron.

"So you refuse to turn over the program, according to the directives of USG Oversight?"

"Yes," Ron said.

The two swiveled to look at Jere. "And does he speak for you?"

Jere looked at his father. Ron looked back steadily, intently. He nodded, just a fraction.

"Yes," Jere said.



The agents stood there for a moment longer, their expressions unreadable. Jere couldn't stand looking at them.

"Get out of here," he said.

The agents turned and filed out. Ron looked up at Jere, the ghost of a smile on his face.

"We did the right thing," Ron said.

*I hope you're right, dad, Jere thought. I hope you know what you're doing.*

*Otherwise, we're both dead.*

---

Wheel

Mike Kinsson bounced along Movie Trail Road outside Independence, riding inside something that resembled a hamster-wheel wrapped in cellophane. Mike had seen tourists and locals laugh and point as they bounced from rut to rut. He wondered if they knew how much sense their vehicle made on Mars, where they had no idea what kind of terrain they would encounter, and they had no weight budget for anything like a conventional 4WD truck. But, he had to admit, it probably did look ridiculous.

And it was certainly uncomfortable. Beside him, Juelie Peters and Sam Ruiz gripped their harnesses grimly, as every shock and jolt were transmitted directly through the frame to their perch. The hydrazine engine they'd use on Mars had been replaced with a small gasoline engine, which buzzed like a gigantic insect near Mike's ear.

And, to top it all off, their miracle dust-won't-stick-to-it polymer was indeed attracting dust, as well as being scratched and hazed by the rocks they passed over. Seeing through it had become more and more difficult. Now, Mike tried to duck his head outside the spinning rim, to get a better view of the trail they were following. He couldn't quite reach. He squinted and sighed. Off-road probably wasn't all that different from the rutted trail.

They crested a rise and caught a brief moment of air.

"Hey!" Sam said. "Be careful!"

"I know, I know," Mike said, squeezing the brake to slow their descent down the hill. Rain had cut deep channels down the middle of the trail, and at their right side as well. Mike steered them over towards the left side of the road.

*I am getting the hang of this thing, he thought.*

They hit a little gully where a small stream crossed the road. There was a metallic groan that Mike heard even over the buzzing of the engine.

Then he was falling towards a crumpling mess of plastic sheeting and buckled aluminum struts. It happened so fast it almost seemed like the wreckage was flying at him. Mike put out his hands, as the knee of a bent strut came up at him...

He hit the ground, hard, taking the knee of the strut in his stomach. Pain exploded. Juelie screamed. Sam Ruiz cursed. The gasoline engine screamed for a moment as it freewheeled, then went into shutdown.

Suddenly there was silence, except for the soft rustling of the plastic sheets. Mike rolled over on his side, hands clutched around his belly. Above him, dirty plastic colored the blue sky a dull gray.

He looked down at his stomach, expecting to see a metal strut poking out of it. There was nothing. He pulled up his shirt. There was one small red mark, nothing more.

"That'll be a fucker of a bruise tomorrow," Sam said, unhooking himself from his harness. He'd come out of the crash without ever hitting the ground.

"Juelie," Mike said, and turned. She was on all fours, still harnessed in, groaning.

"Alive," she said.

"Need help?"

A glance. A glare. "Not from you."

Sam grinned at Mike and went over to help Juelie up. Sam was one of those wiry-thin, athletic guys with a face like something out of the Interactive Plastic Surgery Guide to Looking Like the Perfect Man. So he wasn't surprised.

*But still, nice to be surprised now and again,* Mike thought.

Once he was out of wreckage, Mike stood with hands on hips, frowning at the shattered remains of their Wheel. The winter breeze was chilly, but he had to wipe sweat out of his eyes. His hands still shook.

"Oh, shit, now I'm worried," Sam said, emerging from the pile of struts and plastic. He led Juelie by the hand.

"What do you mean?" Juelie said.

"Mike looks worried."

"I don't get it."

"If a True Believer looks worried, I should be worried, too."

An instant of blue eyes and heavy non-blond eyebrows. "Huh?"

Sam ignored her. He dropped her hand and went to stand by Mike. "Are you worried?"

"This is the second time our Wheel crapped out," Mike said.

"So we walk back."

They were still three miles out from the pickup point on Movie Trail, which was still ten miles outside of Independence. But that wasn't what made Mike frown.

"What if it breaks on Mars?" Mike said.

"They said these were specially made for earth, like, bulkier, or something."

Mike nodded. They had made the point that these Wheels were made heavier to withstand earth gravity, but

inertia was inertia, wherever they were. What if they ran into a ravine -- on thinner struts -- and the Wheel left them stranded on Mars? The whole thing was a tensioned space frame. One weak link, and the whole thing came down.

"If it breaks on Mars, we're done. There isn't any truck to walk to."

Sam started. "They'll come pick us up."

"No. They won't. You saw the plans. There's no backup."

"But they have to pick us up!" this from Juelie, arms crossed.

"No. They don't."

"We can fix it," Sam said.

"With what?"

"I... shit, they've gotta give us duct tape or something," Sam said.

"I don't think that would do it," Mike said. They didn't understand. They would never understand. There was a very real possibility they could all die on Mars.

And, oddly enough, the more he thought about it, the more he was OK with it. *Here lies Mike, who gave his life to pioneer humanity's path to other worlds* sounded a whole lot better than *Here lies Mike, who worked for Yahoo for forty years and managed to put enough money away so he wouldn't starve when he was old*.

At least part of it was his last conversation with his parents, who had appointed themselves the official Negative News Gatherers for Winning Mars. Every phone conversation ended shortly after they said, "Oh, yeah, and I don't know if you heard, but..."

... Neteno's in financial trouble, that's what they all say...

... the Russians had their first little orbital accident, it only killed one of their staff, but we worry about you...

... buzz is Oversight is looking into Winning Mars..."

And so on.

"What are you trying to say?" Juelie asked.

Mike looked away. "I'm not trying to say anything."

"He's saying, if the Wheel breaks while we're on Mars, we might as well pack it in. We're dead."

Silence for a time. Juelie took a step towards Sam. Another.

"You're trying to scare us off," Juelie said. "You want to be like that Paul guy. Have the prize all to yourself."

Mike just looked at them. He didn't know what to say.

"Is that it?" Sam asked.

"No!" Mike said. "I wouldn't be able to assemble everything in time. Keith Paul is a bear!"

"So you've thought about it?"

"Not until now, no!"

Sam retreated to Juelie and put an arm around her. She leaned into him and glared at Mike.

"Look. I just want us to win. To win, we have to stay alive." *Put it in terms you'll understand.*

Juelie and Sam shared a glance, but relaxed visibly. "So what do we do?" Sam said.

*I could offer to help them with the design,* Mike thought. Except for the one little fact that he didn't know anything about mechanical engineering. But Sam and Juelie were sufficiently uneducated to think, since he was a techie, he could probably help.

*Or we can just say fuck it, pack a roll of low-temp duct tape, and take a chance,* Mike thought. But they wouldn't like to hear that, either. They probably had plans for their lives, plans that probably involved having kids and going out to dinner and spending the thirty million dollars they'd win, throwing parties for friends and flying to trendy places in France and New York and Acapulco. Anything that might interrupt that kind of grandiose dream, they wouldn't want to hear about.

*But it's the explorers who are remembered,* Mike thought. The people who made a difference. Columbus, not the people who financed him. Lindbergh, not the people who built his plane. Armstrong, not Mission Control. Edison, not the millionaires he made. Einstein, not the people who used his physics.

But they wouldn't understand that, either.

*Would you, dying under an alien sky?*

"I don't know," he said, finally.

They trudged back to the pickup point in the low-slanting light of the afternoon sun, their shadows cast before them like giants.

## Freedom

When Oversight came back, it was with two grinning NASA executives and their own camera crew. Following them were one hundred and fifty thousand people who jammed the Hollywood streets in cars and on motorcycles and on bikes and on foot, holding banners saying "Free Enterprise!" and "We are NOT communists!" and "New frontiers, not new Oversight!" and of course, "NASA SUCKS!"

Jere, Ron and Evan couldn't help grinning themselves. Within a day, Ron's video of the NASA/Oversight shakedown had been posted on a thousand message boards and ten thousand blogs. The video that Oversight had tried to grab right out of Ron's eye.

*But Hollywood wins again,* Jere thought. The money they'd spent on encryption, rights management and network protection had finally paid off. Neteno's networks had gotten slow for a few hours after the meeting, as they fought off the Oversight attack. But data from Ron's old eyecam was safe.

They let Oversight think they'd deleted the video. Then they'd buried it in a viral about an extreme sports death and seeded the world net.

The raw video almost brought the AV IM network to its knees in the US, Japan, France, Russia, and even parts of China. A thousand pundits spouted off about "The New Stalin," "The New Face of Censorship," the fact that the Constitution had long been paved over, the free-enterprise foundation of the country, and the "Taking of the New Frontier."

The New Frontier had struck the core audience like a well-spoken diatribe supporting socialized health care at a meeting of Reformed Republicans. Survivalists polished their weapons and streamed out of the Sierras and Appalachians and half-forgotten Nebraska missile silos to demonstrate. TrekCon 21 was turned into a huge caravan that converged on Sacramento, trapping senators in their buildings, demanding the governor secede so that Neteno could go about its business. They were there three days, gathering even more participants from around the country, as over a million people, some in overalls and prickly beards and armed with shotguns, some wearing Klingon outfits, some poorly-spoken science fiction writers, some housewives in SUVs, some businessmen who worked in aviation and space and engineering, still with that glint of adventure and discovery and progress in their eyes.

In three days, two slogans were posted at over ten million websites, plastered on bumper stickers, hung from suction-cups behind windows: *Free Enterprise*, and *Give Us New Frontiers*.

A week after the video hit the net, Jere received a discreet phone call from a higher-up at USG Oversight. The higher-up made him a very generous offer. Jere politely refused and made his own counteroffer.

A day after that, he received another phone call, politely accepting the prime sponsorship for the mission, for a price greater than the entire monies they had collected to date. The launch would go forward as planned. Jere and Ron and Evan were still the controlling shareholder. The only real differences were that there would be one NASA observer present at the launch, they would carry some NASA interferometers and measurement gear, and there would be another discreet logo added on the ship and the suits.

Jere watched Evan and Ron as the NASA muckty spouted off about "New Partnership with Business," and how wonderful this opportunity was. The second-best bit was them shooting it under the big new Neteno sign out in front of the building.

*The best bit*, Jere thought, *was that it was real*. Real. Verifiable. Neteno's star was rising once again.

And they might even be doing a public service. Lefties and righties both talked about the New Press being the counterbalance to Oversight. And the crowd looked happy, vindicated, relieved. As if they were thinking, *Good, Good, we still have the power, we still live in a free country*.

"We are proud to be able to support this effort, and apologize for any misunderstanding our previous interactions caused," the muckty said. "For less than the cost of a single robotic Mars lander, we are sending the first manned mission to Mars. With this mission, we have again leaped ahead of the Chinese and the Russians. We see this as a model for future exploration of space: USG Oversight and private industry, working hand-in-hand to accomplish our goals."

Some applause, some boos, some catcalls. But it was done. They were back on track. It even got them their advertising hooks: *Free Enterprise*, and *The Newest Frontier*. Both were really catching on in a big way, buzzing around the net. Some studios even floated ideas for competing programs.

*So now it's more than a game*, he thought. It was a demonstration of some of the things that people will need to do to conquer the red planet. Or at least they'd spin it that way.

He looked at his dad. He'd taken the biggest chance. If Oversight had pulled his video, they'd probably both be in a very small cell in a very remote part of the country right now.

*Fucking showoff*, Jere thought. But it was a soft thought. For now, at least, his dad was okay.

Not like Evan and his hard, unblinking eyes. To him, it was all still just a game.

A game played hard, winner take all.

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## Kite

Nandir Patel imagined flying his Kite to be something akin to being suspended over the desert in a hang-glider. He'd seen films from hang-gliders, and had always secretly wanted to try one. But that would mean taking time away from the company for training, for test flights, for selecting the right glider, for packing it up and carting it to the foothills, for an hour or two of silent flight. His time was worth more when he worked on software. Or worked on the company. And that was what mattered. Making enough to step off the treadmill. Then he could sigh in relief, take a breather, learn to hang-glide, write a novel, or just sit in Peet's and drink tea all day, musing and waiting for the day the perfect woman would come along.

But he didn't expect to be shipped down to El Segundo, and hung in a small blue cylindrical room in the far corner of a large concrete tilt-up building. He noticed there was something like a treadmill below him, set on the floor.

"This is the test flight?" he asked them.

"It is." The woman who strapped him in wore a white t-shirt with the logo of Moto Robotics on it, faded, over tight blue jeans. Long brunette hair cascaded down her back.

"You're a technician?"

"Engineer," she said.

"So this is a simulation?"

"Kinda," she said. She went on to explain that the model Kite was only 1/4 scale, so it could fit in a barometrically-controlled wind tunnel. They'd take the pressure down to Martian levels, run the tunnel, and use force feedback from the model to provide him with realistic control inputs on his full-sized harness.

"What about my teammate?"

A quick grin. "Simulated."

"So they aren't going to build a full-sized model?"

"Can't. There's so much more air here on earth, tests would be meaningless. Or we'd have to fly in the stratosphere, but then you'd have to wear a spacesuit."

"Squeezesuit," Nandir said, frowning, remembering his fitting for the thing. He would be happy never having to wear one again. When he first slid it on, he thought, *Oh, hey, this isn't bad, kind of like long underwear*, but when they'd activated the fabric, he felt like it had become a giant snake, and was squeezing him to death. His genitals were clasped in a death-grip. He could feel the catheter, digging into the skin of his crotch.

*And you have to wear that for days on Mars*, he thought. He wasn't looking forward to that.

"Have a good time," the brunette engineer said, and waved from the door. Nandir waved back.

The room went dark, then lit again, this time with an immersive of Mars. Nandir smiled. It was good. Really good. The illusion was almost seamless, except for some light-spill where the vertical wall met the ceiling and floor. If he looked straight ahead, he could imagine he was suspended over Mars. Orange, arid rocks beneath him. Pink sky ahead.

"We'll start the simulation now," the woman's voice said. "First we'll do steady-state, then landing, then takeoff."

The buzz of an engine came through the speaker. Nandir supposed it was to simulate the sound of their hydrazine motor. The ground unrolled under him quickly, and the airframe became live in his hands.

Nandir pulled the control bar forward, dipping the nose of the Kite. The ground rose up to meet him. Fast. He pulled up. The Kite jerked up. He saw nothing but sky. Then the craft heeled over and he saw nothing but ground. It came at him, fast.

It stopped with a comical crashing noise.

"Easy!" the engineer said. "You need to be very gradual with the control inputs. You're flying pretty fast and low to get lift, remember. There isn't a lot of margin for error."

"What about automatic control?" Nandir said. "You should be able to limit control input to defined parameters."

A laugh. "Oh yeah. You're the software guy. Good thinking, software guy, but you're assuming we have servos. This is manual input, unmediated. You have to be careful."

"Oh."

"Now, let's try it again," she said, and the ground unrolled under him.

Nandir eventually got the hang of the controls, and the extremely light touch they required. When he got used to that, they had him do landings. After the seventh comic crash, he finally was able to bring the craft down to a smooth landing. The harness lowered with him, allowing his feet to run on the treadmill. The treadmill moved too fast for him, and he lost his footing three more times before he managed a successful landing.

"Not bad," the engineer said.

"As compared to?"

"Betting pool," she said. "You're the first. The rest of your friends come later."

Compared to landing, taking off was relatively easy. The only catch was angling the engine's thrust, because it had to be up full in order to give them enough lift to take off. When he finally managed that, Nandir earned a round of applause over the speaker.

The convict asshole was next. He glared at Nandir when he walked into the little room. "This is flyin?" he asked.

Nandir smiled. "This, sir, is flying."

Another glare. Nandir ducked out of the room, chuckling.

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## Popularity

Tonightshow.com was one of the survivors of the golden age of television, so Jere supposed it was appropriate that he'd appear there. But it still seemed strange. Tonightshow was where the up-and-comers and just-over-the-hills came to get skewered, gently, by the perpetual and ageless Jay Leno. Jere wondered how many strange treatments the man had gone through over the last couple of decades, how many little trips out of the country he'd taken, and how many hairs of his familiar salt-and-pepper coiffure weren't made of some synthetic fiber.

*I shouldn't be here*, Jere thought, as the makeup guy worked on him, in the little dressing room.

But maybe he should. On his way to the studio, he'd passed a mural of Mars, drawn by locals with UV-active paint, so it sparkled and morphed in his Porsche's HID lights. On the Hollywood and Vine macrodisplay, promos for Winning Mars chased across the giant screen. His earbuds whispered that Ho-Man's *Spirit of Mars* was currently playing on the Hip-Hop (light, positive) channel, and The New Daves' *Fuckin Mars* was playing on the Mashup channel of the A-only nets.

It was just like Evan said. Just like the charts showed. They'd done more than touch a nerve. They'd gone live wire. The world turned around Mars, for this brief time. Part of it was probably their famous Oversight video, twenty-one point five billion views and counting. But it was more than that. Jere sampled their fanmedia and shivered. Housewives yelled at aging NASA scientists, who in turn were razored apart by nineteen-year-old kids with animated tattoos. Engagement was off the scale. There were over one thousand seven hundred sites dedicated to tracking progress on the Mars Enterprise. Time-lapse footage of its orbital construction played on over a hundred million desktops. Proctor and Gamble had started doing Mars-based promotions, even though it wasn't a sponsor.

*If they die, I'm fucked*, Jere thought. Forget the Russians. There was no place on earth he could hide. He chuckled, briefly, imagining himself trying to convince the Russians to send him to Mars, because that would be the only place he was safe.

The makeup guy finished his routine and made a half-hearted pass at Jere. He was a good-looking kid, probably not more than twenty. Jere smiled and shook his head.

When they took him to the stage, Jere started. It was done in warm reds and inviting earth-tones, and the familiar cityscape had been replaced by a giant mural of Mars from orbit, cast against a background of brilliant stars. The ruddy planet glowed down on the stage, throwing cool shadows.

Before he knew it, they were live and on the air. Jere endured the entrance, the brief intro, and the good-natured ribbing (what, since you Mexicans have taken over LA, you gotta go to Mars next?). Then Leno went serious.

"So, did you know what you were doing?" he asked, leaning forward.

"At what point?"

"When you started this."

They'd gone over this in rehearsal. This was one of the easy questions, not one of the curveballs that Leno was sure to slip in. Jere was supposed to say, yes, he cared about humanity, yadda yadda, bullshit bullshit.

"No." Jere said, smiling.



Blink. "Why'd you do it, then."

Jere felt his grin growing wider. It was completely involuntary. He couldn't have stopped it if he tried.

"To save my ass," he said.

Silence for three beats. Jere spoke into it. "I did it because we needed a stunt. Because we needed the money. Neteno was big, and I wanted it bigger."

Leno's eyes narrowed, just a fraction.

*What the fuck are you doing?* Evan's voice came to Jere, in his earbud.

*No. Let him. Look at the numbers.* Dad's voice, somewhat in awe.

Jere popped the earbud out and dropped it on the floor. "Come on, man," he told Leno. "This is Hollywood. We don't do shit to save the planet, to better humanity, to preserve the endangered wild dingo. We do things because it gets us attention. You know how many celebs I know who have orgs bid on the causes they back? You know how many good interactives and linears get killed because the numbers don't come up right, or the 411 assholes say there's too much legal liability?"

"That's certainly an interesting perspective," Leno said.

"It's truth. It's the way the world works," Jere said.

"But a funny thing happened on the way to the money," Leno said, nodding. "You discovered that you really believed in this cause, and you'd do anything for it."

"Nope. Winning Mars is like an old car. Cheap to buy, then a money pit. We got in too deep. There's no going back. I hope we can fix up this car, sell it, and make a profit. But we might not."

Leno sat, mouth open. "But... you mortgaged everything, you fought Oversight!"

Jere looked at the camera and shrugged. "What can I say? I'm an idiot."

Leno tried to bait him in with some little jabs, but the interview was effectively over. When he brought in the surprise guests, an Oversight wonk and a science-fiction author, the audience barely even noticed.

On the way home, Jere almost half-expected to see the netbuzz angst mimicked in the macrovision, huge dripping red snipes announcing WINNING MARS CREATOR ADMITS BEING A MONEY-GRUBBING ASSHOLE, but the banners spun on unperturbed. In his eyepod, arguments went peaky and violent, boosting engagement above the path defined by Kase.

Slowly, consensus emerged. *It doesn't matter what his motives were*, they said. *It doesn't matter everything they did except for this was fake*, they said. *We don't believe he doesn't believe*, they said.

Evan yelled at him. Ron called him a genius.

Jere smiled.

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Team

Geoff Smith watched the three-way conversation, like some mutant form of tennis.

"If we take him, we get extra time?" Wende Kirshoff said.

"Yes," the Neteno program coordinator said. He was a thin little man who looked very tired, and very ready to be done with the training program.

"Do we have to use it?" Laci Thorens said.

"It's supposed to provide a window for Mr. Smith to run the experiments package," the Neteno wonk said.

"But do we have to use it?"

"It will take you some time to assemble your Wheel, in any case."

"But," Laci said, speaking very slowly and clearly, as if to someone very slow on the uptake, "Do we *have* to use it?"

Neteno wonk closed his mouth, sat back in his chair, and rubbed his eyes.

*Say something, Geoff thought. This is you they're talking about! You're going to be the one who finds life on Mars, and they're trying to talk Neteno out of the time you need to do it!*

But he had no picket to carry, no posts to make, no voice to speak. He was tired, and sore, and almost ready to tell them all to piss up a rope.

But you do that, you don't go, he thought. Neteno made that real clear. He couldn't be a team of one. He'd failed that physical. All the other teams were gelled. The only way he would be part of Winning Mars was if the lesbians took him.

Laci turned to Wende. Sitting together, the two tall, athletic blondes looked alike enough to be bookends. "We don't have to use it," Laci said.

The Neteno wonk said nothing.

"Wait a minute!" Geoff said.

Three heads swiveled to look at him. He shivered. He felt like a specimen on a glass slide.

"I... I have to do the experiments," Geoff said.

Still looking.

"I mean... I'll go as fast as I can, but I have to do the experiments. Or else IBM will get pissed."

Neteno wonk looked surprised. "True. We have a successful-completion clause in every sponsor's contract."

"So?"

"So, I don't think Neteno would be happy if you actively interfered with Mr. Smith's experiments."

Laci frowned. "But it's not like you can enforce it!"

"I believe it could be considered contract breach."

"Fuck. We can yell at him, can't we?"

"Verbal abuse we can't police. Remember, though, you'll be on camera, and taking direction from the team leader."

"So?"

Neteno's wonk shrugged and sat back.

"What do you think?" Laci asked.

Wende looked at Geoff. Her green eyes were cool and unreadable. But she didn't frown. Geoff tried to smile back at her. It felt mechanical and forced, but he was rewarded with a twitch of her lips.

"Sure," Wende said. "Why not?"

## Launch

Russian summer was the same as Russian winter, except the black ice had been replaced by mud. Depressingly familiar to Jere, now. As was the grin of Valentin Ladenko. Who drove a new Mercedes S-class, this one hydrogen, as if change for the sake of change was all that mattered.

It was an entire caravan this time, reporters and pundits and hangers-on, all loudly complaining about the facilities. The small town of Baikonur was overwhelmed by the visitors. The space hotels had long since filled. Reporters were sleeping in taverns, in houses, in barns, in the street, maybe with the goats. NO FOOD signs hung from many of the restaurants and bars.

"Should they pay us extra for the tourism, Valley?" Evan said, watching a gas station gleefully quintuple its price.

"Leninsk," Valentin said.

"It won't last," Jere said.

"Sure it will," Evan said. "There are enough bored reporters around here to crank out fifty thousand local-interest pieces. And people will travel anywhere. They don't care what a craphole it is."

And maybe that was true, Jere thought. Public support for Winning Mars had risen to an insane pitch following his Tonightshow routine. The peak of the Gaussian consensus showed Jere as a reluctant visionary, too modest to express the depth of his conviction.

*People believe what they want to believe,* Ron had said.

Then it was launch day, and Jere didn't know how to feel. Except for the one SpaceX flight in the distance on that first day, he'd never seen a launch. He'd always been on them. Now, he would get to see one up close.

So if it exploded, he could see the charred bodies falling from the fireball. He'd seen that in his dreams, over and over. Even though it was just a standard flight, just another LEO shot for RusSpace, done it hundreds of times, no problem.

If the whole thing went up in smoke, public opinion would snap, like a great steel beam strained to breaking. His brilliance and selflessness would become a cold-blooded publicity stunt. They'd howl for blood. He would be crucified. If he was lucky.

*All because the public wasn't fed*, he thought. Because they didn't get their daily dose of excitement.

A-muse-ment, Ron called it. Non-thinking. To muse is to think, and to A-muse was not to think. Which is what most people wanted. Give them a roof and food and someone to fuck, let them buy a few shiny things from time to time, and all they really cared about was filling the gaping void of their lives. They didn't want to muse. They wanted to A-muse.

And God help the person who promised amusement, but didn't come through. That would be the real outrage if Mars Enterprise blew up on the ground.

The RusSpace orbital shuttle looked larger and dirtier than he remembered it. The Can waited patiently in orbit, but without these dozen people, it was nothing. They should have probably sent up the teams separately, and Frank on his own flight, but that wouldn't have met the timeline, and the budget was again strained to the breaking point. Even the government money had gone fast when the Russians bills came due.

*The most expensive amusement ever created*, Jere thought. Add that to the record books. They'd blown their initial budget by almost eight times. He wondered again how Evan could have proposed the initial number with a straight face. Had he ever really believed it?

The ride to the launchpad was short. The crowd outside the gates parted for them as they drove to the official grandstand and made their way to the little box at the top.

Ron collapsed in his seat with a grunt. Jere and Evan piled in as well. They were sitting on campchairs that looked like they could have come from a Napoleonic campaign. Perhaps they had.

"Crunch time," Evan said softly.

"Yes," Ron said.

"All or nothing," he rubbed his hands. "Anyone in a betting mood?"

"Shut up," Ron said, and Evan fell silent.

For once, Jere was glad to have the old man with him. Without Ron, Evan would have woven a web tighter and tighter, until he alone controlled the relationships with the sponsors and the Russians and even the public. Jere knew that now. But Ron has stepped in and helped even it out. Evan still held too many pursestrings, and was hiding a lot of money, but they could deal with that later.

Ahead of them, the ship towered over the bleak landscape, like the last hope of man after a nuclear war. Gleaming steel and clouds of vapor, a high-tech needle aimed at the deep blue sky.

One minute. The few people on the field scampered to cover.

Ten seconds.

Jere held his breath as the numbers flickered down on the big board.

There was an explosion of light and a mind-numbing roar. The plexiglas windows of the little booth jittered

and shook.

Jere held up a hand to shield his eyes. Thinking, *It's exploded, it's all over, it's done, I'm done.*

But then the cheering of the crowd roused him. He looked at them in disbelief. What were they cheering for? Were they crazy? Did the fucking Russians actually want to see blood?

Then his father pointed and shouted, "Look!"

The needle was rising into the sky.

Slowly at first, then faster. It was a hundred feet up. Two hundred. Then as tall as a skyscraper, balancing on a long white tail of flame. The wind battered the grandstand and beat at the throngs, standing hundreds deep. The smell of burnt mud and concrete worked its way into the shelter. Sand and dust and grit pattered against the plexiglas.

*My God*, Jere thought, as the needle rose higher. Its flame no longer touched the earth. It gathered speed like a jet, shrinking smaller and faster as it rose up and arced out.

Eventually, the roar reduced itself to a shout, then a mild grumbling. The Mars Enterprise was a bright speck in the sky, like a magnesium flare.

Everybody still cheered. Reporters looked around themselves, dazed and blinking.

They'd done it.

"Congratulations," Ron said, when they were finally able to tear their eyes away from the pinprick.

"For what?" Jere said. He was numb. He didn't know how to feel.

His dad looked up at the sky again, and broke into a huge grin. "You've done something that no government has ever been able to do."

"But... it wasn't... it was just a..."

Ron held up a hand. "Shh," he said.

Touch

Glenn Rothman grimaced as the shuttle pushed him back into his hard-backed seat. Beside him, Elena moaned softly. He could smell her sweat, not clean workout-sweat, but rank and sour fear-sweat.

He looked over at her, fighting to keep his neck from snapping to the side. She had her eyes closed shut, tight, her eyelids folded into little piles of wrinkles.

*Of course*, Glenn thought. *She can't control this. She can't even pretend to try.*

He reached out with his hand. It felt like there was a fifty-pound weight hung from his fingertips. He tried to lay it on her hand softly, but it came down harder than he would have liked.

Her hand turned under his, and gripped his briefly. Then her eyes flew open and she snatched her hand away.

"Elena," Glenn said.

"Don't do that," she said, yelling over the roar of the rockets. "Don't ever do that."

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### THREE: SHOW

#### Vacation

Mike Kinsson brought an iStuff filled with over a hundred terabytes of books, linears, music, and interactives onboard Mars Enterprise, but he didn't bother picking it up for over a week. It was enough to float from the aluminum handrail and look back through the rearmost porthole of the Can, where Earth shrank slowly in the distance.

*I don't believe it*, he thought. It was an unending loop, played over and over in his mind. At times he felt almost numb, as if he had been hollowed out and stuffed with those little cellulose packing peanuts. Then he'd look back at the earth, and think, *Holy shit*.

*Only astronauts have seen this*, Mike thought. The earth was only about the size of his fist at the end of his outstretched arm. He shivered.

"I'm really doing this," he said, softly, almost too soft to hear above the gurgle and wheeze of the Can's systems. "I'm really going away."

"What?" A voice, behind him.

Mike whirled. Juelie floated slowly past him in mid-air, reaching to catch the Can's rearmost rail. Mike looked forward, but nobody else was in the main cabin. Most likely in the bunkroom, or the kitchen, or the cramped little exercise-space. All the fitness nuts had gone crazy when they hit zero-g and their bodies puffed up and started doing weird things. They spent most of their time in the exercise-space. It already stank like a junior high school locker room. Mike wondered briefly what it would smell like when they returned, almost a year from now.

"What were you talking about?" Juelie said. Her pretty gray-blue eyes zigged across his face, as if mapping it.

"Nothing," Mike said.

Juelie nodded and leaned close to him, pressing her face against the side of the cabin so she could look out the little porthole. Mike drew away from her, then cursed himself for doing so.

"It's getting smaller," she said.

"Yes."

Juelie closed her eyes, her face still pressed against the cold metal. When she finally opened them, tears shimmered in them.

"I'm scared," she said.

Mike opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"I don't think I'll ever get home!"

"It's okay," Mike said. "It'll be okay."

"I want to go back!"

But you can't. You can't step off and take a taxi. You're stuck here, whether you like it or not.

Mike reached out and put his hand on hers. "It'll be all right. It really will."

Juelie twisted away from the wall and put her arms around him. Her body shook, wracked by sobs. She made almost no sound, except a low, stuttery intake of breath.

After a few moments, Mike put his arms around her.

"He doesn't care!" she said.

"Who?"

"Sam! Fuck! He doesn't care! Says I'm being a baby."

*I'm sorry*, Mike wanted to say. "We'll make it," he said.

Juelie pushed away and held him at arms' length. Her eyes jittered across his face again, as if searching for something they couldn't quite find.

"I'll help you," Mike said.

"I--"

There was a bang from the front of the cabin. Juelie pushed Mike away. Mike turned to see Frank Sellers, swinging from the foremost rail in an uncharacteristically clumsy manner. A toolkit floated beside him.

"Sorry," Frank said. Petrov Machenko followed him in. He was a big, chubby Russian guy who was the second in command/production assistant/general do-all kinda guy, from what Mike could figure. They'd never been introduced. Frank and Petrov had been chasing down various bugs in the Can since launch, and only in the last couple of days did they seem less wild-eyed.

Frank thumbed his throatmike. "Okay, everyone," he said. His voice echoed hollowly throughout the Can. "General assembly in main cabin. Put down what you're doing, pause your games, and get here on the double."

"What's going on?" Mike asked.

"Are we going back?" Juelie said.

"You'll see, and no," Frank said, his gaze landing on each of them in turn.

The other contestants filtered in by ones and twos, until all thirteen of them were in the main cabin. Most went to the walls, but Glenn and Elena Rothman hung in midair, almost motionless. They were still dressed in the plain gray Nike workout gear, bearing huge sweat-stains at their necklines and underarms.

*Showoffs*, Mike thought.

"We've been too busy for formalities, but now it's time to start the show," Frank said. He opened the toolbox and withdrew three bottles of Cristal champagne, holding them like a bunch of flowers in one ham-like hand.

"All right!" Keith Paul, squirting forward from his empty wall.

Frank pulled his bouquet of bottles away from Keith's outstretched hands at the last moment, and the man went hands-first into the opposite wall. He cried off, rebounded, and thrashed in midair, looking for a handgrip. A couple of the contestants laughed, but quickly stifled their grins when Keith turned to see who was laughing.

The laughs came back when Petrov pulled a big bottle of vodka out from behind his back, and held it forth in imitation of Frank.

"Hey!" Frank said. "Where'd you get that?"

Petrov grinned. "Emergency fuel," he said.

More laughter. Frank's brow furrowed for a moment, then he shook his head, as if deciding consciously to relax. "Okay, okay. I won't ask."

He turned to address everyone. "Before we par-tay, though, I need to go over a few things with the group."

"Like what?" Keith said, still flailing.

"Good question," Frank said. "First and foremost, let me get this right out. We're going to be in this can for almost a year. A year, people. Three hundred and sixty five days, twenty-four seven. I don't know about you, but I didn't spend that kind of time with my wife in ten years. We're going to get mighty sick and tired of each other. Like, as in, smelling someone's fart -- and you'll know whose it is -- will set you right off, and you're gonna want to rip their heads off.

"Sounds like you've done this before," Elena said.

A nod. "Navy. Close enough. What you need to do, if that happens, is just get away, far as you can. Go watch your movies again. Check the tomatoes. Look out a port and dream about your wonderful life when you get back. Just get away from the person."

Silence.

"Secondly, I don't give a fuck what you do while you're on this ship. I'm not here to be your mommy. Nor is Petrov."

Petrov nodded, his teeth on the cap of one of the bottles of vodka.

"What we are is judge and jury of this whole mess. Look it up in your contract. You've agreed to abide by our decisions. They're legally binding. So if we say you get chained in a bathroom the rest of the trip cause you can't behave, that's what happens."

Silence and wide eyes. Keith's voice broke it. "You'd have to make me."

"We will," Frank said, not looking at him.

"Point is, don't go whining to your lawyer cause we tell you what to do. There's bound to be problems on a



trip this long, so if we say jump, you say, 'how high?'"

Some nods.

Frank smiled. "Good. We're all getting it. One final thing. Smile and wave. You're on camera."

Silence again. Mike found his voice. "What do you mean?"

Frank pointed towards the ceiling, where a little black nubbin sprouted. "Since the beginning of the trip, the show's been running. I'm told the ratings are pretty shit so far, but I'm sure they'll pick up when we're on Mars."

"We're on camera?" Juelie said.

"Yes."

"All the time?"

"You got it."

"In the bathroom?" Juelie wrinkled her face in disgust.

"No. Even Neteno ain't that twisted. But almost everywhere else--"

"Even when we're eating?" Juelie said, looking almost as disgusted as when she was asking about the bathroom.

Mike tried to hold back a grin. There was laughter throughout the room, and Juelie went red. That made everyone laugh even more.

"What if I don't want to be on camera?" Keith said.

"Then you better take a step out the airlock, because that's the only place --" Frank looked thoughtful. "Wait, actually, there's cameras out there, too."

More laughter.

Frank grinned like a proud grandparent. "Okay. Now you know how it goes. They'll take the interesting bits, splice them together, and feed it to all the retards watching. If you don't want to be on, better be boring."

"Why can't we get the show?" Geoff asked.

"Well, other than our piss-poor data connection, they've blocked it. I suppose one of our genius hackers--" looking at Nandir "--could probably figure how to get past that, but we still might be looking at hours of download."

Frank sighed. "Okay, enough of this crap. You're on a TV show, you're gonna be filmed. Get over it. Let's get this party started!"

Frank stripped the foil off one of the bottles of champagne and popped the cork. The champagne fountained out into the cabin. It coalesced rapidly into bubble-filled globes.

"Ah, shit," Frank said. "Shoulda thought of that."

Keith twisted to catch one of the globes in his mouth. He sucked it down and belched. Everyone laughed. Then the room was full of floating bodies, chasing champagne balls. Juelie sailed past Mike, her face smiling and radiant.

Mike held back. Frank opened a second bottle of champagne and sprayed the crowd. Petrov sat with a bottle of vodka, sharing direct hits off it with Keith and Elena.

After a while, Nandir came to float by Mike. "You don't drink?" he said.

"Not now," Mike said. Juelie and Sam were whirling in midair, as if dancing. She grinned and laughed.

"I agree," Nandir said.

"With what?"

"Not drinking now."

Mike turned to look back at the earth. It was smaller. He was, slowly but surely, moving away. Moving out.

*If only I could stay here,* he thought.

"What have you been looking at?" Nandir said.

"Earth," Mike said, not turning.

Nandir craned his neck. "It's getting small."

Mike was silent for a long time, until his curiosity took him by the neck. "Don't you think it's strange?" he asked Nandir. "Leaving earth? We're the only ones who have ever seen this, except a few astronauts."

"And automated probes."

"Yeah. But what does it feel like? What does it feel like, to you?"

"It feels like being stuck in a very small condominium," Nandir said.

"That's all?"

"I am grateful for all the time to work on my software."

"No sense of wonder? Nothing?"

Nandir shrugged. "Things change. This is just another one of them."

Mike shook his head. Nobody understood. Not like him.

Juelie ended up sitting beside Petrov and the others, drinking directly out of the third bottle of vodka he'd managed to produce. She waved at him. Mike waved back.

Eventually, she came over to him.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Everything.

"Come have a drink."

"I don't drink."

A wrinkled nose. "Stop looking!"

"At what?"

"Earth!"

Mike sighed. "I can't."

Juelie looked at him a moment longer, then pushed off and went back to the group. She ended up drinking for a long time, after Mike had left the room and went to his hammock. He laid awake for a long time. After a while, Juelie and Sam came in and shared her hammock. Mike tried to ignore her soft cries. Mike tried not to look at them in the dim blue light. He ended up looking down at Keith.

Keith's eyes were open, and he was grinning.

"Friend zone, he's in the friend zone," Keith sang, softly, aping some song that was almost familiar.

Mike turned away and looked at the wall. Eventually, he slept.

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## Boomerang

Patrice's last gig made her hot, but Jere was hotter than the sun. She didn't know how to feel about that yet. Sometimes she felt angry, her stomach clenched in a tight little ball. Sometimes she felt hollow, as if there was nothing inside her. And sometimes she didn't know how to feel at all.

The producers shouldn't be the stars, she thought, watching the discreet little coverglass that hid behind her sunglasses. She'd never wear an eyepod, but these weren't too bad.

They'd be even better if she was on the white, at the top page of the entertainment nets. But the white was all about Jere and Mars, Jere and the trip, clips of the dumbass contestants on the ship, most of which acted like they didn't even know the cameras were on them, acted like you saw in closet porno tapes from the previous century. They didn't know you had to act like you were always being watched. They didn't know it was always a show.

But they still had the fucking popularity. Even when Patrice shifted to swarmview, her image was buried in the back, small and dim under the brilliance of Winning Mars.

*You shouldn't have teased him*, she thought. For about the millionth time. *He would've let you stay on the show.*

It didn't matter. She'd show them. Take the sequel, add a hot actor, and it would be even hotter. It'd go past hot. It'd create a whole new level of hot, above the white, beyond the forefront. Swarmview would TV her face, the only thing for anyone to see. Everybody else would be ghosts in the background.

Her finder told her Jere was with the asshole, but she didn't care. She didn't care it was lunch, either. She walked into the Golden Dome, the snootiest restaurant on the corner of Hollywood and Vine, and walked right past the Maitre'd. Who, to his credit, only glanced at her for a moment before his eyes flashed in recognition.

*That's right, she thought. Look past fucking Jere for once. I'm up there, too.*

Deep in the back of the restaurant, hidden in the shadows behind suspiciously healthy ferns, Jere and Evan huddled in a booth. A privacy shield glowed blue in the center of the table. From time to time, there was the flash of a flyeye as it flamed out against the shield. Their conversation sounded like Swahili gargled through Scope.

Jere had that look he got when he thought things were going so well, he needed to look for the cliff. Edges of his mouth upturned in a faint smile, eyes squinted as if preparing for a blow. Patrice shook her head. Jere was one of those people who just couldn't let go and relax. He couldn't enjoy what he had. If things were bad, that was the natural order. Sell sell sell, cut cut cut. If things were good, then bad must be right around the corner. Hold spending, don't count your chickens, blah blah blah. Patrice frowned. If there was one thing she could change about him, that would be it.

Jere looked up and saw her. His eyes went wide, then flickered to Evan. Evan swiveled his dark little eyes to set on her, and compressed his lips into a frown.

Jere called out to her. Through the privacy shield, it sounded like a yodel crossed with a toilet flushing. She held her hands to her ears and pointed at the shield.

Jere slapped it off, and stood. "Sorry about that," he said. "Evan and I were--"

"Talking business, yes I know."

"How's it going, Miss Klein?" Evan said.

"Just fine," Patrice said, not looking at him.

Jere stumbled out from behind the booth and hugged her. She kissed him, briefly, on the lips. Sudden emotion surged within her. He felt so familiar, so comfortable, so right! He smelled like Jere. Patrice fought the urge to press herself against him, look up and smile and sigh.

"It's been too long," Jere said.

"I messaged you."

A nod. "I know, I know. I've just been buried, like literally buried, I was going to get back to you..."

"It's all right."

Jere sighed. "How was your show?"

"It's a little behind Winning Mars." Or a lot.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry."

Jere looked so honestly embarrassed, Patrice couldn't help but smile. "Don't apologize. You've earned it."

"But you... I wish you could have been..."

*On the show.* Patrice nodded. So did she. Nobody would even look at the other contestants.

A brief throat-clearing from Evan.

"Look, do you want to catch dinner tonight--" Jere said.

"No."

"No?"

"Not unless we're going to talk about how I'm on the next show."

Jere blinked. "The next show?"

"Yeah. Winning Mars 2. Winning Jupiter. What do I care? Whatever it is, I want on it."

Evan laughed. "You'd have a hard time Winning Jupiter."

"We... we..." Jere glanced at the privacy screen, as if wishing he could turn it on again.

"Okay," he said, finally. "We'll talk."

"Wait a minute!" Evan said.

Jere turned, pointed a finger. "Shut up," he said. He turned back to Patrice. "I'll pick you up. Same condo?"

She nodded. "See you there."

As Patrice walked away, she heard Evan, deliberately loud: "Why do you spend time with her? You're white-hot."

Then Jere: "Heat never lasts," he said. Then the hum and gurgle of the privacy screen.

Patrice smiled. If nothing else, Jere was predictable.

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## Fitness

"Elena, stop!" Glenn Rothman said, as he followed Elena down the short hall from the exercise room to the main cabin. He reached out and grabbed her arm. It was still slick with sweat, and she twisted away effortlessly. She caught the handrail, whipped around to face him, and punched him, hard, in the stomach.

Glenn doubled over, his breath going out of him with a big "Whoo!" He felt himself rebound from the opposite wall, and scrambled for the handrail. He tried to pull in air, but it was like breathing through a soda straw. He opened his mouth and pulled, hard. A tiny bit of air slipped into his lungs.

"You see!" Elena said. "I'm getting weak. So are you. Look at you, trying to catch your breath!"

Glenn pulled a little more air into his lungs. "Don't..." Breath. "Seem..." Breath. "Weak..." He reached out for her.

"Don't touch me," she said, batting his hand away. She rolled up the short sleeve of her exercise outfit and flexed her arm muscle. She pulled at it, pinching and stretching the skin. "I'm getting flabby. I work and work, but I'm getting flabby."

"Muscle loss is to be expected," Frank said, sticking his head into the corridor.

"It is? It is? How the hell are we supposed to do the cliff thing?"

Frank chuckled. "You should've read your contracts. Permanent bone loss, muscle loss, et cetera, I think we covered it all?"

"You did?" Elena said. She turned to Glenn. "Why didn't you see that?"

"I... did," Glenn said. His breath came a little easier now.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask."

Elena pulled herself close to the wall and closed her eyes. Glenn wanted to go over and comfort her, but he knew he'd just be thrown off. And she was right. He should have told her. She wouldn't have read down to page thirty-one, article one hundred fifty six. She wouldn't have read the bits after that, either, the ones that said they probably wouldn't want to have children after this, at least if they didn't want them to look like Kermit the Frog. Or the piece that outlined their increased risk of cancer over the course of their lifetimes. She wouldn't have read any of that.

He remembered the first time they did Everest. No oxygen, of course. It was a hell of a thing, a perk for winning the '17 X-Games, one of those group things where they'd send up cameras and cull it for a show later on. A hell of an opportunity. All for free. She'd signed the contract without looking at it. Glenn had done the same. Of course he would go with her. He loved her. They'd be married, and they'd spend the rest of their life together. That was the only way things could go.

On the third day of the ascent, white-out conditions drove them into their tents early. Glenn sighed and lay down with Elena, waiting for the burn in his muscles to subside. But it didn't. If anything, it got hotter. Elena rubbed her calves and arms, too.

Glenn asked her what was wrong, but she said, quietly, *Nothing*.

In the morning, in the clear ice air, they discovered the reason. Their guide, a burly white guy who hid behind a full face-mask most of the time, just laughed.

*Everyone gets that, he said. Muscles, hurtin for oxy. Crying out. Saying, you should be carrying a tank.*

Elena looked panicked, and asked if it would hurt her.

*Not permanently, the guide said. May even make you stronger, in the long run. Mind, that's another thing. Some people say you're dumber after you come down off Everest. Brain cells crying for oxy, too. That's why it's so hard to think.*

*But physically we're ok?* Elena said.

And, with a nod, that was that. They set off again.

Bad weather kept them from seeing the summit. Glenn had to drag Elena back when their guide said it was time to call it quits. Eventually, she'd looked towards the invisible summit, and said, in a voice low and determined, *We'll be back.*

"Don't know about the climb, anyway," Frank said, bringing Glenn back to the present.

"What does that mean?" Elena said.

"You may not even make it."

"We'll make it!"

"No. You're not getting me. You might not make it to the cliff. All the routes are guesswork and bullshit, based on photos from orbit. We know there's a mile-high vertical cliff there. We think we can land you near enough so you can do the climb. But if we can't, you get another route."

"We don't want another route!"

"If you're gonna splat face-first into a boulder the size of a house, you want another route."

"We'll take the chance!"

Frank shook his head. "When we get closer, we'll decide."

"But..."

"Elena," Glenn said.

"Shut up! Shut up! We may be losing our chance at the ridge!"

"We'll do everything we can to get you there," Frank said. "Trust me."

Elena looked from Glenn to Frank and back again. Then her face turned down into a deep frown. "What about me? What about my muscles?"

"You can work out more," Frank said. "That does slow the effects somewhat."

"Aren't their drugs?"

"Drugs?" Glenn said. *Elena must be really desperate.*

Really scared.

*She turned to him.* "Yes, drugs."

Frank shook his head. "Nope. Not like there was a big call for it, before this mission."

"There's nothing?" Elena said, her voice rising into a wail.

"No pills."

"But exercise works."

"A little."

Elena clamped her mouth shut and nodded. She turned and went back to the exercise room. Glenn followed her, as she loaded the inertial machine with fifty kilos more than she usually did.

"What are you doing?" Glenn said.

"Trying to stay in shape."

"You already spend more time in here than anyone else!"

Elena stopped. Looked at him. "I don't care if I'm in here twenty-four-seven."

Glenn sighed and turned away.

"You shouldn't, either," Elena said. "At least, if you want to keep up with me."

Glenn stopped, still turned away. What she was doing was crazy. They still had four months left. She'd kill herself.

After a moment, he turned and went to set up his own inertial machine. He smiled at Elena, but she didn't look at him. She was already in the routine, legs pumping, arms pulling, eyes straight forward, seeing nothing.

Earthbound

Jere hated Costa Rica. He hated the overpolite waiters and the too-cheerful windsurfing instructors and the always-hawking glass-bottom-boat guys. He hated the perfect cheerful weather, with fluffy white clouds like sheep hanging in the deep blue sky, above the turquoise water that looked like something on a monitor with the saturation turned up way too high. And he hated sitting around on the beach, holding and drink and laying in the sun and otherwise doing nothing, his eyepod tucked away for the evening, just for the time it took Patrice to get them ready for dinner. An hour or so, if he was lucky. It wasn't enough to even go through the summaries of Neteno's activity, swarmrating, inperson presence, financial status, continuous micropayment flow. But he did it, and he made himself smile whenever he took the eyepod off again.

Because it was good being with Patrice again. A couple of weeks out of the months of waiting for the big show on Mars wouldn't hurt. Maybe it'd help dispel the dream he kept having, the one where the Can dropped straight to Mars and went splat. Just a brief flare from orbital cameras, then nothing. Like that ancient NASA probe Evan'd told him about, the one where they got the calculations wrong.

And they'd had government backing, probably money falling out of their ass, redundant systems, backups on their backups. They had a bunch of fucking crazy Russians and sponsors they were still figuring out where they'd decided to cut cost.

He wished Evan wouldn't tell him about all that shit. Apollo 13, the fucking Mars probes, the crazy Russians, SpaceX's first launch, the Shuttle, all that stuff.

But still he smiled. Because Patrice was fun, and he liked teasing her about their next show. Taking the Moon, featuring armed actors going after the Chinese. Or maybe Winning Gold, featuring a hunt for a mythical solid gold asteroid. Or Protecting Earth, if they could lob an asteroid at it. Or Kissing Venus, if they could figure out that one crazy kid's cloudsurfing idea. Of course all of them were bullshit. There were no plans for a second show.



But it was good to have Patrice around.

Because he'd seen the spike. In that great new trend-plotting software the Dick gave him, something like a sleeping bear stirred and sat up when Patrice walked into the restaurant. People started talking. *He told her to stay off the show because it was dangerous, because he loved her*, they said. Active tune-in to his current state went off the charts. And while they whispered behind their privacy screen, people began to speculate: what's the next show? What does Patrice have to do with it? What an amazing woman!

Jere was hot. With Patrice, he was hot with staying power. He could see the tail of their popularity, stretching out for months in the software. She boosted his swarminess, his staying-power, everything. Together, the most pessimistic tail didn't drop off till after the show. And the cult networks had started counterpointing Jere and Patrice's romance with the buzz around Winning Mars. Viewer engagement for the romantic bits, culled from flyeyes and patched together by open-source storygenerators or bored kids on the net, was even higher than Winning Mars.

*It's the old stories, the old stories that fucking sell.*

Jere sighed and shook his head. *But without Mars, our story wouldn't have the profile to go white-hot.*

And, it was probably natural people would turn to them for a while. The trip out to Mars was long and boring. The editors complained every day that there was little to work with, and bitched even more mightily when Jere told them, no, they wouldn't have Frank and Petrov stir the pot, no, they weren't going to use any of Evan's ideas.

And the world had flared again, as it always had, with the Muslims in France threatening to nuke Paris again, and some fucking disease-for-profit asshole releasing his shit in Nebraska. Neteno had done well with those, because suddenly they were credible again, suddenly people would believe anything, and 411 shut the fuck up, and the sponsors lined up like they used to. That was good. Getting the company back on track, getting his life back on track.

A little voice, way in the back of Jere's mind: *You're using her.*

But it wasn't like that. He liked having Patrice around. He wasn't using her.

*What's next, will you sell sponsorships for your own romance?*

Jere smiled, imagining personal products strategically placed on their nightstand and in their bathroom. Perhaps some recognizable designer swimsuits. Water-bottles, of course, they could carry those everywhere and hold the labels out, just so. Where they dined, if it was a chain. He could make a lot of money on it.

But he wouldn't do it. No way.

Because then he'd have to look at himself in the mirror. And he didn't want to see Evan's eyes staring back at him.

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## Education

Keith was deep in an interactive, thinking of the lesbians. Which made sense. In the interactive, he was walking in on two sisters writhing on Mommy and Daddy's bed. He was supposed to be a plumber or something. The VR deck wasn't much good without the dick-sleeve and the little stick-sensors, but it beat whacking it in the bathroom with his eyes closed.

*Laci and Wende*, he thought, as he rounded the corner on the two sisters, and they looked up at him, gasping. But smiling too, like they wanted it, like maybe being lesbians wasn't the best thing on the planet.

Or off. Though the lesbians here hadn't given him much of a show. Wiggling a bit under the blankets, way after lights out. A couple of moans. Not a whole lot to get excited about.

Keith bet he could make them moan.

One of the girls got up off the bed. She was perfect, slim, big tits, not sagging at all. Keith smiled and moved his POV forward.

His POV dissolved in a mess of blocks. The sound stuttered and jumped.

"No! Shit! Not now!" Keith growled, hearing his own voice over his earbuds. He shook the deck, but the picture didn't come back. Instead, an angry red screen displayed some text below the international fuck-you icon, the exclamation point in the yellow triangle.

Keith pushed the reset button, but the red screen stayed lit. He'd just have to unplug it for a while.

"Shit," he said, stripping off the goggles and pulling out his earplugs.

"What's wrong?" a voice said, beneath him.

Keith jumped. He'd thought he was alone in the bunkroom. Or else he wouldn'ta been pulling his dick. What kinda fag would be laying there watching? He looked over the side of his hammock. It was Glenn, the fucking action-sports asshole. Sweat ringed his workout gear, and his muscles stood out hard under his skin. So probably just back from the workout room, where he seemed to spend all his time with that chick that hated him. Dumbass.

"What's wrong with you?" Keith asked.

Glenn looked genuinely surprised. "What do you mean?"

*I mean, you walked in while I was pulling my dick. You mean you missed that?*

But, Keith realized, it was entirely possible Glenn had missed it. The fucker stumbled around like a goddamned zombie, too zonked from working out all the time to do anything else. Keith knew he was getting a little flabby, but those two assholes took it way too far.

"Deck," Keith said. "Fuckin thing redscreened."

"Ah," Glenn said.

"Yours workin okay?"

"My what?"

"Your deck." Dumbass.

"I didn't bring one."

Keith snorted. Of course. Crazy fucker.

Keith pushed off the bed, down the hall. Nothin to do but wait for the deck to come back to life. He went to the exercise room, watched the wiry Elena chick go at it on the inertials for a while. She raised sweat-matted hair and glared at him. Keith smiled back.

"What... you looking at?"

"You," he said.

Another glare, then she dropped her head and went back into it. She almost didn't look human. She'd lost weight during the three months out, and thick muscles corded her arms and legs. Beneath her short top, he could see ribs.

It would be like fucking a skeleton.

Keith watched her a while longer, just to annoy her. He waited until she looked up again. Then he went down the hall. Most everyone was in the common room, stuck behind a wall of eyepods or earbuds or eating like robots. Because it was a fucking boring trip. Nothing to do, except run the same linears and interactives over and over. And think about the lesbians. They were out of sight, which might mean they were in the pilot's cabin with Frank. Keith wondered what they did in there. And if Frank watched.

Back through the hall. It was almost an unconscious thing. The pacing. Nothing to do. Back and forth. Nothing to do. Back and forth. Keith felt rage building. Three more goddamn months. Then six months back. He tried to think of the money going into his account, automatically, every day. He tried to think of winning the thirty mil. But even that seemed pale and faraway.

*But I will win it*, he thought.

*BFD*, another voice said, as if he was having a conversation with himself. It's three months till you win, then six months till you can go spend any of it. Like a whole fucking life.

*I could pay the lesbians to suck my dick all the way home.*

*Doubt that*, the voice said.

Besides, he'd still be here. Keith shook his head and paced.

Low singing from the hydroponics room made him stop and look. Inside, the Mexican-fucker was busy farting around with the tomatoes. She wore earbuds and was humming along to some dumbass tune. What was her name? Oh yeah, Juelie. She wasn't a bad-looking chick, like someone out of those girl-next-door videos anyway, a decent ass and a mid-sized rack that looked pretty perky, but of course they all looked pretty perky with no gravity, and a face you wouldn't have to cover with a bag. The cool geek had a thing for her, but he'd been fucked in the ass by the Mexican, who Juelie would share the sack with from time to time. She was a lot less conscious about keeping covered than the lesbians, especially when she got into it. Keith smiled, remembering dim glimpses of smooth flesh, and her moans, slowly rising in intensity.

She looked up and saw Keith. At first, she gave him that blank look, like a deer seen through a telescopic sight. Nothing going on up there, no idea of what would happen next.

Then her brows drew down in a deep frown, and she looked back down at her work.

Fucking bitch, Keith thought. Anger grabbed his gut with a sharp hand. This time, he didn't try to push it away. He stepped into the room.

Juelie looked up, her eyes going wide.

"How's it going?" Keith said.

She pulled earbuds, let them drop. "Nothing," she said, backing away.

Keith smiled. He liked her fear. "Nothing?"

Juelie blinked, shook her head. "I mean, fine, I'm fine. How are you?"

Programmed. Like a fucking computer. "I'd be better if you came back and shared my bunk."

"What does that mean?" backing away, bumping into the racks of cucumbers, or whatever they were growing back there. Eyes wide under the bright light.

"It means I want to fuck you," Keith said, moving forward again. He had her stuck in a corner. She looked around frantically and tried to push past him. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. She pushed at his face, flailing in midair. Her feet tangled in the tomatoes and tore some vines free.

Keith batted them away and pulled her close. She squealed and pointed up at the little black camera-eye above them. But Keith was past caring. Maybe, if he was really bad, they'd send him back. Maybe that was what he really needed to do.

Three more months. Then six more.

He clawed at her clothes. She yelled, but it sounded very far away, like a stereo just turned on.

"Come on," Keith said. "I just want to kiss you."

She paused for just a moment and looked at him, to see if he was serious. Keith laughed and tore her blouse open, exposing smooth white bra.

Like you need that in zero-G, he thought.

Something struck Keith from behind. It felt like an eighteen-pound sledge. It knocked him off Juelie, and he went flying through the plants himself. He hit the far wall and turned in time to see Petrov launching at him.

Keith grabbed a rail and lashed out at Petrov. His fist whooshed through air, narrowly missing as Petrov ducked and spun in midair. He was tricky with shit like that.

Keith gathered to shoot through the door and into the hall. Frank's face appeared in the door, and he thought better of it.

Wham! Petrov's fist hit him again, sending him flying. Keith's POV spun wildly. He saw Petrov give up his grip on the handhold and launch after him.

Somewhere, far away, a woman was sobbing.

Oh, shit, Keith thought. I did that. He hit the wall, grabbed a handrail, and looked towards the door. Frank hugged Juelie close. Her face was red and streaked with tears.

I did that, Keith thought again. The last minutes streamed back at him, like a show on fastforward. He closed

his eyes. It was like he was watching someone else entirely.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Wham! Petrov's fist hit him again, sent him flying. Keith impacted Frank and Juelie. Juelie wailed. Keith wanted to say he was sorry, but Frank flashed teeth like a coyote and shoved her outside.

Petrov came up behind Keith and grabbed him with one hand. Keith turned to see him holding onto a handrail.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Too late for that," Frank said. He pulled the door closed. It was the first time Keith had ever seen a door closed on the Can. He felt his stomach clench with fear.

"What're you gonna do with me?" he asked.

Frank gave him a terrible old-man smile and blew out terrible old-man coffee-breath. "Anything we want," he said. He raised a fist. It came down. It was nothing like Petrov. But he couldn't escape.

And, eventually, Petrov took over.

The pain went beyond. Keith heard himself, yelling and crying. He saw the fists come down, again and again. It was like a business. One of them held him against the wall and the other hit.

In the end, they plucked him out of the air and carried him to the door. Before they opened it, Frank leaned close to Keith's ear.

"Next time you do that, we won't hit you," Frank said. "We'll throw you right out the fucking airlock."

Keith nodded.

"Big cheers, audience says," Petrov added.

Three months.

Then six months.

*Fuck.*

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Face

"Ratings are up, anyway," Evan said.

Jere sighed. Outside his office, the Neteno sign orbited again. That was good. That should make him happy.

Except. Fucking Keith.

"Keith was your idea," Jere said.

"What?"

"You said, use convicts."

Evan recrossed his legs and cleared his throat. "If you're thinking of scapegoating me--"

"No. I'm the face. I'm the one who has to go on."

"But the ratings--"

"Fuck the ratings!" Jere yelled. He came around from behind his desk to stand over Evan. Evan scooted back as far as he could in the chair. For a moment, his dead eyes almost seemed to show something, something that might have been fear. "If you paid attention to anything besides the raw numbers, you know ratings don't mean shit. The positive/negative's flopped from balanced to negative. Demo's gone to crap, we picked up pervs and lost females. Females who won't let their SO watch it, now. Ratings'll drop next day or two. If you really believed all your charts and graphs, you'd know it. If you really wanted to create the next Star Trek, you'd know it!"

Silence.

"Why'd you even bother?" Jere said. "Why'd you come into my office at all? With numbers pulled out of your ass, not believing a damn thing you said? What made you pitch this show at all?"

Evan just shook his head.

"Talk, you showoff fuck!"

Evan opened his mouth. Sighed. Looked up at Jere. "I made it all up," he said. "Is that what you want to hear?"

"It doesn't matter what I want to hear! Why'd you do it?"

Silence again. Evan shifted in his seat.

"Why?"

Finally, a direct look. "The answer never changes," Evan said, softly.

"What does that mean?"

"Once you've tasted the power, you'll do anything to get it back. Even falsify 411 data. Luckily, you didn't look too close."

"You could've taken us down!"

"We still might. Go down." Evan smiled, rich and genuine.

Jere goggled. To take a chance like that, to try to build on a foundation of nothing, risking everything... how could someone choose to live like that?

"You really did it, didn't you?" Jere said. "When you signed the personal guarantee, you signed everything over. You weren't hiding a damn thing. You didn't have a backup plan."

Evan nodded. "Now you're starting to understand."

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Plans

"We have much better data on the routes now, so we have what we think is the final drop plan," Frank said.

*He is much less certain than he asserts,* Nandir's inference software whispered in his earbud.

Nandir nodded. That wasn't exactly hard to figure out. Still, the software had called it. Even operating without a persistent connection to the global networks, using a relatively limited local database.

They were gathered in the common room for the weekly briefing and beating, as Frank called them. Nandir was able to sleep through most of them. He was the boring one. He'd never tried to put on a squeezesuit and take an unauthorized spacewalk, he'd never groped someone else's girlfriend or boyfriend, he'd never even started singing, badly, in Tagalog, as Romeo had done once. He wondered if Romeo was still on antidepressants.

Now, only two weeks before Mars orbit, Nandir was almost annoyed at the interruption. He was close, so close, to getting the inference software above forty percent confidence. And that with the limitations he was working under. When he went home and could use the eyes and ears of the net and a richer database, he might be able to get its score above fifty percent. And, at sixty percent or so, the software started becoming interesting. It changed from a toy to a useful commodity. He could find investors. He could build another company. And make another fortune, this one big enough to step off the treadmill.

But in less than two weeks, he'd have to put on a silly suit and go down and run and jump and fly. So people back on earth could watch him. It seemed incredibly stupid. There was no way he and Romeo would win it. He didn't even care. He'd be slow and careful and get back when he got back.

He wondered what they'd do if he feigned illness on the day of the drop. Disqualify his team? Romeo wouldn't be able to do the assembly by himself. Send him anyway? Probably the latter. And probably not worth it. Frank seemed to have a reasonable amount of medical knowledge. He might know if Nandir was faking.

Of course, the irony would be if he actually was sick. Nandir smiled.

"Why the grin?" Romeo asked.

*This person is interested in you sexually,* his inference software said.

"Never mind," Nandir said, and nodded forward towards Frank, as if he'd been listening to the speech about how much better their route guesswork was.

"... upshot is the drops'll be staggered over a seven-hour window. "Thorens, Smith, and Kirkschoff are first, to allow time for the IBM experiments package--"

"We're not all dropping at the same time?" this from Keith Paul, the lowbrow criminal.

*The speaker identified as Paul is extremely upset,* Nandir's inference software said.

"Where have you been?" Frank said. "Schedules've been posted forever. We're just doing final tweaks."

Keith set his jaw and dropped his eyes. "How's that fair?"

"What does that mean?" Frank asked.

"It means, you'll drop the winners first."

"No. Do I have to go over this again? The drops are staggered to compensate for the different routes. The Thorens team has additional duties -- namely, running the IBM experiments package -- and Patel's team has the shortest and easiest route."

Keith just looked down.

*The speaker identified as Paul is overcome by joy, and will agree with the interpretation.*

"Of course, this is all still best-guess stuff. The routes may be easier or more difficult than we think. But, hey, you pay your money, you take your choice."

"We should be doing the same things!" Keith said. "That'd be fair!"

Frank's lips set in a hard line.

*He's thinking he wouldn't take the chance with you maybe ripping everyone's suits open, Nandir thought.* Now, if his software would just say it!

*There has been a fatal exception in module INP66X0FB21, his software said.*

Nandir cursed. "Reboot," he said softly.

*Rebooting, the software said.*

"I'll bet Nandir doesn't have a problem dropping last," Frank said.

Nandir looked up. Frank pointed towards him. Nandir noticed how grimy the cuffs of Frank's long-sleeved shirt was. But everything was like that. Nissin foods and Taco Bell@Home and General Mills wrappers piled in drifts until someone got bored enough to shovel them away. Every handrail was dark with grime. The whole place looked like it needed hosed down.

*That was an incredibly stupid thing to say, Nandir thought.* Because now Keith was looking at him, his eyes hard and bright under his furrowed brow. As if he was calculating something. Something bad.

*We're all getting a little messy ourselves, Nandir thought.* Messy in the head. If he hadn't had his software to work on, how bored would he be now?

"Who cares what the dot thinks?" Keith said. There were a couple of gasps from the other crewmembers.

"What?" Keith said. "I can't say that? Dot, dot, dot!" He pointed at Nandir. Nandir stifled a smile. It meant nothing to him.

Keith pointed to others. Romeo. "Gook!" Sam. "Mexican!" Petrov. "Commie! I bet I can't say those, either! What do you think! I'll say them if I want! Give everyone a show! Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke!"

Frank nodded at Petrov, and the big man launched towards Keith. Keith's eyes went wide, and he cowered against the wall. Then, at the last instant, he launched out of the room and down the hall. Petrov tried to grab him and almost snagged a cuff. Petrov swore in Russian and squirted out of the room. Down the hall, they heard a crash and the smack of fists.

"Sorry about that," Frank said, turning to look down the hall.



*The speaker is very happy*, Nandir's inference software told him.

"That is in--" Nandir said, but then stopped himself. Frank might be very happy to see Keith beaten again. Nandir decided not to correct the software.

"Okay," Frank said. "Anyone else have questions about the drop schedule?"

Head-shakes all around.

*The speaker is interested in ballroom dancing*, Nandir's software said. *Suggest asking him/her out for an activity.*

Nandir sighed.

Then, softly, he laughed. He still had a long way to go, but at least he had something to do.

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## Romance

Jere took her to Yamashiro that night, which was strange, because Patrice had heard him talking shit about the place, saying it was for tourists and people who wanted to get married. And it was one of those showy places where you paid as much for the view as the food. Some producers had taken Patrice out there before, so at least some industry people went there. But in the strange ecosystem of what constituted cool in the world of studio luncheries, she knew the hot places changed every month, favoring the small places with flyeye-zappers the Oversight spooks hadn't shaken down yet, the funky places with active wallpaper and a few bar-stools, a menu printed by an ancient laserprinter, and maybe an engineered dog-parrot under glass, squawking out the dialogue from the hot interactive of the week.

Yamashiro was nothing like that. It was one of those cal-asian places that had been doing the jive so long that it seemed almost respectable. Quiet little booths with crisp linen tablecloths clustered around views of the Los Angeles skyline through the floor-to-ceiling glass.

He must have taken me here because he thinks I like it, Patrice thought.

"Thank you," she said.

Jere looked up from frowning at the menu. "For what?"

"Taking me here."

A start, and a guilty smile. "You're welcome." Jere went back to studying the menu.

"What are you having?"

"Oh. I don't know." Eyes on the menu.

"Will you order for me?"

"Sure."

"You will?"

Jere nodded. Looked at her. His eyes darted around, almost distracted. "Of course."

"What's the matter?"

Jere looked back down at the menu. "Nothing."

"Nothing? You can't even look at me!" Irritation rose in her, and Patrice heard her voice rising to a shrill note.

She expected Jere to explode, but he only sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"What's the matter?" Patrice said.

Jere looked up at her. For the first time, she noticed little beads of sweat standing out on Jere's forehead. As if seeing where she was looking, he wiped them away with a shaky hand.

"I'm no good at this," Jere said.

"No good at what?"

Jere stood and knelt near in front of Patrice.

No. This wasn't happening. No. No. No. Patrice felt the world's foundations come unstuck and slip sideways. This was a dream. Not even a dream. She'd never let herself think about this. She'd never ever allowed it. Even with Jere.

"What?" Jere said.

Patrice realized she was shaking her head and pushing herself back in her seat. She shook her head, feeling tears close to spilling.

"What's wrong?" Jere said.

"Do it," Patrice said.

"Do what?"

"Just say it!"

Jere looked at her, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Yes, I figured it out, she wanted to say. I'm not as dumb as you think. But she couldn't open her mouth.

Jere fumbled in his jacket. Patrice watched him, thinking, This is nothing like the interactives, where the suave prince always picks the perfect moment, always has the right words. This was almost common, almost pedestrian. Of course, the prince also didn't have to run a company, or worry about buying a ring, or do any of half a hundred other things a real man would do.

She watched him, thinking, This is the reality.

Not feeling a thing.

He finally got the little black-velvet pill out of his jacket and opened it. It was very large and simple, a diamond of at least three carats, orbited by a smaller ruby, set in a mathematically perfect swirl of platinum.

"Patrice, will you marry me?" Jere said.

For long moments, Patrice couldn't say anything. She looked at the ring, thinking, The red is probably Mars. She looked up at Jere. The sweat was back on his brow. His eyes were wide and frightened, as if he was holding a gun on a wild animal that the gun might be too small to take down. His bottom lip quivered, just once.

Patrice became aware that the restaurant had gone almost silent in breath-held anticipation. She wanted to turn and look at all the tourists and not-so-hip people, and say, yes, I'm being proposed to, what's the big deal, why can't you go back to your fucking dinner.

That's why he did it here. Because everyone would be watching. Including the networks. The thought was sudden, clear, and ice-cold.

Jere still looked at her. She waited for beads of sweat to coagulate and run down his forehead, like something you'd see in a linear. But they remained stubbornly discrete.

Jere's lips parted, as if he wanted to say something else.

If he says please, I'll tell him to go soak his head.

Jere settled for licking his lips, but he said nothing.

No. Tell him no. This isn't real. This is a fucking stage-play.

"Yes," Patrice said.

All the tension went out of Jere's body. He bowed his head forward, before quickly lifting it. He smiled at Patrice.

If he says thank you, I'm going to take it back, Patrice said.

Jere opened his mouth.

Patrice reached out and put a hand over it.

"Shh," she said.

Over the palm of her hand, his eyes looked almost relieved.

Even if this is a farce, it's important, Patrice said. Even if this is always what I wanted.

Even if this is always what I dreaded.

Falling

Being paired with the lesbians wasn't distracting to Geoff. During the long trip in the Can, they'd never been openly affectionate. And they'd never invited Geoff Smith to join them in any of their pilot's-cabin activities. They dressed in shapeless clothes, and stayed away from the barbarian and the other contestants as much as they could. And Geoff had his own thoughts, important thoughts, so far beyond sex that it didn't really matter who they were. And, when sex got bothersome, he had his own interactive library.

So he didn't really catch himself looking at them until the day of the drop, when they put on their squeezesuits. They came out to the ring where the drop pods were, looking like white-jumpsuited versions of

Tomb Raider, or some other early interactive heroine. Perfectly sculpted buttocks, breasts that stood out full and firm (a little more full than the glances he'd seen on board, Geoff thought). Even their crotches were sculpted, hiding nothing. Which made no sense, Geoff knew, because even at their thinnest, the squeezesuits were at least four millimeters thick. Which was enough to hide any detail.

Maybe they did it to better balance the pressure of the suit on our skin, Geoff thought. Struggling not to look. Struggling to keep his racing thoughts on track. Because, suddenly, all the activities Laci and Wende took part in seemed to grow in importance, until they were all there was.

"This thing hurts!" Laci said, rubbing at the front of her thighs with the heel of her hand. Her voice was tinny and compressed, coming over the suit com.

"Did you use the depilatory?" Frank said.

"Of course," Laci said, still rubbing.

Frank frowned and looked back at the passenger cabin. Only the three of them were in the launch ring, per Frank's instructions and Petrov's enforcement. It made sense. The ring was a small, cold crawlway around the outside of the ship. There wasn't much room for even the four of them.

"It pinches," Geoff said, scissoring his legs. And the suit was painful. Even after the depilatory and the whole-body lubricant.

"You used the lube?" Frank said.

"Of course!" Laci said.

Frank looked at Wende. "What about you?"

"If he's complaining, I'm fine," Wende said.

"If the suit is painful, that might mean..."

"I'm fine!" Wende snapped.

"Blistering, epidermis tears, internal bleeding, none of these would be fun."

"I read the manual. I'm fine." Wende said, arms crossed.

"It's really painful," Laci said.

"Bad enough to strip down?" Wende said. "Bad enough to maybe lose our drop window?" She pointed at the blue numbers, flickering down towards zero. There were only eleven minutes left.

Laci frowned.

"If you got a problem, better strip and get it fixed," Wende said.

"No, no problem."

"Good," Wende said.

"If there's a suit problem, we'll blame you for it," Frank said.

Wende started. "What does that mean?"

"We have this all on film. You bullied her into going."

"We don't have time!"

Frank frowned and flew over to Laci. "If you've got a problem, let's get it fixed now. He popped off Laci's header and opened her suit, turning her away from Wende and Geoff.

Wende's frown deepened. "Come on! We don't have time for this."

"Shut up," Frank said, and his hands went back to Laci's crotch.

"There," he said. "A small fold. I did what I could to smooth it out. You've lost weight."

Laci nodded.

"Come on," Wende said, from the door of their drop capsule. Laci followed.

"What about you?" Frank asked Geoff.

"I'm fine."

"You said it pinched."

"I'm fine!" Geoff tried to slide past the old man.

"Oh, no you don't," Frank said, grabbing Geoff's arm. "I'm not going to have you die down there, either.

"No, it's OK, really."

"Where is it?" Frank said, popping off Geoff's header and splitting the suit.

"I don't have a problem!"

"I can make you stay on the ship." Old gray eyes, cold and hard. Geoff didn't doubt Frank meant it. And he had no doubt Frank would do it, even if it killed Laci and Wende's chance.

And he'd have to share the ship with them on the way back.

Unable to speak, Geoff pointed at his groin.

Frank split the suit further and thrust his hand down inside it. Geoff felt his face go hot and red. They're recording all of this, he thought. Even if it doesn't go on the show, it's in a digital archive somewhere. Or somebody was intercepting it. They'd play this damn clip at parties until the end of time.

Geoff looked heavenward as Frank fingered his balls. He pulled out a hand. "I don't feel anything."

"It's not that bad," Geoff said. "It's better."

"Is it?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Come the fuck on!" Wende called from the pod, gesturing frantically with her hand.

Frank chuckled as he helped Geoff get his suit sealed back up. "Go on," he said, shoving Geoff towards the hatch.

Wende grabbed him and stuffed him into one of the drop chairs. They were nicely padded with open-cell foam, and looked very comfortable until the top closed on him like a clam, compressing his body in a foam sandwich. The other lids flipped down. Geoff looked around. Laci and Wende lay on one side of him. Ahead was a tiny round porthole. It showed the blackness of space, devoid of even a star.

If I turned out the cabin lights, I could see stars, Geoff thought.

"One minute until drop," Petrov's voice came through the suit comm.

The pinching, tingling feeling in Geoff's crotch slowly came back. He grimaced. It would go away. It didn't matter.

Or maybe it would matter. Maybe he wouldn't be able to do anything. Maybe he wouldn't be able to do any of his experiments.

*No!* Geoff thought.

"Thirty seconds," Petrov again.

Geoff wondered if Laci and Wende were holding hands, deep under the foam. He tried to wiggle his fingers nearer to Wende, but they wouldn't move.

"Ten seconds."

The suit wouldn't be a problem.

"Nine."

Or maybe it would.

"Eight."

He'd be able to do the experiments. Even the IBM ones.

"Seven."

He'd prove there was life on Mars, once and for all.

"Six."

Or he wouldn't.

"Five."

Or the Wheel would break, and they wouldn't go anywhere.

"Four."

Or they'd hit a little too hard, and they'd be stuck.

"Three."

Or the airbags wouldn't inflate at all, and they'd go splat.

"Two."

Geoff felt sweat crawl its way down his temple. It landed in his eye, stinging.

"One."

Explosive bolts went bang! And he was turning, rolling. The pod hissed and darted this way and that as it maneuvered away from the Enterprise. There was a long hiss, and Geoff felt the little capsule accelerate. It was a strange sensation. To feel something outside his body, for the first time in 6 months. Geoff wondered how well he'd walk on Mars. Or when he got home.

Then the capsule rotated around and Mars filled the little porthole, salmon-red and streaked with yellows and blacks.

This is it, Geoff thought. I'm falling towards another planet.

Falling.

Towards.

Another damn planet!

Geoff wanted to pump a fist in the air. Take that, NASA! He thought. Take that, skeptics! I'm here, I'm going to prove there's life here, and there's nothing you can do to stop me.

It was an indescribable feeling. A little like the day he got accepted to the show. But deeper, sharper, and edged with fear.

Because, of course, he was falling.

Towards another planet.

A lot of things had to go right before he stepped out of the capsule and onto the pink dust of Mars.

But in that moment, that was okay. Things would go right. Nothing would stop him. Geoff heard the echo of his breathing, high and fast.

Mars grew slowly in the porthole.

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Bar

Patrice suggested Herald's Under Melrose for the evening of Winning Mars' first drop, but Ron vetoed it.

"You have a higher composite profile than any current head of state," Ron said. "You can't hide. People are going to be watching your show, and they're going to be watching you, too, in little windows right beside it."

"They'll kill me if anyone goes splat," Jere said.

"That's a chance you take."

So the three of them ended up going to The View, an ultra-touristy place filled with smartfog displays and ghost-windows and rent-by-the-minute somatics, as well as the latest not-yet-scheduled psychoactives, delivered in ultra-expensive cocktails. Evan found them, either by happy chance or by location service, and the four of them held down seats at the bar, just below the non-interactive smartfog display that kept cycling through various famous cityscapes. Just eye-candy, marshmallow shapes of familiar spires, but something that the tourists liked to goggle at.

Jere sipped his dry space-distilled Stoli Orbit martini and tried to ignore the eyes. It was like he was on display, and everyone knew what was happening. He caught fragments of conversation: *That's Jere. That's him. Winning Mars. They start tonight. He's here to be watched. Fucking showoff.*

Patrice sat pressed against him, her warm flesh mostly bare against his thin silk shirt. She'd chosen the most minimal cocktail dress she had, a tiny bit of silvered silk with some intelligence that kept it from revealing bits of Patrice as she sat, walked, and stood. It was supposed to get attention, but people only glanced at her before staring at Jere.

*Great idea, dad,* Jere thought. If someone dies...

"If someone croaks, you're gonna get massacred," Evan said, leaning close. "You sure you don't want to visit the restroom right about now?"

"I can't," Jere said. "I need to be seen."

"What, are you a fucking pope, raising the glad-hand?"

"Apparently." Nodding at Ron.

"Fuck the old bastard. They aren't going to rip him apart."

"You sound so certain someone's gonna die."

Evan shrugged. "Better safe than dead."

Jere shook his head. His eyepod counted down the final minutes. Near the end of the time, The View made its smartfog go flat and used it to project a realtime of Winning Mars on its front. Necks snapped up.

For a while, there was no sound. Just the image of Mars, huge and red. Then, soundlessly, one of the passenger pods flew out from their point of view, to drop towards the planet. The view changed to a camera on the pod. The planet turned slowly in their view.

"First contestant module released," Frank's voice came over The View's PA system. Jere jumped and looked around. Glittering eyes were fixed on him. He tried to smile at them. He turned back around to look at the display.

"The Kirschhoff team," Ron said, loud enough for everyone to hear. The music in back ramped down, so that



soon the only sound in The View was the creak of the passenger pod and, later, the thin scream of the Martian atmosphere, as the pod went deeper into the atmosphere. The planet swelled larger.

"Atmospheric insertion successful," Frank said.

"As if there was any doubt," Evan said. "Those things are supposed to drop like rocks."

People at the bar heard him and turned around.

"Shut. The fuck. Up." Ron said, slowly and deadly.

It was like watching your first landing at an airport. The planet drew closer and closer. More and more details became clear. The rate of change slowly increased. It was almost hypnotic.

"Following predicted course," Frank said. "Impact in thirty seconds."

"Impact?" someone at the bar said.

"They're bouncing," someone else said.

Now, the bar was quiet enough to hear the breathing of the contestants in the drop pod. Their breath came quick and sharp, as if they were afraid.

Of course they are, Jere thought.

The ground rushed by, faster than Jere had ever seen a plane land. It looked sharp and twisted and ugly.

This will never work, Jere thought.

"Ten seconds," Frank's voice.

A small whimper from the cabin.

We shouldn't be hearing this, Jere thought. But of course they should be hearing this. They should be seeing this, too. They should have thought to put cameras in the drop pods. It was the money shot. It was what made people tune in.

"Five seconds," Frank again.

Over the whistle of the wind, sharp bangs. Screams from the cabin. People in The View looked around sharply.

"Airbags," Evan said, loudly.

"Three... two... one..." Frank's voice said.

A tremendous crash, and the picture disappeared to fuzz and static. People in The View stared up at projection, mouths open, in that moment between shock and acceptance.

Are they dead? Jere thought.

A murmur went through the patrons. It started small and deepened quickly to ugly. After a moment, Frank's

face appeared. He was thin and unshaven. "For those of you following the raw feed, this communication failure was expected. Telemetry indicates the module is intact. We should hear from them shortly."

For the next minute, nobody moved. Nobody raised a drink. Nobody even seemed to breathe. This is the most important thing I've ever seen, Jere thought. They're not even drinking.

He looked at Patrice, but she didn't even look back. She saw only the screen, still displaying Frank's worried face. Her mouth was slightly open, as if in wonder. Jere still didn't know what to think about her. She wore his ring, but it was just a thing, just another thing. There were times when the curves lined up so well it was impossible to fight them. The curves pushed you along. And she was at the nexus of those curves. It felt right, in many ways. Jere smiled, trying to be happy.

The picture above the bar was replaced by an image of two people wearing squeezesuits and headers -- a blonde girl and a vaguely dorky-looking guy. There was the sound of someone blowing out a breath.

"Wow, what a landing," Wende Kirshoff said. "But hey, you know what they say, any landing you can walk away from..."

"And we're walking!" the dork said.

Behind Jere, a cheer rose. It was loud and happy and sustained. It made the hair on the back of his neck rise.

"Turn around," Ron said. "Take a bow."

"Why?"

"Because in this moment, you're a fucking hero. Use it."

Jere stood up and turned. Every eye was on him. He'd addressed crowds before, but they'd never looked like this. Smiling. Open-mouthed. Applauding. Looking at him with something like awe.

The cheer rose again. Hands pumped in the air. The crowd surged forward to meet him.

Their hero.

## Death

Glenn Rothman was still shaking from his drop when he saw it. A thin white line, arcing through the light blue Martian sky. Like a single strand of spider-silk, glinting and gossamer. There was no sound.

*Nandir's team*, Glenn Rothman thought, stopping for a moment to watch it disappear into the pinkish haze of the horizon.

Chatter from Frank in the can went softly hysterical. Their fearless leader's voice rose until Glenn had to pay attention to it. Nandir's drop had gone unstable and tumbled in the thin atmosphere. The airbags had never deployed. A software glitch. Or something in the hardware. They were trying to figure out the details. Glenn stood rooted to the spot, feeling a chill through the wet heat of his squeezesuit.

*It could have been us.* Glenn shivered. He had almost picked Nandir's route, which seemed easier on the rolling and flying legs but more difficult on the Overland Challenge to the travel pod. Perfect for him and...

"Come on!" Alena said, over the local comm. She stood thirty feet in front of him, looking back, her face twisted into an angry mask.

"We just lost Nandir."

"I know! I can hear!"

"But..."

"And I'm going to lose you if you don't get moving!"

"Don't you care?"

An inarticulate growl. Then a sigh. They were, after all, on camera, all the time. "Of course I care. But I want to win. Come on!"

Glenn bounced over to her. Her face was flushed with exertion, but tears glittered in the corners of her eyes. She wouldn't look at him.

*She's more scared than she'll admit*, he thought. He tried to take her hand, but she pulled away.

"Stop that!" she said. Her topaz eyes transfixed him for a moment, her normally full lips compressed into a thin line, the soft arcs of her face pulled into something harder and more brutal. The face he used to love. The face he still loved.

She bounded away, moving fast in the low gravity.

Glenn hurried to catch up. I know how you feel, he wanted to say. I know, and I understand. The stories about people losing brain cells were one thing, the brief acquaintances with half-remembered names in wheelchairs were another. Everything they'd done before carried risks, but the risks were well-quantified. Even their insurance agent had said, Oh yeah, you do extreme sports, and ticked off every one they did on the form before he submitted it. And the bill came with a surcharge, clearly outlined, that covered every single one of their activities.

But she'd never really seen someone die. And neither had Glenn. Suddenly it was like there was nothing inside him but vacuum, looking to be filled. He thought, for a moment, Things will be different when we're back.

And then: If we get back.

Glenn caught up with Elena and tried to give her a smile. She refused to look at him, staring ahead grimly. The terrain was getting more rugged. Ahead of them rose the Unnamed Ridge, a three-thousand-foot near-vertical they would have to freeclimb to reach their transpo pod. The good news was that it looked climbable, especially in the low gravity.

The low gravity was both a blessing and a curse. Glenn was still getting used to what he could do. The squeezesuit and header made him topheavy, throwing off his balance, but his total weight here was still less than half of what he was used to on earth. Getting comfortable with taking eight-foot vertical jumps and twenty-foot flying leaps wasn't easy. Momentum still worked.

"More human interest," Petrov's voice blatted at him from his private channel.

*Piss off*, he thought. But he couldn't really do that. It was part of their contract. They had to do what they were told. Frank and Petrov reminded them, every time they had a chance.

"Glenn, we need to see Alena." Frank's voice, this time.

He plodded ahead.

"Glenn, we're close to contract breach." Frank, sounding sad.

"Shit!" he said, but turned obediently to focus on Alena. The squeeze-suit clung to her curves, and the transparent header was designed to show as much as her pretty face as possible. Less attractive now, perhaps, with her hair hanging with sweat and her mouth set in a hard line.

"More," they said.

Glenn tried running in front of her and feeding the view from one of his rear cameras, but it was too hard to concentrate on the terrain ahead and maintain a decent frame. Eventually he dropped back to focus on the exaggerated hourglass shape of her suit.

I should be thinking about Nandir, he thought. I should be worried about climbing the Unnamed Ridge. Instead, I'm a fucking cameraman.

"Good," Frank said. "Stay there for a while."

"Okay," he said. *Assholes*.

## Funeral

"Oh, shit," Jere said, watching the monitor as Frank talked through the loss of Nandir's team. He was very, very drunk, and the ancient flatscreen seemed to float and dance a million miles away. He could almost believe it wasn't happening.

"Jere, did someone just die?" Patrice said. She leaned against him, warm and soft.

"Yes!" Jere snapped.

They'd agreed to go to a more private party from The View, invited by some investment assholes from New York who had a quaint old house near Ron's in the Hollywood Hills. Jere looked around the room. The investment assholes watched him in the reflection in the mirror on the backside of the bar. A couple sat in a loveseat, ignoring everyone but themselves. A very, very beautiful woman, dark hair and pale skin and strange silver eyes, who'd made a pass at Jere on the ride over, pretended to ignore him.

"I have to go," Jere said.

"Yes, you do," Ron said. Jere started. He'd forgotten Ron was there.

"Do you have to?" Patrice said.

"Yes."

"Can you get in front of a camera?" Ron said.

Jere nodded. "Long enough to do what needs to be done."

"I'll drive you," Evan said.

"I'll take you up on that," Jere said.

On the ride to Neteno, Evan shook his head. "Rotten luck," he said.

"You knew it would happen. You said it'd happen."

"No. Not that. Nandir. It had to be Nandir. You lost the minorities. Someone's going to have something to say about that."

Jere frowned. Evan, asshole that he was, was right. Someone would have something to say about that.

At Neteno, Jere downloaded an insta-script about sadness and loss. He looked at the camera and did his best to deliver the lines.

And the entire time he was on camera, he thought about Evan's words. He worried about how he looked. And he thought, bitterly,

*Of course someone's going to die. Probably lots of someones. All you have to do is make the proper horrified noises and move on from there.*

Or whatever Evan had said.

Asshole.

When it was done, Jere expected to see crowds outside the Neteno building, holding torches and screaming for his head. But there was nothing, just the faceless traffic on Vine. Evan was gone. He thought of looking at his public ratings in his eyepod, but decided it wasn't a good idea. He turned it off.

"What do you want to do?" Patrice asked.

"Let's go home."

"Home?"

"If they're going to kill me, it might as well be at home." Jere popped his eyepod off his face and stuck it in his pocket. Patrice watched him do it with big, unbelieving eyes.

"Do you want me there?" she asked.

Jere looked at her. She was very beautiful. She could never understand. He didn't know what to feel.

"Of course," he said.

Crash

"Pull it out! Come on! Pull!" Sam Ruiz shouted through their local comm. Mike Kinsson and Juelie Peters tugged at the shattered plastic shell. Suddenly the whole side folded and twisted off, and all three of them ended up in a tangled heap on the dusty ground. Mike Kinsson noticed absently that the Disney and Red Bull

and Wal-Mart logos on Juelie's suit were covered in dust, and reached out to brush them off.

"What are you doing?" Sam said, yanking Juelie to her feet.

"Dust..." Mike said, and trailed off. It was stupid anyway. Why should he worry about their sponsors? Why should he worry about anything? They were dead.

Sam's team had been given the easiest Overland Challenge, essentially nothing more than a fast run over rocky ground, because they had been assigned the toughest rolling and flying part. Soaring over the Valles Marinaris was part of their air journey, partly to make it more dramatic and partly to bring back some great images.

But after their brief Overland, they'd bounced up to the scene of a disaster. Their transpo pod had come down in the lee of a huge boulder, and had smashed itself in-between it and the ground. Its smooth globular shape was now twisted into something that more resembled a crushed basketball.

*It was supposed to hit and bounce*, Mike thought. Which meant all the kinetic energy of the fall had been absorbed at once by the boulder, rather than a series of lazy bounces. A terrible design, something from last-century NASA that didn't work then, even with triple-redundant systems and all the overbuilding the government could throw at it. Now, with Russian manufacture, the Wheel and Kite inside were probably...

"Junk," he said softly, as Sam and Juelie began pulling out bundles of bent and sheared struts and shreds of fabric. It didn't look anything like the training. Not at all.

"Are you going to help, or not?" Juelie asked.

Like a robot, Mike went and helped them pull out all the contents of the pod. He noticed that the big Timberland and Kia and Cessna logos emblazoned on the outside of the pod had survived intact, and he had to suppress the urge to laugh. He had to crawl inside to try to get some of the last pieces, but they had been wedged into the rock and wouldn't come out. He noted, with no great emotion, that one of the final items was the hydrazine engine that was intended to power both the Wheel and Kite. It was twisted almost beyond recognition.

"Where's the rest of it?" Sam yelled, when he came back out.

"Stuck."

Sam glared at him and crawled in himself. There was a great volume of cursing on the local comm network. When Sam crawled out again, sweat was running down his cheeks and there was a strange, faraway look in his eyes. Mike looked around at the twisted pieces strewn around them and shook his head. Sam saw it and grabbed him.

"What?" he said. "What are you shaking your head for?"

"We're dead," Mike said. "It's over."

"No! We can make something! We can do some hybrid thing, like a wheel," he began rooting through the wreckage, frantic, eyes bright and intent.

"Powered by what?" Mike said softly.

"We can power it! Or we can make skis! Or we can..."

Juelie went over to Mike and laid a hand on his shoulder. As soon as he felt her touch, he stopped. He stayed still on his hands and knees, looking down at the rocks and dust, panting.

"Mike's right," Juelie said. "I saw the engine."

"Then what do we do? Give up?"

"Rest, at least."

Sam stood up. The pale sun reflected off his shiny bronze face. He looked from the wreckage to the horizon and back again. "I don't want to stop!" he said.

"Why?" Juelie said. "We can't win."

Sam looked at her for long moments, as if trying to decipher a strange phrase in an unknown language. Then he slumped. All the tension left him. He sat on a boulder and hugged his knees. Something like a wail escaped him. Under the cloudless alien sky, amidst a red desert unrelieved by water or leaf or lichen, it was a chilling sound.

"What do we do?" he said finally. "How do we get to the Returns?"

"We don't," Mike said, standing carefully away.

Sam just looked up at him.

"Walk overland," Juelie said. "It doesn't matter how long it takes."

"There's not enough food and water," Mike said.

"We'll eat less!"

"We can't cross the Valles Marinaris."

"Why not?"

"Mile-high vertical walls."

"The gravity is less--"

"We'll still go splat!"

Juelie was silent for a while. "They'll have to come rescue us," she said finally.

"No," Mike said.

"We've lost," Sam said.

"Wait," Julie said. "What do you mean, 'no?'"

"They can't just come down and get us," Mike told her. "Other than our drops and the return modules, there's no way to get down here and back again."

Julie looked confused.

"They can't rescue us," Mike said. "They don't have the capability."

"Then what do we do?" Sam said. "Sit here and die?"

Mike looked away. Even he knew better than to answer that. Juelie walked over and offered Sam her hand. After a moment, he took it, head hanging low. Mike edged away from the two, not wanting to be part of any coming outburst. Sam was driven by a single purpose: to win his share of the thirty million dollars. That's what he wanted. Nothing more, nothing less. He hadn't disguised it, hadn't hid it. But now that was taken away. And more, his life was forfeit.

*We knew the risks when we signed*, Sam thought, walking farther away. Or at least I did. Sam and Juelie were probably part of the walking dead, the people who never really thought much about life, who never really thought they could die. They probably hadn't read the contract at all, just signed it and sent it off.

*But I didn't care*, he thought. *All I ever wanted to do was to see another planet. All I ever wanted to do was to get away.* To get away from mom and dad and their ideas about the perfect life, the planned life, the work-until-you're-old-and-hope-to-save-enough life, the life that most everyone took.

Thoughts came quick and bitter. He was still better off to die here. Earth was a dead-end world pursuing dead-end dreams, the majority of the population interested in nothing more than making money and amusing themselves. Nobody produced anything anymore. Nobody explored. Nobody took chances. There were no places to take chances in.

*And yet I never did anything either*, Mike thought. *This is the only chance I ever took.* Until this, I was too scared to give up my job, too insecure to let go of my condo, my 'Actives, my things. I was a geek. There was no other way to describe it. Endlessly yearning, but unable to commit.

And so, this great leap. Finally.

*And so, now you die.*

Mike tried to make himself feel something, but he couldn't. It was too far away, too remote. They had maybe five days worth of food and water in their packs. They had a blow-up shelter for the night, but it was nothing more than an insulated bubble to keep out the worst of the frigid Martian night. It wouldn't allow them to take off their suits. Five days, and then a week or more for the sweat recycling to stop working, or the batteries to die, or some other suit malfunction to take your life. Or you could just take your helmet off and be done with it.

*It's too bad they didn't give the science pack to me*, Mike thought. *I would have infinite time to do the experiments.* Or at least many days. But it had gone to the other asshole on the Thorens team. Too bad. It would have been good to have, THE FIRST MAN TO CONFIRM LIFE ON MARS, or something like that, on his headstone. They could put up a monument to him, when people came to Mars for good.

Or maybe they'd never come to Mars for good, Mike thought. Maybe this is the last shot, one stupid game-show and then nothing. Everyone content to just do their thing, live their safe and planned life.

It wouldn't surprise him. First Nandir. Now them. Not exactly a rousing endorsement of interplanetary travel.

Mike wandered a hundred feet or so away from the couple when Frank's voice from the Can blatted in his ear.



"We're aware of your situation," Frank said.

"So?" he heard Sam ask.

"We're asking the Paul team to divert and rescue," they said. "We think he can carry you in his Wheel. Is your fuel bladder undamaged?"

"Yes!" Juelie said, hope rising in her voice.

"Good. We're transmitting the request to him now."

"Great!" Juelie said. "Sam, did you hear that? We're going to be rescued."

"Nope," Sam said.

"What do you mean?" Juelie's voice, edging into the strident.

"It's a request," Sam said. "Re-quest. Do you think Paul is going to give up his thirty million?"

Sudden silence over the comm.

"Do you think he'll do it for you?" Sam asked.

More silence.

"Did you have something so special with him that he'd throw away his chance to win--"

"Shut up! Shut up!" Juelie screamed.

Mike couldn't help grinning, just a little. You see how your boyfriend is, now, he thought. He wanted to go back to Juelie and comfort her. She stood far away from Sam, pacing and wrapping her arms around herself. But there was no way Mike would get in front of Sam. That would just be a faster way to die.

"Keith might do it," she said. "He still might."

Sam's laughter echoed in the dying Martian day.

Buried

"Don't be a fucking baby," Ron said. "Get back on camera. Now."

"And tell them what?" Jere said, staring at the image of his dad, on the kitchen flatscreen.

"Tell them there need to be sacrifices. If the next missions to Mars are going to mean a damn thing, you've got to scramble some eggs now. And you're on the point of the thing!"

"You're not making any sense," Jere said. "You're mixing metaphors."

Ron's face went bright red, and he leaned into the camera. His nose grew to the size of a beet. "Shut. Up. Stupid. Son. Get on camera. Tell them something. You're blazing the trail. Whatever!"

"There aren't going to be any other shows."

Ron stared into the phone, his breathing rough and ragged. He said nothing for a long time. Finally, in a strange quiet voice, he said, "Yes. There will be."

"What do you mean?"

"Yours is the spectacle. Before things really get started."

"Dad, you're talking crazy."

Ron shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Get on camera. Talk about new frontiers. You can do it. I know you can." Then he cut the connection.

Jere sighed. "Drive me back to the studio?" he asked Patrice.

Patrice shook her head. "No. Do it here. With me."

"Are you sure?"

Patrice reached out, squeezed his hand. "I'm sure."

They set up the camera to show them on the couch. Jere called into Neteno and had them set up a live feed. He didn't care about what it looked like. He didn't care about scripts. He sat down, faced the camera, and thought, eight hundred million people.

"I'm not going to apologize for the Ruiz team," Jere said. His voice was soft, low. "When I started this, I knew the risks. I knew people could die. And yes, I did it for the money. But during the development of the show, I discovered, hey, this is really important. Like, so important that maybe some people will die doing this, and so important that might just be all right."

"I'm sad to see the Ruiz team stranded, but I tell you this. Maybe it needed to happen. Maybe we needed to be reminded that life isn't all tea and cookies. There are eight hundred million of you out there watching the show. What do you feel? Horror that a company like Neteno can put on a show like this? Or the thrill that there are people, on Mars, right now. People, standing on another planet.

"When I started this, I didn't know that we put probes on Mars in 1976, over forty years ago. Billions of dollars in government programs later, and we still hadn't put anything more than a few Roombas on Mars. The Chinese gave up at the Moon, because it was more interesting to gather up the old United States stuff -- now over fifty years old, think about it, that's half a century since we had people standing on the moon -- and take down our flags than go on to Mars. You can see the Lunar Rover and the original flag in a Beijing museum, I'm told."

"So, here we are. So I ask you: are you outraged, or are you thrilled? I will do everything I can to get the Ruiz team, and all the other contestants, back to Earth safely. But they knew what they were signing up for. And they are on Mars right now, looking back at earth from an alien sky."

"I'm thrilled. I hope you are. If not, I understand. But, even if you are outraged, ask yourself one thing: if not this way, then how?"

Jere thumbed the remote control that turned off the camera. He wanted nothing more than to go to sleep. It had been a very, very long day.

Patrice held out his eyepod. Jere shook his head. He would find out what everyone thought eventually.

But not now.

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Offer

The only thing that kept Keith Paul from swatting the tiny cam that dangled in front of him was that he knew that would lose him the thirty million dollars. *Contract breach*, the asswipe Frank would say, in that gruff old-man voice of his. Words from the training came back to him. You're all camera, all the time. We can tap in at any time we want. You won't know when we'll be using your footage, but we'll always be watching.

*Yeah, and I hope you get a shot of me taking a great huge shit*, Keith thought. Broadcast that to your eight hundred million viewers. Here is Keith Paul, taking a dump on your ratings.

But they wouldn't do that. Oh, no. That might offend someone. Some fucking wanked-out chick might faint dead away at the sight of his weewee. They were too pussified to do that.

He would be sure to say that when he won. When they pointed the camera at his face, he would tell them exactly what he thought of them. It would be his crowning moment, his first major televised fuck-you-all.

And he would win. No doubt about that. Teams were for pussies and faggots. He'd been able to skin the Wheel and string the Kite faster than any team back when they were training. Because he was one man. One strong man. He didn't have arguments with himself, or forget where something went. He didn't have to discuss things, or worry about someone loafing. They called him a machine, and that was exactly what he was, a machine made for winning.

*Spin that, Neteno assholes.*

Keith had picked a long overland romp that looked fairly easy, unlike the extreme sports fucksticks who wanted to go almost a mile straight up, or the geeks who wanted to fly to dry tanks and then chance walking in. The only team he'd worried about was the one with the dot and the slant.

And now they weren't a problem. Keith allowed himself a slow, lazy smile.

No, everything was great. Keith grinned up at the light blue sky. Really not that different from Earth. Not as weird as the photos they had shown him, with the pink skies and all that. He could almost be tramping through the Mojave back home, carrying his old M-16 and looking for shit to shoot.

And that was the one creepy thing. Nothing moved. In the Mojave, shit moved. You'd see a rabbit go tearing-ass out of a bush, you'd see the Joshua trees swaying in the breeze, maybe even an ancient-ass desert tortoise clumping around.

Not Mars. The ground just lay there. There were no plants to move around, no animals to dart around. The land felt old and scarred and unnatural. The sun didn't seem to be turned up all the way, either. He kept wiping at his header's visor as if to clear it, but it wasn't cloudy or tinted. That was just the way Mars looked. Because it was farther away from the sun. Farther away from home.

"We need to make a request," said Frank, from the Can channel.

"What?" They always had requests. *Look at this, do that, scratch your ass, pick your nose*. But it was usually Petrov who made them. Frank sucked. That John Glenn asshole could talk for hours. Keith frowned.

"The Ruiz team's transpo pod had a landing malfunction. They have no transport."

"So?" *Two down, three to go. The odds get better all the time.* Plus, the Ruiz team was the one with that bitch Juelie. Keith's memory of his beating was still a little too recent. Thinking about the three of them starving in the desert made him smile.

"We'd like you to divert your Wheel and collect them."

*What?* "I haven't even reached my transpo yet."

"After you get there."

"And you're going to give me extra time for this?"

A pause. "No."

"Then how the hell am I supposed to win?"

Another pause, this one longer. "They'll die if you don't pick them up."

"Again, so?"

"Do you just not get it?" Frank's voice edged to anger.

"Do you just not get it?" Keith said. "I don't give a shit. Let them die."

A long pause. When Frank came back on, he spoke slowly, in a carefully controlled voice. Keith imagined him damn near chewing through his knuckles having to be nice to him, and he smiled.

"Keith, we'd really like you to consider this. Even if you don't win the prize money--and you still might--the act of rescue will likely create its own reward."

"They'll pay me to do this?" *Now, that was interesting. Why didn't you say so in the first place, dumbass?*

Pause. "I'm sure they will."

"Like, they'll pay me more than thirty million bucks for it?"

"I'm sure our sponsors will be very generous."

"More than thirty million?"

Another pause. For long moments, Keith thought they had given up on him. Good. But Frank started in again as he caught the first glimpse of his iridescent transpo pod, glittering in the distance.

He would win.

"Keith, we've got buy-in from several of the sponsors. We can get you a million. Plus other things. Cars..."

"No."

"They'll die. That will be on your conscience."

"They can't prosecute me for it." It would be just like them, to dredge up the fact that he was the only former

felon, even though he was pardoned, even though his record was wiped clean when he signed the deal with Neteno.

Long pause. "No."

"I think I'll ignore you now."

"Keith..."

Keith looked up at the thin sky, as if to try and see the Can spinning overhead. "A million is not thirty. A million and promises is not thirty. Sorry, no can do."

"You may not win."

"I will win. And you know it."

Another pause. This one longer. "Two million."

"Did you fail math? Two million is not greater than thirty. Give me an offer more than thirty, and they're saved."

"We... probably can't do that."

"I... probably can't save them," Keith said, mocking his tone. "Shoulda thought of that when you built the damn Can."

Silence. Blissful silence. Long yards passed and the transpo pod swelled in his view. As he reached its smooth, unmarred surface, Frank's voice crackled to life again.

"Even if you win," he said. "People will hate you."

"That's all right," Keith said. "I love myself enough for all of them."

"You're terrible."

*Yes, Keith thought, But I'll win.*

---

Jere

"Can't we get any more money from the sponsors?" Jere said. They were in his office, him and Evan and Ron. "Make the asshole a big enough offer, and he'll divert."

"It'll have to be a big offer," Ron said.

"Not thirty-one million."

"No, but it would have to be big. And the sponsors are tapped. They aren't going to throw in dime one more. Even if you are Teflon right now."

"Is that true?" Jere asked Evan.

"Pretty much," Evan said. "They don't trust your ratings. Fifty-three percent thrilled to forty-seven percent outraged, with a polarization scale that has them fighting each other in bars, ain't exactly confidence-inspiring. Your rating could slip at any moment. They don't want to put any more money into this until something firms up."

"Until the contestants are back on board," Ron said. "Until we have a winner."

"How will they like Paul winning this?" Jere said. "Ask them that."

Evan shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Don't even fucking say it," Jere said. Yes, I know, I should've thrown the whole thing, whatever, he still might not win.

"They don't believe that Paul'll win this," Evan said. "They don't believe you haven't rigged it."

"Fuck. Shit."

"My sentiments exactly."

"Put them on," Jere said. "One by one. Let me see if I can get anything more out of them."

## Experiments

Geoff Smith looked down the contours of his chest. It was like something you'd see in a home gym commercial, except painted white and covered with sponsor logos. They'd sculpted muscles into his squeezesuit, but he'd never noticed it before.

He looked from his own chest to (what he'd thought were) the skin-tight curves of Laci and Wende, as they performed various acrobatic maneuvers to get their Wheel put together. Their transpo pod had come down a little further away than the Can had planned, so they'd run over the rough, uneven terrain for what seemed like hours to meet it. It didn't help that Geoff had to lug the heavy IBM experiments package -- and his own, smaller one -- the whole way.

But now the girls were putting the wheel together, and here he was, Geoff Smith, on an alien planet! And he was going to prove there was life on it! He would do what a million scientists back on earth wanted to do! Him, with nothing more than a bachelor's degree in chemistry, would do what all the Ph.Ds told him he couldn't do. He would put Martian life under a microscope for the first time! He would look at it with his own eyes! He would be famous! Revered!

Because the big problem was that nobody had ever really looked. They'd tried the Carbon-14 tagging trick on Viking, they'd tried spectrographic analysis, they'd even had a little drill and lots of other really silly experiments on the later rovers, but they'd never just taken a sample of dirt, put it on a microscope slide, and looked at it. Because even with all their robots and automation and fancy measurements, they weren't here. Now he was. And he would show them!

"Damn!" Wende Kirkshoff said. She hung from the top curve of their Wheel, holding a strut and looking at it disgustedly. She was a pretty blonde girl with freckles and a pleasant demeanor, but Geoff could never help but think she was avoiding him.

"What's the matter?" Laci Thorens said. She was on the ground, assembling the engine into a subframe with the kind of intensity of six-year-old might devote to a paint-by-numbers picture that was designed for the 12+

set.

"This strut doesn't have the little fitting dealie on the end," Wende said. "It won't stay in."

"Aren't there spares?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so."

"Look for them."

Geoff shook his head and hurried off, before the girls could rope him in. He remembered Wende's implied threat. They hadn't noticed him yet, and he wanted to keep it that way. They didn't think big. All they cared about was the money.

Who cared about the cash? With his discovery, he would be so famous that he could name his price.

Geoff set the IBM box in the lee of the transpo pod like the instructions said, digging down enough to ensure that it was placed somewhere its sampling tube could penetrate. He was supposed to let it sniff around, suck up a sample, run it through a bunch of tests and processing he didn't quite understand (he knew what an atomic force microscope was, but what was a scanning cantilever sensor, or a tomographic mapping array?) and then take the whole thing with them when they left.

Which was stupid. IBM was doing the same old thing. When all they had to do, really, was give him a bag and a microscope.

So he'd brought his own. It was the smallest and lightest one that he could find. Now it was just a matter of getting some dirt, throwing some water on it, putting it on the slide, and looking for wriggles.

"There aren't any spares," Wende said, over the local comm. Geoff looked back at her to see if she was looking at him yet. She wasn't.

"Shit. Let me see." Geoff caught a glimpse of Laci's squeezesuit as she hopped up to the top of the Wheel.

When he got his thoughts back again, he fumbled the little vial of water out of the tiny pocket of his squeezesuit. The microscope was already out, sitting perched on top of a medium-sized rock, away from the dust and grit.

How had Viking done it? It had moved a rock, hadn't it? And this new one from IBM was digging down. *Probably best to just combine both techniques*, Geoff thought, and shoved a medium-sized boulder out of the way. The Martian gravity was cool! It made him feel really light and strong. He knew it would be that way, but actually bouncing along and moving rocks like Superman was really a lot of fun.

*I could get used to living here*, he thought.

He dug down into the dust with his fingers, feeling the chill seep through his squeezesuit. At about six inches down, he struck another rock and dug sideways until he had a trench about two feet long and he could dig down some more.

At about a foot down, he hit rock again and decided to call it quits. The dust was clinging to his transparent header, and the front half of his suit was pink.

He took a pinch of dust from the shallow hole and dropped it onto a glass slide. The water had gone frosty

around the top, and when he opened it, it started to steam furiously. He dropped a couple of drops on the slide and they froze almost instantly, making something that looked like red ice cream.

*Damn, I didn't think of that*, he thought. There was no way he was going to see something through all that gunk with the microscope. He remembered that from when he was a kid, and his parents got him a microscope. If you couldn't get light through it, you couldn't see anything.

He sloshed some more water on it and pushed it around with the tip of his finger, trying to get the mixture thin enough to see through. After a couple of tries, he managed to get a thin pink film that looked reasonably transparent in places. Surely he could see something there at the edges.

"Geoff!" Laci said. "We need your help!"

*Damn damn.* They'd noticed him. "Can't," he said. "In the middle of an experiment."

"We need your help or we ain't rolling anywhere!"

Geoff slid the slide into the microscope and looked at the watch embedded in his suit. "We have time." And in fact, they did have almost half an hour left. The girls were just greedy, thinking about money rather than glory. He thought of trying to explain to them how important his experiments were, but decided they'd never understand. They'd never listened to him aboard ship. They were even less likely to listen now, if they saw their money slipping away.

"We have to do it now!" Wende said.

"Wait a minute," Geoff said. Slide in place. Microscope to eye. Nothing but fuzzy grey darkness. Focus. Dark, dark. Sliding into focus. Becoming great boulders. Sand under three hundred power magnification.

"Geoff, now!" Laci said. Her voice was low, impatient, dangerous.

"Just a few seconds," Geoff said. "Then you can have me." Focus. Ah. Crystal-clear. Scan it over a bit and find a brighter area. There. Ah.

Water crystals. Boulders. Bright light. Nothing else.

*Well, of course it wouldn't move. But where was the rounded wall of a bacterium, or the jelly of an amoeba?*

"Now," Laci said, and strong hands picked him up. He felt his grip on the microscope slipping. He grabbed it tighter, and it popped from his hands. He was jerked back as he watched it fall, with agonizing slowness, into the dust and grit.

He wrenched out of Laci's grip and scooped up the microscope. It was dusty, but looked OK. He looked through it. The slide was out of position, but he could still see. He reached for the focus knob...

The microscope was torn out of his hands. He looked up to see Laci standing in front of him, holding the microscope behind her back.

"Give it back!" he said. "This is important. I'm right..."

She punched his header. Hard. He could see the soft transparent plastic actually conform to her fist. It didn't quite touch him, but the kinetic energy of the blow knocked him to the ground.



"Go," she said. "Help Wende. You'll get your toy back when you're done."

"Give it back!"

Laci raised the instrument and made as if to smash it on a boulder. Geoff lunged forward at her, but she danced away. "No," she said. "Go help. I'll give it back later."

"Laci, this is important!"

"Yeah, and so is winning. Go help."

Geoff knew when he was beaten. He sighed and joined Wende atop the Wheel, where they quickly discovered another problem: the epoxy they'd provided for quick repairs wasn't setting in the Martian cold.

"Damnit!" Wendy said, when she saw what was happening. "What do we do now?"

Geoff stopped looking longingly at the microscope (now sitting on top of their hydrazine engine) and inspected the problem. The strut was one of the main load-bearers that held them suspended under the top of the Wheel. They couldn't ignore it, because after a few good shocks, the structure might collapse and tear the wheel apart.

"Tape?" he said, half-jokingly.

"None," Wende said. Her voice quavered.

*Oh crap, he thought. Don't panic. Not now. Not when I'm so close.*

"What about the Kite?" Geoff said. "Doesn't it share components with this? Maybe it has a strut with the right connector on it."

"It's packed."

"Then let's unpack it."

"What about when we have to fly?"

"We make sure we don't forget the damn thing. Wende, you want to stay here?"

"No."

"Then show me where the Kite is."

She did, and they dug into the bundle of struts and fabric. The components were the same, and many of them were the same length. When Geoff found one with the right connector on the end, he pulled it out and handed it to Wende.

"Just like Ikea," he said.

"They aren't the sponsor!"

"Same idea." *Maybe I can save the mission and discover life, too,* he thought. Then he noticed that Laci was frantically tightening the straps that held the little engine in place.

"We're late!" she said. "Check the time! Come on come on come on! Let's go!"

Wende grabbed him and had him help set the bottom end of the strut. Then Laci was starting the engine. Near the Wheel, his microscope was still parked on top of a rock.

"Wait!" he said, running to get it.

The Wheel was already moving. "Hurry up!" Laci said.

He grabbed the microscope and ran back, throwing himself up the scaffold towards the perch by the cabin. The landscape moved by, slowly at first and then with increasing speed. The soft rim of the Wheel bounced over rocks and boulders. It was like riding a giant beachball.

But he had his microscope. Between that and the IBM package, he would surely find something. He would still be famous. And they might even win!

*The IBM package!*

*Oh, shit, no! No no no!*

He'd never picked it up.

"Stop! he cried. "You have to go back!"

"Why?" Laci said.

"I left the IBM package. The research one!"

Laci gave him a disgusted look. "How could you be that stupid?"

"Go back."

She just looked at him. A slow smile spread on her face. "Sorry," she said.

Geoff looked back at the remains of their transpo pod, but it had already disappeared over a hill. They were moving. And he was lost.

Loss

"So much for getting anything more out of IBM," Evan said. "In fact, they're probably going to want a refund of their sponsorship so far."

"Shut up," Jere said, already calculating losses from the IBM experiments package. The replay rights would have to go for a ridiculous sum to offset it. All because of one dumbass geek. They should've given the experiments package to the other starry-eyed loon, like Ron had suggested.

All this shit, Jere thought. I'm buried in it. Finances so complex that it looked like a three-dimensional topo map of the Alps, with deep valleys to navigate and impossible heights to scale. All moving in real time with the shifting of international currencies, interest rates, and a thousand other variables and derivatives that Jere could never hope to understand. The real fortunes, Ron had often said, Are now controlled by the people who channel them. Who erect the dams, who cut new channels for the rivers to flow. My own little holding, what you called almighty, isn't even a crumb on the hors'd'oeuvre plate at the banquet of the true monetary giants.

They play with percentages of gross national products, with fractions of the balance of global trade. They've made it a game to devalue the currency and reap the rewards, three or four percent a year, but three or four percent a year of the global output of the world.

What could we buy with that? Jere wondered. They bought themselves mansions and expensive cars and parties that cost millions of dollars, on top of the real entrée, the ability to broker power around the world, so as to make the ongoing rape of the world possible. We could have sent hundreds of missions, we could have sent thousands of people, we could have built cities on Mars, like the stuff from Burroughs, recently at the linear palaces. They buy control, the softest noose ever laid around the necks of men but a noose nonetheless.

Jere had a moment of crystalline clarity. I would never have thought this way when I started this endeavor, he thought. I'm parroting dad, even in my thoughts. Because of this, he's forever changed me.

And suddenly, all the money, all the positioning, all the power seemed completely meaningless and empty. They have their palaces here on Earth, but they've never looked up to the sky.

Was this what Ron wanted him to see? Was this the final epiphany?

Was Winning Mars to be the crowning achievement, before the frontier closed once again, this time for the last time? Is this what Ron bought into?

Jere looked at Ron, his face lit by the glow of Los Angeles at night, coming in from the windows of his Neteno office overlooking neon Hollywood. Ron looked back at him and pushed his face into something like a smile. Jere could see virtually every muscle moving in his face, he could feel each pull taut in turn. It was a completely mechanical movement, something that Ron had to think about to do. It was grim and forbidding and wonderful. Jere felt tears begin to well in the corners of his eyes. He blinked them rapidly away.

Without factoring in the loss of IBM's monies, they'd managed to put a couple of million dollars into their buying-out-the-asshole fund. Jere polled his eyepod. It told him that taking any more from his own reserves, or from Neteno's, would navigate them towards one of those valleys that yawned like a crevasse from which Himalayan hikers never returned. Go too far down, and the company would never recover, no matter the changes in the financial markets.

"It's time," Jere said. "Let's talk to the asshole."

"We don't have enough money," Evan said.

"Shut up." Ron's voice, perfunctory now. He made his effortful smile grow fractionally wider as he nodded at Jere.

Jere covered his mouth to hide a grin.

Ascent

They were half-way up the sheer face, and the way Alena was climbing, they were going to die. Glenn watched her almost literally fly up the rock, making twenty-foot jumps from handhold to handhold, reaching out and grasping the smallest outcropping and crevice with fluid grace and deceptive ease.

*Dangerous ease*, he thought. Climbing in the low gravity seemed childishly simple compared to climbing on Earth. Which meant it was easy to take one too many chances. Easy to get overconfident and make mistakes.

Alena made one last lunge and scrabbled for grip in a tiny crevice. Her feet skidded and she slid down the face for one terrible instant before catching on another tiny outcropping. Pebbles and sand bounced off Glenn's visor.

"Slow down!" he said. "A fall from here'll kill you as dead as one on Earth."

"We need to keep moving!"

"Alena..."

Labored breathing over the comm. "Listen to them!" Alena said. "Laci's team is already rolling, and that psycho guy is, too! We're falling behind."

Glenn cursed. The voices from the Can, when they weren't giving orders, provided a blow-by-blow of what the other teams were doing. As if it would do anything more than irritate them.

*Which is probably why they're doing it*, he thought. To get them doing something stupid. And Glenn knew exactly how that would work on Elena. It would drive her harder. She'd take stupid chances. Because the climbing wasn't fun for her. It was a career. And she always had to get ahead. Telling her they had a different schedule, that they didn't have to roll until the next morning, would mean nothing to her.

Knowing that, in that tiny instant, Glenn could almost hate her. Almost.

Glenn pulled himself up nearer to Alena. She resumed climbing, too.

"Let me get nearer," he said. "So we can safety each other."

"We have to keep going."

"The others have more time to roll. We aren't falling behind."

Alena stopped for a moment. "I know, but..."

"It's hard not to think it, yeah." Glenn finished for her. He pulled himself even higher. She stayed in place for once. Higher. Higher.

"We'll make the top before nightfall," he said. "Then we shelter and wait it out. We've got a short roll and a reasonable flight. We still have the best chance of winning, Alena."

Pant, pant. He was close enough to be her failsafe now.

Alena looked back, gave him a thin smile, and pulled herself up again. For a while it was all by the book, then Alena began stretching it a bit, leaping a bit too far, aiming at crevices just a tiny bit too small. With the sun below the cliff, the shadows were deep, purple-black, and the cliff was losing definition in the dying day.

*Just the thing to trick the vision*, Glenn thought. Something they didn't need. He redoubled his efforts to keep up with Alena, even though he knew it was dangerous, and there were more skids and mini-slips than he cared for.

It was completely different than climbing on Earth. He felt as if he weighed almost nothing, but he couldn't feel the rock at all. Just the cold, through the tips of his fingers where the squeeze-suit grew thin. But not thin enough to feel texture. Not thin enough to be able to put your hand on rock and know what you were

grabbing, whether it was weathered granite or loose shale, or rock solid enough to bend an old-style piton. Most of the rock was reasonably solid, with a rough, pock-marked finish that looked windblown. And much of the ascent was less than vertical. But still, he worried.

And yet the adrenaline was going, he was rushing, he could hear the roar in his ears and he felt powerful, omnipotent, charged with energy. It was wonderful.

When they reached a deep crevice in the rock, Glenn thought things were getting better. But here, the rock was fragile and crumbly, and rust-red chunks came off easily in his hands. With the weight of the backpack pulling him away from the cliff face, it was dangerous. More than dangerous. Glenn was about to tell Alena that they should get out of there when she reached up and grabbed an outcropping that looked solid and it broke off in her hand.

She scrambled for purchase on the cliff face and found none. From ten feet above Glenn, she began to fall, agonizingly slowly at first. Glenn felt his heart thundering, like an engine out of control in his chest. He had a momentary vision of the two of them tumbling out of the crevice to fall thousands of feet to the rocks below. He tested his handholds and footholds, and a small cry escaped his lips when he realized he probably wouldn't be able to keep his grip when Alena impacted him.

Glenn jumped downward, seeking better purchase. Slip and slide. Nothing more. Down once again. Nope.

Down again, and then Alena piled into him, an amazingly strong shock in the weak gravity. *Mass still works*, Glenn thought, wildly, a moment after he'd lost all contact with the cliff face.

Alena flailed, trying to catch the rock surface as it skidded by. Glenn knew that soon they would be moving too fast to stop, and reached frantically himself. He slowed their fall, but didn't stop it.

Where was the edge of the crevasse?

He looked below him. Right here. But there was one outcropping that looked reasonably solid. If he could catch it...

He hit hard with his feet and felt a shooting pain go up his right leg. His knees buckled and his feet slid to the side, away from the outcropping, towards destruction.

One last thing. He reached out and caught the outcropping, keeping one hand around Alena's waist. For a moment he thought their momentum was still too great, but he was able to hold on. Alena skidded to a stop within feet of the opening.

For long moments, Glenn didn't dare move. He could hear the harsh rasp of Alena's breathing. Meaning they were both alive. Alive!

Alena looked up at him with something in her eyes that might almost have been gratitude. He looked down at her and smiled. For a brief instant, she smiled back. He hadn't seen that for a long, long time. His heart soared, and his breath came in short gasps.

Slowly, they backed out of the crevice and continued on up the cliff face. Glenn's right leg roared with pain, and he knew he was slowing Alena down. But she didn't run away from him. She didn't take chances. She didn't say anything at all until they had reached the top, and the last dying rays of the sun painted them both blood-red.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

He was about to say something, but Petrov's voice blatted in his ear. "What imagery! Pan slowly across sunset."

"Thanks," he said, bitterly, as Alena turned away.

## Relief

Jere watched the raw feeds from the slice and dice screen at Neteno, deep in the dark warrens where the infogods and story-precisioners worked. They were still hot on Keith Paul, who had been singing popular songs with his own bawdy lyrics for the past hour. So it was still wait and watch. Even Jere's offer waited for the cameras.

At least Glenn and Elena had made it up over the cliff. What, hours ago? Something like that. When they were both up, he breathed a little easier. Even was out of the room, so there were no stupid comments about how "at least we didn't lose them." Jere didn't want to think about the fallout of a show where they lost three teams out of five. He was sure he could call up predictions on his eyepod.

Keith's voice went hoarse and coughs exploded from the audio channel.

Thank God, Jere thought. Maybe he'll shut the fuck up.

But no. The asshole hacked up phlegm, swallowed it, and resumed singing. Jere cursed silently.

"You can go on now," one of the infogods said, in Jere's ear.

"No more maughty nursery rhymes?"

"No. It was a good edit point. We're live on Glenn and Elena, fifteen minutes past. You have a solid seventeen to twenty minute block."

"Put me on."

"You realize this will not be a realtime conversation? You'll have to say your piece and wait for a response?"

"Yes. Do it."

"Done."

The sound of rough singing rang in Jere's ears.

## Rejection

Wheeling had been easy back on Earth. The training out by the 395, on the nice smooth sand and little rocks, was no big deal. You could bounce over the flat as long as you wanted, and hardly ever have a problem, unless you were an idiot.

But Wheeling was a bitch and a quarter here on Mars. Keith Paul stopped singing for a moment and gritted his teeth as he came to another long downhill run. It was scattered with boulders as big as houses and ravines that could catch the edge of the Wheel and fuck him up good. He'd already dug the Wheel out twice, once when he swerved to avoid a slope that would pitch it over and ended up in a ditch, and once when he got to bouncing and bounced over a hill into a ravine.

And man, did it bounce! On Earth, it kind of scooted along, absorbing the shocks with its plastic "rim." But here, whenever it hit a rock, it bounced. Sometimes a foot, sometimes a couple, sometimes ten or twenty feet in the air. And that was with you running almost blind, hoping there wasn't anything in front of you.

*They probably got some good vid of my terrified mug*, Keith thought. Before he started singing. That was smart. Don't show scared. Ever. That was how you got fucked. And the singing was fun. Keith imagined them beaming that into an almighty living room, full of live-in kids with kids. That'd spice up their evening.

But he was being strong on other things. He was making good time across the desert. He'd been up rolling at the moment dawn's light made the landscape even dimly guessable. And he'd been able to keep up a fair clip, even with the setbacks.

*Other idiots are probably picking their way along like grandma in a traffic jam*, he thought, and smiled. He would take the chances. Even if it was scary. Because he was going to win.

And he was strong on the offers. Frank and Petrov both tried, about every hour on the hour. They were like some kind of fucked-up cookoo clock. Keith liked making fun of them. They'd promised him everything but a blow-job and a hot dog, but the money hadn't changed. Neither had his position.

Now, he was getting near the Kite part of the trip. They'd probably try to talk him into it then, unless they'd found some other suckers.

Almost on cue, the voice. This time it was some new asshole

"Hello, Keith, this is Jere Gutierrez on Earth--"

"Who're you?" Keith said.

... don't know who I am, but I am the founder and CEO of Neteno. Not like I'm trying to show off, I just wanted you to know how important this is--"

"Who. The fuck. Are you?" Like the asshole wasn't going to acknowledge him.

"... since there's a several minute gap between my speaking and you hearing. Let me repeat, because you probably think I'm an inconsiderate asshole--"

"What?" Keith said, but Jere had his attention.

"--I have to run through this just once, in one shot, because there's a several minute gap between me speaking and you hearing."

"Ah."

"Let me just start by saying, this is our final offer," Jere said. "And it's a very generous one. Take this offer, and you will be a very well-off man. And you will be a hero. I will personally use all the resources of Neteno to make you a legend, a star. By the time you come home, they'll be giving you parades, and your hometown will have a sculpture of you up in the square. Or whatever they do. Take this, and you win both ways. But this is your last chance."

"Yeah, yeah, what's the fucking offer?" Keith said. What a fucking windbag.

"By air, you have a good chance of picking up the Ruiz team. It's even conceivable you could win the show,

as well. You are currently leading the three remaining teams by a fair margin."

"What's the offer?" Jesus.

"If you rescue the Ruiz team we're upping our offer to four million. Plus all the gifts and benefits we've discussed before. Plus the PR campaign to make you a hero. This is our final offer. Let us know your decision. Frank is standing by to hear your response."

Keith shook his head. Fucking windbag. That's the way it always was. Butter up that fucking dry toast before you shove it up my ass.

"Keith?" Frank said.

"Yeah."

"What do you think?"

"I think you're all very bad at math, even your fearless leader." Though, he had to admit, the idea was intriguing. With four million, he could live pretty well if he went to a low-rent part of the world like Mexico or something like that. And as a hero, he could probably get the chicks. Pretty much any one. He wouldn't even have to spend for that.

For a moment, he actually could see himself down there, living on the beach, fishing every day, hooking up with some pretty little senorita...

*No! Stupid! You're a winner. You're in the lead. Four is not thirty.*

Long silence from the Can. Then, Frank: "You heard Mr. Guitierrez. That's our final offer."

"No."

A long, long silence. Keith expected the fearless leader to come back on and plead with him some more. That would be fun.

Finally, Frank came back. "Your decision has been noted," Frank said. He didn't sound surprised. If anything, he sounded tired.

*Noted?*

"Hey, what does that mean?" Keith said. Like, were they going to try to disqualify him or something? That wasn't in the contract! They said so themselves!

Silence.

"Ass! What the hell does 'noted' mean?"

Silence.

"Fuck you, then!"

Silence. On and on.



Was it possible that he could run this whole thing and not win due to some technicality? Could he take the offer now, or would they try to screw him out of it?

No. No. He was a winner. He was going to win.

And if they tried to take that away from him, God help them.

---

#### Contingency

"I'll go back on, offer him eight million," Jere said.

"It won't matter," Ron said.

"Sixteen."

"Run the projections with a sixteen million dollar hole."

"No." Jere already knew what they'd look like. Ruin. Total and complete. A smoking crater.

"But it's not that much money!" Jere said. His voice was high, cracking.

Ron closed his mouth, blew out a big breath. We don't have it, that breath said. Everything we have is leveraged, and the leverages leveraged. There was nothing to turn into money.

"Oversight," Jere said.

"No."

"They might do it. We could grassroots it, like we did last time."

"I don't want them in it. Even if I thought we could."

"But they--"

Ron came over, put a hand on Jere's shoulder. His hand was hard, like the hand of an automaton. Wood. Unfeeling. He squeezed Jere's shoulder hard, once.

"It should've worked," Jere said. "I thought it would work."

"Not this time," Ron said.

---

#### Performance

Last. Dead last. No denying it now. No excuses. No rationalization. It had taken Glenn and Alena way too long to assemble the Wheel that morning, far longer than they had taken back on Earth. Blame it on the cold, or the parts that didn't want to fit together, or the arcane changes to the engine assembly, but facts were facts. The others hadn't let it keep them back, as Petrov in the Can (rather gleefully, Glenn thought) told them.

And yet Glenn was strangely happy, oddly content. Just like that one freeclimb in Tibet, their second time up, when it wasn't about Everest, but about rock that was supposed to be unclimbable, when it was clear they were beaten, hanging exhausted from numb fingertips beneath a thin sun rapidly disappearing behind a front of ominous purple-grey clouds. That moment when he realized they weren't going to make it, that they would

have to go back down, that they would have to forget being the first. The stress and the worry suddenly lifted from him, making him feel light and free, as if he could do anything. And his great surprise when Alena, tears freezing on her cheeks, agreed with him. They scrambled down the rock as the icy rain hit. The icy rain that would have killed them.

They'd made love back in what passed for a hotel with incredible intensity, golden and yellow sparks flying in a perfect night sky, impossible to describe, infinite and endless in a moment's perfection. They'd finally collapsed, sated, face to face, sweat cooling to an icy chill in the cold room. He'd waited until her breathing had slowed, and lengthened, and deepened, then said, very softly, "Marry me."

Alena's eye's opened. In the dark they were like the glassy curve of two crystal spheres, unreadable.

Glenn's breath caught. Had she heard him? What would she think? Would she...

"Yes," she said softly, and closed her eyes again.

He'd lain awake for a long time after that, looking at the curves of her face, limned in the pale moonlight. Had he imagined it? Had she really heard him? He fell asleep with questions resonating in his mind.

When he woke in the morning, she was already pulling on her gear. Glenn had a moment of sleepy pleasure, watching her slim form, before he remembered his question--and her answer--from the night before.

She looked down at him. The light fell pale and grey on her face. She looked like the ghost of an angel.

"Yes," she said. "I said yes."

"Glenn!" Alena shrieked. "Watch out!"

Glenn jerked back to the present as the Wheel caromed off a boulder and promptly went bouncing across a field. He pulled on his harness and leaned outside of the Wheel's edge, shortening the bounces on his side and bringing them back on course. They'd rigged the harnesses so they run flat out and catamaran the wheel, which allowed them to run full out. Each of them leaned out the side of the Wheel, giving a better view of the terrain ahead than through the translucent dust-coated fabric, and allowing them to shift its direction more rapidly by leaning in and out to shift the center of gravity.

A risk, yes, but a risk that Glenn knew they had to take. Alena wouldn't settle for less. And it might even be better, balancing the time of use with the fatigue on the Wheel. If it broke before they were done, they'd have no chance. So the shorter time they spent inside it, the better.

Or at least that's what Glenn told himself. "Pay attention!" Alena said. "A few more inches, and we might have lost a strut."

"I know, I know," Glenn said. "I'm sorry."

"What were you thinking?"

"Tibet," he said.

Silence for a time. "Oh," she said finally.

"Remember?"

"I remember we didn't make it."

And she was right. A series of storms had kept them from ever trying the climb again. The next year, a guy from the UK had succeeded in climbing the ridge. Before they could save to go back again. Glenn had found the printout from the freeclimb website posted to the refrigerator, when he'd come home from work. That was the beginning of the silence. It was, in a way, the beginning of the end, though their marriage limped along another three years after that.

Glenn said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"I just don't like losing," she said, after a time.

"Neither do I."

"We don't have to lose if you pay attention."

"I am."

"We're making up time."

"I know."

"The others may have problems with the Kite."

"They will."

Alena stopped and shot him and puzzled look. "Why are you so agreeable for once?"

*Because I love you,* Glenn thought. That's another thing I never wanted to lose.

But again, he said nothing.

There was nothing to say.

---

Joy

Patrice couldn't drag Jere away from the darkened room of the slice and dice screens, so she brought him pizza from Pizza One, the new italo-californian place on Vine. His eyes were big and round from the litter of espresso cups in front of him, but the skin hung in dark bags beneath them. His right eye, glazed with eyepod-dazzle, looked faraway into space. His left eye jittered, focused on her.

"You need to sleep," she said.

"What?" Jere said. He hadn't seen her at all. Not at all.

"Sleep. You know, the bit where you lay down on a bed, close your eyes--"

"I'll sleep when its over." Petulant. Whiny. Like a six-year-old.

"You'll be dead when it's over."

Jere glanced at her, glanced at the pizza. Looked away.

Silence.

Evan snored softly on a recliner in the corner. The creepy dad was gone, which was fine by Patrice. He was too serious. She could imagine strange calculations, going on behind his eyes. She didn't like to think about that.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh? Finances."

"I thought Keith was already flying."

"Uh. Yeah. He is. But we might--" Jere's gaze went away, reflecting strange landscapes.

"Marry me," Patrice said.

"Huh?" Jere looked at her. Really looked at her. "I will."

"Now."

"Now?" Jere looked like a kid in school, faced with calculus for the first time.

"Now."

"But--"

"We can do it. It's easy."

"But, a priest, a ring, a service--"

"We don't need a priest, I don't need a ring, and I don't care about a service."

Jere reached up to turn off his eyepod. He looked at her with both eyes. The next thing you say will make or break this, she thought. I'll love you or I'll hate you, depending on what it is. But I'll marry you either way. Because you need this.

"Why?" he said.

Patrice smiled. That why was enough. It said, Why do you want me? I have nothing to give you. Everything is up in the air. There is no prize.

"Because," she said. "I believe in you."

Jere just looked at her. His bloodshot eyes darted left and right. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. She let him sit there, open-mouthed, for a while, before she said, "Come on."

Patrice took him out into the street, where the hangers-on had come to watch Winning Mars on the big screens outside Neteno. When they stepped out onto the sidewalk, people stopped and stared. A hush fell. Eyes turned towards them, until they were like glittering marbles in the sunset above the Hollywood Hills. Couples leaned together, to whisper Jere and Patrice's name.

"What are you doing?" Jere said.

"Marrying us," she said.

She turned to address the crowd. "I believe in Jere," she said. "So I'm marrying him."

"Let all the flyeyes and netcams take this as proof. I take Jere as my husband, to have and to hold, forever and ever."

She looked at him. He could blow it now. He could. It was possible. His eyes quivered with fear.

But he stepped forward, took her hand. He looked at the crowd. And in a loud, clear voice, he said, "And I take Patrice as my wife, to have and to hold, forever and ever. Because I believe in her."

The crowd gave a little cheer. Some tourists with old-fashioned cameras snapped pictures. And, Patrice knew, the news was already winging its way around the world.

So you have what you want, she thought. And Jere has your support.

Which was good. He needed it.

"What do we do now?" Jere said.

"I have no idea," Patrice said. Smiling happily. Because, just for that moment, everything was right.

Mirage

Geoff Smith felt dazed. Leaving the IBM package was one thing, but the slide was inexcusable. If only he could turn back the clock and check the microscope before they'd left! If only he could have remembered to pick up the IBM package! All it would have taken was a glance, and a five-second diversion, and everything would have been all right. He would have both, and his fame and fortune would be assured.

Now, his best possible fate was winning a prize. Just cash. Only money. And then having to endure the endless interviews that came after it, reporters asking snickering questions about how it was to be teamed with Wende and Laci, if they ever let him watch, if he got any. As if he cared!

But that was his only hope. And now, in this instant of time, as they flew over the rugged Martian terrain, it looked like they might actually have a chance of winning. Chatter from the Can told them: the felon's Kite setup wasn't going well, his lead had evaporated, and every second left him further behind. The extreme sports geeks had never really been in the running. They'd been slow at everything--assembling the Wheel, navigating, assembling the Kite--and were many, many minutes behind.

*Money*, he thought dreamily, watching the landscape pass below. *Money money money*.

He'd hoped that he would be able to put together another slide as Laci and Wende built the Kite, but his water was lost and they wouldn't let him have the time. He'd swapped struts while Laci rerigged the engine and Wende did the electronics checks. And truth was, he didn't really feel like making another slide. It was as if losing the slide had taken all the fight out of him.

Of course, he could scope the dust all he wanted when they were back on the Can, but that would be surface dust, stuff that had been flying around in the UV. What if the dust had to be from a few feet down? Or what if the dust had to be from near the water flows that they had seen from MGS, so many years ago? What if he'd never had a chance at all, and they knew that, and they didn't care? His thoughts whirled like a cyclone, all destructive energy and dark currents.

Wende looked back at him from the pilot's sling and smiled at him. Geoff tried to smile back, but his lips felt frozen in place. After a moment, Wende turned away and looked at Laci. Laci looked back at him and frowned.

*Yes, I know you don't like me, he thought. You've made that abundantly clear. Now turn back around and be a good copilot.*

Laci was probably thinking how much faster they would be running if he accidentally fell off. He looked up nervously at his tether, but it was solid and unfrayed.

Movement on the ground caught his eye, and his heart pounded. Movement? He strained his eyes. It was a wispy shivering that played at the edges of the mini-dunes that hid between rocky fields. Could it be something under the sand, twisting and dancing? Could there be real macro-organisms on Mars, maybe something like sand-fleas or worms or...

Geoff was about to say something when they whisked over a hill to a larger dune field that was aboil with movement. He made a sound deep in his throat as they were shoved sideways. Wende cried and grappled with the manual controls.

Wind.

Of course. Geoff felt instantly stupid. The wind was kicking up. Even in the thin Martian atmosphere, it was enough to kick up sand and dust.

There was no life underground. Just mindless, lifeless sand, pushed by the wind.

*Sandstorm?* He wondered, looking at the horizon. But it was the customary light pink, shading to pale blue above. No mass of pink dust hung like a curtain near them.

His head swam for a moment, and he shook it. His vision blurred and doubled as if his head was a giant bell, just struck. He gripped his perch tighter and held his head still. After a moment, it passed. The landscape streamed by beneath him, soothing and hypnotic.

*We've always looked down at the surface of Mars and imagined things.* Shciapiarelli's canals, Hoagland's faces and cities, Clarke's trees. Everyone saw what they wanted to see in Mars. First, God of War. Next, an arid desert world where intelligence clung to life with massive feats of engineering. Then, an incredible fantasy-land where all manner of strange creatures hid the secrets of eons past. Then, suddenly, the real photography, exposing the dead, dry thing they knew it to be now.

But it wasn't dead! He knew there was life here. If they'd just let him have enough time, he would have seen microbes. If they'd given him a shovel and even more time, he'd dig up fossils. He knew it! And somehow, he would still prove it!

The landscape changed again from dunefield to dark rocks, rectilinear and almost artificial in appearance. It reminded him of ancient Mayan ruins. Like that other guy had said. That guy online, who was always seeing cities in every photograph the latest probes sent back. Geoff thought he was a little crazy about it, ancient Mayans and spacemen and stuff like that. Or was it Egypt? Or Stonehenge? He shook his head.

Details swam and ran and resolved themselves again. The rectilinear lines became sharper and more regular. Now he could see individual stones, etched into fantastic designs by the passage of time.

Etched? By what? He shook his head again, and details leaped out: fantastic whorls and patterns, ancient art of

the highest order. It wasn't etched by weather. It was etched by intelligence! He was looking at carvings. Alien, to be sure, but deliberate carvings. Someone had done these, thousands or millions of years ago!

Were those patterns he saw in the sand as well? Did they cover ancient squares where people once gathered? For a blinding instant, he could see the entire city as it had stood, towering, over the rough Martian surface, with wise-looking, robed people with big golden eyes congregating...

"Stop!" he cried. His voice sounded strangely high and strangled.

"What?" Wendy said. "Why? What's wrong."

"It's them!" Geoff said. "Intelligence! The city below us... there's a city below us!"

The two looked down, scanning back and forth with puzzled looks. Probably not even looking down, Geoff thought. Just looking ahead. Always ahead. To the prize. That was all that mattered to them.

"Geoff?" Wende said. "What are you talking about?"

How could they not see it? He could see its lines, etched into the rocks, buried in the sands. There was the remains of an entire civilization below them. "The city! Look at the stones! They're square! Look at the language on them!"

"Geoff, that isn't funny."

A crackle. The voice of Frank Sellers from the Can. "What do you see?"

"A city," Geoff said. "The remains of a city. Stones. Writing! Decoration!"

"Land," Frank said.

"What?" Laci said.

"Put your Kite down."

"No way!" Laci said. "We're winning!"

"The Roddenberry clause says you have to investigate any overt evidence of life you might find," Frank said.

"Fuck with that! We're not stopping!"

"If you don't stop, it's contract breach."

"But there's nothing below us!" Wende broke in. "Just a rockfield."

"You have to land. Or you forfeit all winnings." Slow and steady, as if speaking to a child. Geoff had to stifle a grin.

"Shit!" Laci said. Wende grumbled, but they began to fall from the sky.

"Turn around," Geoff said. "The best part is behind us."

Wende wheeled around and he saw it all, the geometric perfection, the ancient city and all its splendor.

"I still don't see it," Wende said. "Frank, can you review our last imagery?"

"Yep," Frank said. "Continue with your landing. It'll take me a few minutes."

"Shit." But still they dropped lower.

Silence for long seconds as they fell out of the sky. Wende picked a relatively clear section of sand and for a moment they all acted as landing gear, running over the sand.

Geoff's legs felt heavy and weak, and he buckled under the weight of the Kite. Down this close, he could see nothing. Rocks were just rocks. Sand was just sand. There was no great city.

*Like Nazca!* he thought. You have to be up in the air to see it. Smart! Real smart! Like the Face!

"Geoff? You alright?" That was Wende. Pretty Wende. Nice of her to think about him.

Frank's voice crackled back on. "False alarm," he said. "I don't see anything other than some regular volcanic cracking. That's probably what fooled you, Geoff."

Foiled? "I'm no fool!" he shouted. He had seen it! He had!

Silence for a time. Finally: "Laci, Wende: what does Geoff look like? Is he blue?"

"No," Wende said. "But he is looking a bit funny. Patchy, splotchy. Oh, shit. Does he have a bug?"

"More likely a life support malfunction. Is his suit torn? Is he cold?"

"Fuck him," Laci said, and started the engine again. Wende glanced at her and shrugged out of her harness.

"No," Laci said. "Wende, get back in. We need to fly!"

"It'll only take a minute," Frank said.

"It won't kill him."

"It might," Frank said.

"Then we take the chance."

Wende had stopped shrugging out of her harness, under Laci's hard glare. Frank said nothing. Geoff watched them for a moment, thinking, *I saw it! I did! I really did!* There was a distant babble on the comm and things got very bright.

Then rough hands picked him up. Wende's face bent over him.

"What do I do?"

"Check his suit. He may have torn it."

Wende spun Geoff around, looking at his suit. He tried to think of a snappy retort, but everything was fuzzy. "Stop it!" he said, and tried to twist out of her grasp.



"Nothing," Laci said.

"Check his oxygen," Frank said. "It may be cranked up too high. Funny, that usually doesn't cause hallucinations, but I suppose..."

"I saw it!" Geoff said. "I really did!"

He said it would only take a minute, but it seemed to take forever. They did something on the back of Geoff's suit, and he sucked in big breaths of air. His head began to clear.

But when they were all back on board and soaring into the sky, even the Rothman team had passed them.

---

Face

When Jere and Patrice came back from their short honeymoon at his apartment, Evan was holding forth to the slice and dice room. "If only they'd found a city," Evan said. "That'd make this whole trip worthwhile."

"What, did you expect to find the Martian crown jewels?" Ron said.

"Who knows?"

"You're an idiot," Ron said.

"Just remember who came up with this idea."

"And the completely bullshit numbers that got us in this mess."

Evan stood up. He glanced at Patrice and Jere, and played dum-dum-de-dum out of the corner of his mouth, ironically. "You just don't think big enough. We should be selling this as a series! We should be pitching for the next show! Haven't you looked at the numbers? This is the biggest thing to ever hit linears, even in the age of TV. This is the superbowl of superbowls. This is the Holy motherfucking Grail. And you sit there, hand-wringing, when you're right on the fucking top!"

"Shut up, Evan," Ron said.

"No. I won't. I shouldn't have to. I've shut up for long enough. I should go out and sell the next show to someone else, right now. You just don't get the power. Not at all."

"If you think you can sell it, do it," Ron said.

Evan looked from Ron to Jere. "Are you formally severing my contract?"

Silence from Ron. He looked down at a program planning screen, as if engrossed in the details.

"Am I released? Because if I am, I want it for the record."

Silence.

"Tell me! Tell me right now!"

"You're not released," Ron said, softly.

Evan laughed. "Of course not. Because you know this is a big idea. You know this is the big deal, the big power. You know, if you sell it right, you can do whatever you want with this."

"Shut up, Evan."

This time, he did. Ron looked up at Jere with dull, ironic eyes. "Welcome the newlyweds."

"What a fucking stunt," Evan said.

Ron moved with more grace and speed than Jere had ever seen him use. In one motion, he stood up, swung, and placed his fist squarely in the center of Evan's face. There was a dull crunching noise, very much like the foley guys pounding celery, from the dim days of the art. Evan squealed like a girl and retreated, clutching his nose.

"You fucking nut!" Evan said.

"You don't talk to my son like that. Or his wife."

"I'll... I'll have you fucking arrested!"

"Try it."

The two old men stared at each other, both motionless. Jere waited tensely, expecting Evan to rush his father. But he just took a couple of steps back. Blood was streaming over his hand.

"Go," Ron said. "Have the nose fixed."

After a while, Evan did.

## Dying

Frank was lying to them again. Mike Kinsson didn't blame the man. What was he going to tell them otherwise? *Sorry, you're out of luck, best to just ditch the headers and pop off quick.*

"We're still seeing if we can rig one of the Returns for remote operation," Frank said. "If we can remote it, we can bring it to your location and you can return to the ship from there."

"How much longer?" Juelie whined. "I'm bored."

She and Sam had their arms around each other. The tiny half-dome shelter was still up, but everyone was out of it for the thin grey light of morning. The morning of the third day. The last day. Later, Mike would go and wander around, like he'd done on the days before. Sam hadn't gotten aggressive yet, but Mike didn't want to be around when he did. Juelie and Sam were like two teenagers who had just discovered sex, and they were probably happy to have the privacy. He'd walked over to the nearby cliffs, turning over rocks, hoping beyond hope to see the tell-tale color of lichen or moss, something that might be able to survive in Mars' hostile environment. He still remembered the first time his mother and father had taken him to the Griffith Observatory in Southern California, and they had talked about what life might be like on other planets. Lichens and primitive plants for Mars, they'd said. Maybe. That was about the best they could hope for. Or just bacteria. Things you couldn't see. It had fascinated him in a way that nothing had ever done, before or since. What if there was life on other planets? What if Mars could be made to support human life? There were an endless variety of "What ifs."

"We're hoping to have a definitive answer by the end of the day," Frank said.

"What if it takes longer?" Sam said.

"Then we wait."

"We're running out of food!" Juelie said.

"We know. Please do what you can to save food and conserve energy."

They both looked at Mike. Mike looked right back at them, thinking, *Like what you were doing wasn't more strenuous than my walk.*

He started edging away from them again. What would they do when they found out there really wasn't any rescue coming? Maybe it would be best just to wander off, and stay wandered off. Maybe the Martian night would be cold enough to overwhelm his squeezesuit. Maybe the movies were right. Maybe freezing was a pleasant way to die.

"He's heading off again!" Juelie said.

"Mild physical exertion won't hurt," Frank said.

They watched Mike as he walked away, but they didn't come after him.

More lichen-hunting. He walked past the cliffs from the day before and came to a place where sand and rocks made a steep slope down into a small valley. Rivulets had been cut in the surface of the slope, some still knife-edged.

He remembered old satellite images. Could he be near a place where water was near the surface? He paused to dig into one of the little channels, but turned up only dry sand and dust and pebbles. If there was water here, it was deeper than he could find.

Which was too bad. Because if there was life here, they'd likely find it somewhere where there was liquid water. That's what they'd always said. Their best hope for finding earthlike life hinged on water.

He wandered on. There would be no rescue. He knew that. The Returns weren't designed for remote operation. If they were, they would have had one out to them the first day.

He'd keep walking, and see where his feet took him. Until it was time to lie down and turn down the heaters as far as they went. Maybe some real pioneer, fifty years from now, would find his desiccated body and say, *This is the other guy, the one who wandered away from camp. We finally found him!*

Mike shivered. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

But it was better than imagining Juelie and Sam, when the real news came down.

---

Bittersweet

"It's a lie, isn't it?" Patrice said. "What you're telling Sam and Mike and Juelie."

Jere turned to her. This is my wife, he thought. It was one of the weirdest things he'd ever thought.

"It--" he began. And stopped himself.

"Of course it is," he said.

Patrice looked down. "I want to talk to them," she said. "Before the end."

"I--"

I'll wake up to her the rest of my life.

"I'll make it happen," he said.

---

Honeymoon

"Come on!" Alena said. "Come on come on come on!"

And they were close. The Can was embargoing the status of the teams, but Glenn knew they were close. They'd made it from dead last to nearly tied with the Paul guy when Frank and Petrov finally shut up.

"What can I do?" he asked, over the local comm.

"I don't know! I was talking to the Kite, not you!"

"I'll think positive thoughts."

"Good for you!"

Glenn smiled. And what could he do, other than stay lashed up under the belly of the Kite for minimum aerodynamic drag? Nothing.

*The next one they should make more manual, he thought. Human-powered Kites and Wheels. None of this motor crap. Or at least have us be able to add our output to the engines.* What was the fun in flying, anyway? The Wheel had taken some skill and technique, and that was where they'd made up most of their time. But the Kite was nothing more than a big powered hang-glider. What was the fun in that?

"Look!" Alena said, pointing.

Glenn strained his eyes. Ahead of them, the rocky plain rolled uninterrupted for as far he could see.

"What?"

"The Returns! We've made it!"

Glenn squinted. Very far in the distance, he could just catch the glint of metal. "Is that really it?"

"Yeah, that's it! Come on come on come on come on!"

"Talking to the machine again?"

"It can't hurt!"

Alena looked at him, and he saw the girl who he'd fallen in love with, the woman he'd proposed to, all the goodness in her. She was smiling, exultant, her color high and eyes flashing. She was at her best when she was not only competing, but winning. It was impossible not to love her.

She saw him looking and smiled wider. Oh, what that promised!

He shoved the throttle hard against its stops, as if another few micrometers could make any difference in their velocity. It was already hard open, always had been. There was only one setting, in the thin atmosphere of Mars.

*Where was Paul?* If the race was as close as he thought, he should be able to see his Kite, bright white against the pale sky. He scanned from left to right, but saw nothing.

And it comes down to this, Glenn knew. Whoever makes it to the Returns, wins. The returns went back to the Can automatically. There was no race to orbit.

Another scan. No Kite. Was it possible that Paul had run into trouble? Could they really be first?

*Karma will get you all the time*, he thought. *You should have picked up the Ruiz team.*

From ahead of them, a bright flare. The kite rocked as Alena started violently. One of the returns climbed slowly into the sky, then moved faster, darting upward out of view.

"No!" she said. "No no no no no!"

"Paul," Glenn said softly.

"How much longer do we have?" Alena asked.

"A couple of minutes. But it's..."

"Go faster!"

"It only takes three minutes to orbit!"

"I don't care! Go faster!" Her eyes were brighter now, brighter with tears. Her face was twisted into a mask of anguish.

"Are you talking to me, or the machine?" Glenn said softly.

"Anybody! Anybody who'll listen!"

Glenn fell silent and let the only sound be that of the rushing wind and roaring motor. The Return field grew ahead of them, big enough so they could see the remains of Paul's Kite. It lay there, an almost unrecognizable tangle of aluminum struts and fabric. He had had a hard landing.

"We've lost," he said.

"No!"

"Yes, we have."

When they landed, Alena scrambled to the nearest return pod and began the launch prep.

"Hurry up!" she said. "Come on! Hurry up!"

When the prep was still less than halfway done, the voices from the Can came back. This time it was the Frank. He sounded tired, and sad, and more than a little disgusted.

"We have a winner," she said. "Keith Paul is now back on board the Mars Enterprise. To our other teams, thank you for an excellent competition. Please do whatever you can to travel safely on your way back. There is no need to hurry now."

"No!" Alena wailed. She beat on the low bench of the Return pod. Glenn tried to gather her in his arms, but she pushed him away violently. He tumbled out onto the cold sand and lay for a moment, stunned, staring up at the alien sky.

"Glenn?" Alena, on their local channel. Glenn shook his head, but said nothing.

"Glenn?" Frightened.

She came out of the pod and knelt atop him, her eyes red from crying, her mouth pulled taut in worry. "Glenn!" she said, shaking him.

"What?" he said.

"Glenn, I can't hear you! Are you OK?"

"What?" He reached behind him and felt the suit's radio. Nothing. It seemed OK. Of course, he could have hit something in his fall... He shrugged and gave her the thumb-and-forefinger "OK" sign.

"I heard you hit and a big hiss and I thought you'd broken your header, that I'd killed you." She was crying even more now, big tears hitting the inside of her header and running down towards her chest.

He pushed his header to hers. "I'm OK," he said.

"I can hear you now."

"Yeah, old trick. Frank told me. Touch helmets."

She helped him up. The return pod gaped open like a mouth.

"Let's go," she said, touching helmets again.

"Wait a minute." Glenn looked from the Return pods--all four of them--to the sky, and then towards the east, where the Ruiz team was stranded.

*Could they?* The Can had been talking about rigging one of the Returns for automatic flight, but they obviously hadn't. Would it be possible to fly one over to Ruiz, pick them up, and save them? Would it be possible to fly two? Would they have enough fuel? Could they refuel?

It was worth a shot.

"Alena," he said. "Do you want to be the real winner?"

She got it. Her eyes got big, and she nodded. She stayed helmet-to-helmet with him as she called the Can.

"Frank," she said. "Let's talk about the Ruiz team."

---

Show

Evan's bandaged nose didn't get in the way of his presentations. In the darkness of Jere's office, animated charts showed realtime Viewing Audience, feedback Ratings, inferred Attentiveness, inferred Buyer Motivation, plotted against Neteno's historicals and an average of other Linear, Free-Access networks. This was the crap, the stuff they had to do for the sponsors, the wrap up.

The consolation prize for having the asshole win.

"We broke the 'Near downtrend," Evan said. "Broke it hard."

"Advertisers received excellent value for their investment," Evan said. "Viewer Attentiveness times Inferred Engagement is a record for 'Near networks, maybe even interactives."

"Typical networks would have upped ad rates midcourse," Evan said. "As it is, the stage is set for a sequel."

"Not with the long-term historical sequel return at 58%," Ron said.

Evan frowned. "We could break the trend. We broke one, hard. All the development is done."

"Don't even think it," Ron said.

"What?"

Ron shook his head. "I know that look. That starry-eyed shit that gave us the second Star Wars threequel. The one with that irritating droopy bastard, whatever his name was..."

Evan shuddered. "I know who you're talking about."

"Point is, this show ain't golden. And we aren't perfect. Leave it now and let them clamor for more. Like Star Trek."

Evan frowned. "We could do it," he said.

"Shut up, Evan," Ros said.

Jere nodded. *We're on top for the moment*, he thought. *And let that be enough.*

---

Winner

"I won, right?" Keith Paul said.

"Yeah," Frank said.

"I'll get the money?"

"Yeah."

"So where are the cameras?"

Frank ripped off his earplug and pushed away from the comm board. He grabbed Keith's shirt with both hands and pulled him close. The momentum took them off the floor, spinning through Mars Enterprise's navigational room.

"There are no cameras!" Frank yelled. His eyes were wide and bright, quivering with that adrenaline-fueled, amped-up look that guys got when they were ready to take you apart with their bare hands. Keith had seen that look a few times in his life, and he knew one thing: he wanted absolutely no part of it.

"Nobody fucking cares about you!" Frank screamed, shaking Keith like he was made out of tissue.

"Everyone's watching the real fucking heroes now! You'll get your goddamned money, just like you wanted, but don't expect anyone to care! Now fuck off! I've got important things to do!"

Frank gave him one last shove, pushing Keith into the bulkhead above. His head clanged on metal and he saw stars.

"Okay, man, okay," Keith said, as Frank drifted slowly back down and took his seat.

"Get out of here," Frank said. "I don't want to see you anymore."

Heroes

"Look at these showboating dickweeds," Evan said.

In the hushed velvet darkness of the slice and dice room, Evan's words were incredibly loud. Visigods, almost used to not seeing Ron and Jere anymore, swiveled and started at the sight of the weary executives. Patrice put her hand on Jere's shoulder, and he reached up to touch it. He felt beyond tired, beyond beaten, lost in some strange netherland.

Instead of Winning Mars, they were all looking at the competitive feeds. The slice-and-dice screen showed the story. Fox, Helmers, and the SciFi Channel were all tuned on a crappy little town down in Mexico, where a slim needle was being assembled in a shabby old warehouse. Outside, a makeshift derrick grew from a field of concrete. And some hairy guy wearing a dirty coverall was talking about building a colony ship to send to Mars. He called it Mayflower II.

"This is the real show," he said. "Not that publicity stunt they did in Hollywood. We're going, but we're going to stay."

There were shots of wild-eyed engineers and ex-scientists and geeks galore, thrusting what looked like old-time tickets in the air. "I'm going," one of them crowed!

The show talked about grass-roots funding and an angel investors and breakthroughs in low-cost spaceflight, and the lottery of the best and brightest who'd signed up to be the first to go to Mars and stay.

"They timed it," Evan said. "Perfect. They wait till we have the Ruiz team back safe and sound, then they spring this shit."

But it was nothing, Jere thought. Just an incomplete ship. A bunch of nuts talking about open-source technology and happy-happy solidarity and helping each other and crap like that. They didn't have a ship ready. And Jere knew what it would take for them to get it off the ground.



"They knew the ratings would die the instant everyone was back in the Can," Evan said. "They knew it, and they are fucking taking it!"

"What are our ratings like?" Jere said.

Evan shook his head and clicked on the realtime feed. The downward spike was still small, but he could see it accelerating. As he watched, it clicked down a few pixels more.

"Do we have anyone down in Mexico?" Jere said. "Can we get a line on this colony stuff too?"

"No," Evan said. "We weren't ready for this. The fuckers probably talked to every network except for us. Shitheads. By the time we fly someone down, the big story's over. Assuming they'll even talk to us at all.

It's just a news story, Jere thought. One that everyone will forget as soon as they log off. A fifteen-minuter on Yahoo.

But he remembered the people, coming down from the hills to stand in front of Oversight. He remembered his face on the big screens at Hollywood and Highland. He remembered getting in front of eight hundred million eyes, and telling them the truth. Because that was what they wanted to see. The truth.

You can go back to the harness, Jere thought. Silk-lined, down-padded as it is. But still a harness. Or you can go forward. These people are going forward.

They're taking up where we left off.

He looked at Ron. Ron was watching the competitive feeds. His jaw should be set, his eyes should be hard and glassy. Seeing everything taken. Seeing Neteno slide towards one of those crevasses where their finances would never recover. But Ron was looking up at the feeds, at that primitive rocket that made even the rough, dirty Can look sleek and well-crafted, and his face was soft. His mouth was slightly open. Perhaps, just perhaps, the edges of his lips turned up into a smile.

"We need to announce another show," Evan said. "Now!"

"What are we going to say?" Jere asked.

"I don't know! Asteroids! Jupiter! I don't know! It doesn't matter. We need an announcement, and we need a big one!"

"No," Jere said.

"No? Are you fucking nuts? You're going to let them steal everything we built?"

"No," Jere said.

"What are you talking about?" Evan said.

"I need to get on camera," Jere said, looking at Ron.

"What are you going to say?" Ron said.

"I'm going to tell them the truth."

"Which is?"

"This is what we wanted all along. We planned it this way. Winning Mars wasn't just a show, it was a spark."

Ron nodded. He did his mechanical smile trick, arranging each muscle in his face in a precisely measured order. Jere didn't find it chilling anymore. He found it very, very sad.

He squeezed Patrice's hand, and thought, I hope I never end up like that. Having to calculate a smile.

In the monitors, the same dirty talking head was going on with that intensity that geeks have, when you activate their center of geekery. He said they wanted to launch sometime in the next eighteen months, to time it for the opposition. He made a very lame joke about having to travel a few million miles farther than Neteno. He looked very excited, and also very scared.

They'll never make it, Jere thought. They'll fucking die up there. All of them. They might not even make it off the launch pad.

*But if they do...*

"Go do it," Ron said. "Go make your legacy."

Jere kissed Patrice and turned to leave. Evan started after him, but Ron caught his sleeve. "No," he said. "Not you."

"It was my show!" Evan wailed.

"Not anymore," Ron said.

Jere hurried out, into the bright hall.

Coda

Mike Kinnson's second going-away party was a lot smaller. Just his parents. There were no banners, no ribbons. Maybe because he still didn't look too good. He was thin, and he still had to use crutches to walk.

"Mexico," his mother said.

"Then Mars again," his dad said.

Mike grinned. What could he say? He had experience on Mars. The crew of the other ship, the Potemkin, wanted him. Even though he wasn't a real scientist, wasn't a real brain.

It'll be hard, they'd told him. We'll probably die. We don't know if we can maintain a technological base, and if our technology falls below a certain level, we expire. But we're going to try it.

"That's right," he told his parents. "I'm going."

This time to stay.

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