

R o M o n i k e r

and

The Amazing Freedom Adventure



Note

Dear reader, you who have stumbled across this book, welcome to my words.

Before I begin, I have a question, a curiosity that I hope you will indulge. It is so — why this book?

Assuming that you have indeed looked at the cover, the blurb and the testimonials, and considering that this being my first book your interest is probably earned by the subject rather than by the author, I have to ask, why even that enthusiasm? Why do you wish to read about Jovian freedom? Why are you interested in the Ganymede Coup, or the Spacer Uprising? I was hardly interested even when I was experiencing them. I write this account now out of no great love for these events, but from every affection for my future, and its best that this be kept in mind.

In fact, I wish to offer a few other clarifications, right at the onset, of what the reader should expect. You see, if it is history you seek, the kind that finds its way into classrooms, then this is the wrong book for you. I fell asleep reading those books, I certainly couldn't manage to stay awake to write one. Similarly, if it is truth that you are looking for, that will provide enlightenment and change your life and destiny, I must warn that you have been severely misguided. If anything, this is a record of how I completely lost control of my own life, and by now I'm almost proud of the fact. Finally, if it is a rousing tale of courage, action and romance that tickles your fancy, then I will suggest instead "*Freedom: A Revolutionary's Tale*". It is written by someone I know and, if I may add, I do not like. My book, unfortunately, presents no problems to the squeamish of heart. There may be some grimacing by the squeamish of mind but I maintain that being an offended minority, or majority, is very 21st century, and more than a hundred and fifty year since the world was first connected end to end, we should all have learnt better than to believe that courtesy is anything more.

What this book is about then - is me. My name is Ro Moniker, and I was the Chief Manager and Officer (CMO) of the aptly named spaceship S76-IB7 during the events that you seem to be so inquisitive about. You may have heard of me. It is unlikely if you are Earthern, but those of you from the Jovian confederacy might just possibly remember my mention. I was quite a hero for a while. One of the original, who arise in times of turmoil and misinformation.

Currently though, I am waiting for a bus. I do that often, and for indeterminate periods of time. I am also carrying out my resolve to create a work about my experiences during the declaration of independence of the Jovian colonies, and the circumstances that they were born out of. I shall try for it to be an honest account, full of candor and sincerity, and possibly bursting with verve. Perhaps at its conclusion, if you will have accompanied me that far, you will even agree with me.

I would like you to bear in mind though, that the color of the sea is not green, nor blue. It is in fact, the color of the sea.

It has taken me some deliberation to decide where to start this account, since we authentic adventurers are invariably so unmindful of our cues, and so callous about our entries. My readers may possibly feel that the tale could have started a bit later, and it is conceivable that I am sacrificing some richness and insight by not beginning earlier. However, I would ask them to indulge me as I begin with a reminiscence of the charming duties of my erstwhile position. It shall prove, I hope, to be illuminating.

1.

It was mostly grey. Grey walls, grey-white in fact, with splashes of color in abstract paintings arranged tastefully. There was a vase, the green of lost ponds, with swirls of inky black. It contained two flowers and three leaves and sat on an otherwise empty, grey table. There were three people, two sitting on one side, the side with the vase, and the tasteful paintings hung on the wall behind them. The third sat opposite them. He was younger than them, had respectably dark russet hair and eager eyes and an uncertain mouth. He looked like he wanted to be composed. Out of other two, one was a pretty, petite woman, with her hair framing her face, and cheerful dark eyes. The other sat like a puddle, lounging in his seat disgracefully. He hadn't shaven for a couple of days, though it must be admitted that it didn't make much of a difference. He was observing the vase.

The pretty one spoke.

"I am Toshiko Yamamoto, and this is Ro Moniker, the CMO of S76-IB7." I gave a friendly grimace. "We will be interviewing you on behalf of the Macauley-Yang Space Corporation, for the post of..." She glanced down at the pad in front of her. "...of Junior IT Analyst." She looked up and smiled. "Well, would you like to tell us something about yourself?"

A good question – wide enough to be cruel, heartless, and one that some novice interviewees don't expect first up. This one, for example, took to sweating cooly, while he tried to convolute his entire existence into a blurb for Superhero IT Analyst. I sympathized and hardly chuckled. He trailed off.

Next, she asked him if he could give us an example of where he had worked successfully in a team. This one he knew, and his face lit up. "Well, as part of the debating society," said he, stressing sneakily on debating, "where I held the post of Vice-President for a year," a few more stresses, "I managed a team of more than ten people and..." so on.

I listened no further and slid down a bit more in my seat. A part of me, the larger part, wondered how Superhero IT Analyst would deal with prehistoric monsters if they were transported to the future.

What is your stand on the prohibition set on genetic modification for cosmetic enhancement, sir?

Rraaagghhh.

I have to say, sir, that I disagree.

Grraggghhh.

No! No, please! Someone, please, help me!

Meanwhile, in another world, Toshiko Yamamoto, who you can regard as my trusty sidekick, followed up with questions about his projects and further details of his co-curricular activities.

I reduced his odds against the monsters by the second.

By the time he finished a long-winded description of his final year project, in the hope that we would be bored into forgetting that geniuses do not apply to logistics firms for IT positions, I decided I needed to intervene. I cut Toshi off in the middle of asking how he would be uniquely suited for this job, and instead said gravely, "Suppose, in the course of your work, you were working in a team of 5 people, 3 fellow IT analysts, and Toshi and me... Yes?"

He had till then been giving me shifty, politely disapproving looks, but now he was all attention, sitting up and looking intent. "Yes, sir?"

"Yes, so," I continued, "in our work, we move around a lot. You understand? To and fro, from Jupiter to Mars...a lot of traveling."

He nodded eagerly, probably imagining that it was exciting. "So, suppose, on this assignment, you were away from the ship, the whole team in fact. Planetside...alright?"

"Yes, sir," he repeated brightly. I sat up a bit too, to encourage him further.

"Now in the midst of this operation, this very sensitive operation, while you are working on your...your work...and important work it is too, so suppose in the middle of this, while the rest of the team is waiting for you to finish your work... do you understand till now?"

"Perfectly, sir. Crystal."

"Crystal? Good, I like that." I smiled. "So then, suddenly, an enormous grizzly bear attacks us. What do you do?"

Toshi started and glared at me. The boy blinked dumbly, and I sat back, happy with a job well done.

"I-I'm sorry, sir. I don't think I quite..."

“A grizzly, the bear,” said I. “You know of them? Seen holographs? It’s the largest land predator alive. So, it’s attacking, swiping people with its huge paws. One swipe, an analyst dies, spine broken. Another swipe, Toshi loses her head. You understand?”

“Sir!” This was from Toshi. She did not approve, for some reason. What was the point of being upper management otherwise?

“So what do you do, Mr...”

“Feng Lei,” said Feng Lei hoAssly.

“Feng Lei, yes. What do you do, Mr. Feng?”

He stammered for a few seconds, before Toshi had to go and spoil it by saying that what I had actually meant to ask was whether he was a team player or not. She does these things. I can’t stop her.

Anyway he had lost it by then, and after a few minutes Toshi’s overdeveloped maternal instincts made her send him away. Then she glowered at me with those sweet eyes.

“Next one?” suggested I, and she let out a sigh and pressed the buzzer. She can’t stop me either, you see. Besides, I suspect that she doesn’t always want to. She likes playing the good girl and you can’t really unless you are in the presence of evil sin.

The next candidate was a buxom, Junoesque woman, quite attractive, but proudly wearing florid magenta and a scowl. I disliked her immediately and cheerfully waved her to a seat.

“I am Toshiko Yamamoto,” began Toshi when she sat.

“And I am Ro Moniker!” said I brightly, fairly glowing with enthusiasm.

“Hello,” said the woman, “Robin Marquez.”

“Hallo,” replied I unnecessarily. This, I have observed, is very irritating.

“Yes, so...” said Toshi, tapping her pad “We will be interviewing you on behalf of the Macauley-Yang Space Corporation, for the post of...” She glanced down; presumably she did it for some kind of effect. I smiled at the world encouragingly. “...of Junior IT Analyst. Well, would you like to tell us something about yourself.”

“Like your hobbies,” I put in.

“Oh, ok, well I am a citizen of the Martian colony of the South American Confederacy. I have been here in Lavender for the last five years, doing my undergrad.”

“Very good,” said I, helpfully.

She didn’t smile. “I’ve done computer engineering from the Manchester University, Mars...”

“Yes, well, your hobbies,” said I, waving her on.

“And projects,” said Toshi.

“Well, my final year...”

“No, no, begin with the hobbies, please...”

She paused and scowled again. I looked attentive.

“Well, I was a member of the wrestling team...”

“Really? Wrestling? That’s wonderful! Absolutely wonderful! Yes, I’ve always thought it to be a most...well, most...stimulating activity. Refreshes the mind, invigorates the body... I’ve no doubt you could have kicked that debater kid’s...”

“Please, Ms Marquez, go on,” interrupted Toshi.

“Well, I guess I like music, and movies...”

“Who doesn’t,” said I. “But tell us, in wrestling...what court are you most comfortable with...grass? Clay?...Hard court? Polyglass?”

“That’s tennis, sir...” said she, eyeing me warily.

“Yes, tennis,” said Toshi. “Perhaps, we can go on to her...”

“Oh tennis! Right!” This is one of the many things I do for fun. “I’m sorry I’m not much of a sportsman. So in wrestling what surfaces do you play on? Sorry, wrestle on?”

“Oh. Well usually carbonsoft mats. Sometimes...”

“Mud?” asked I innocently. “No, no, not in the University team perhaps. Manchester Uni always had good facilities I remember. Yes.” I tapped my chin respectfully. “So, do you subscribe to any particular philosophy? Neo-nihilism? Classical Post-Modernism?”

“Huh?” she blubbered.

“You know...any school of thought you’re partial to? There was this joke once,” I turned to Toshi, “About this engineer getting asked ‘What school of philosophy would you be

aligned to?’ and he answers, ‘Well I ‘m afraid in practice I would be bracketed as mostly Platonic.’ ”

Toshi gave a polite smile. I chuckled heartily. Our specimen looked quite lost. “So...Ms Marquez? Mostly platonic?”

“I-I’m a part of the Feminist’s Club...”

“Really? The Feminist’s Club? Perhaps they would have been better served by calling themselves the Feminist’s Society, yes? But no matter, that’s very commendable.”

I have to admit that I wasn’t surprised. Though not an advertised fact, the South American Confederacy’s Martian colonies had a strong feminist movement going. When the Confederacy ventured into Mars, they specialized mostly in cheap labor, and transported hundreds of thousands of workers and their families, with all the socio-economic conditions to renew the strongest traditions of their patriarchy; which is why our sisters there are even now busy overthrowing their shackles. It is most amusing for an outsider. I can’t imagine why they don’t mention it in the brochures.

I would like to mention here that I have nothing against feminists as such, even those who seem to be a bit late in the fray. I behave exactly the same even towards priests, and intellectuals, and people who like their jobs.

“What kind of activities does your club do?” asked Toshi.

“Well, I have been on a sub-committee which organized events for the physical fitness of women. Sports...wrestling classes...”

“Ahhh,” said I, “using the skills you learnt in one in the other. Amazing! Bravo! Just the kind of thing we’re looking for here!”

She looked as if she was deciding whether to smile. I gazed at her solemnly. “Ms. Marquez, not many people know this,” said I with gravity, “but I too, am a feminist.”

This can be true. I think women are absolutely divine, except when they are not - what more could they ask for?

Ms. Marquez of course seemed unimpressed, but then there’s no pleasing some people. I went on to more pressing matters.

“Ms. Marquez, I’ve always had a doubt, and perhaps with your qualifications, you can help me clear it up. When a man is successful, when he does well, he is sometimes referred to as a ‘big man’, yes? For example, you say, ‘Well he’s a big man now’...Do you think its equivalent would be appropriate for women? And I assure you, I ask this very seriously. You see, Ms Yamamoto here has been doing quite well for herself lately, and sometimes I want to praise her to others, and well, I don’t know, I wouldn’t want to

be improper...”

Toshi rolled her eyes. Ms. Marquez, Robin we may call her, said sullenly that she didn't know. I cheerfully suggested that she should bring this up in her club sometime, since the issue of same terms of address for both sexes is paramount.

I was ready to end this however, there's only so long an entertainment should last. I leaned forward and placed my elbows on the table professionally. “Now, Ms. Marquez, suppose...and please may I have your utmost attention, I don't like to give it away, but this is a very important question...suppose...by the way, you are a team player right?” Aha! Preemption!

She didn't answer immediately, probably remembering her youthful fantasies of being a cheerleader. “Of course you are,” I continued. “Now, in our job there is a lot of traveling...suppose you were working in a team of five, two more IT Analysts and me and Toshi...”

Needless to say, she departed soon after. I had hoped she would say how she would wrestle the grizzly to the ground, pin it with her thighs and thus save our skins, but she seemed to pride herself on her pragmatism, so she said instead that it was a ridiculous question and gave Toshi the chance she needed to pass it off as a joke.

While leaving however, she gave a look dour enough to assure me that I'd ruined her day. I returned a sunny smile to show that she'd made mine.

Toshi, who I suspect felt a kinship with her, accosted me with reproachful eyes soon after. “Why do you do these things?” she asked, her little face a picture of piety and reproof.

I shrugged. “I thought that at least was obvious, Toto. I'm bored.”

“And what if this is reported?” continued Toshi.

“And what will she say? ‘And then he called himself a feminist! How dare he?’ “

She sighed and tapped the pad to bring up the next candidate's data. I rose and stretched. I'd lost the mood for merriment, and I didn't think I could face another serious young face with plans for a future.

“Sir, you can't go,” said Toshi.

“These cages are in your mind, Toto,” said I, with mystic circular hand gestures. “You have a nice quiet interview now, and I will have a nice quiet walk.”

She thought about that and must have liked it since she let me skip off without further restraint.

We were in Lavender, as you might have gleaned already if you were reading with care. It is a city I like, though not much of a tourist destination, so it might have escaped your consideration. It is quite definitely the most comfortable city on Mars though, and one of the richest. The entire city is a mosaic of sprawling open squares, and wide cool avenues, lined on each side by GenGrass walkways. One connecting to another in a large and precise network, and opening up to clean, well made buildings, all portico and plane. And they breed butterflies; many thousands of them that flutter through the city, from flowering tree to flowering tree.

There are people who say it shows what potential there is, what Mars can be like. I wish I could agree, but the reason Lavender can maintain her comfort is because no one else can. The European Federation was smart enough to build the cleanest, prettiest city in Mars before anyone else did and as a result capture more than half of incoming investment and big business. There's simply not enough money in Mars for all places to be Lavender.

I didn't get to come here often. Macauley-Yang has its second largest office here, like most space corporations, but I worked for Contracting and Procurement, mostly Procurement, and you don't procure from this city if you want to turn a profit. The reason I was there then, nose pressed to the transparent wall as I tried to catch sight of a flitting bird, was a certain tariff.

So you can see, there is a certain neatness to my story's beginning after all; it is not all fun and games and feminist wrestlers. My story too starts with the tariff. The famous ruling that goods traveling from the space colonies of the Democratic States of America and Africa to its Earthern states would have to pay up to thirty-four times what those states are charged for trade amongst themselves. This is the Spacer remembrance of the terms anyhow, their reason for how it all started.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. At this point in the story that tariff occupied a happy position in my life. It had just been thought up, and since Macauley-Yang operated from New Chicago on Ganymede, it meant that the company's contract had to be re-negotiated with our contractors, who being respectable people, also had their second largest office in Lavender.

Thus it was that I was sitting in a nice café, next to a fountain with overly large fish milling around in its basin. It was early evening by then, and exactly the wrong time for the coffee I was suavely sipping. It was the sky that was to be blamed for this, the famous Firmament[®] of Lavender, the entire containment dome that holographically projects an appearance of Earthern sky. It is quite as amazing as its reputation of course, and is the one of the main reasons I love this place, but the problem is that due to high British fertility rate, this projection, decided so punctiliously by popular census, is very often the dreary grey horridness that it was right then.

Toshi took her time with the interview, no doubt preening belligerently at the poor kid and when she finally arrived, she had the flush of a job well done.

“Coffee?” asked I gallantly.

She shook her head and sat herself. “Wrong time for coffee.”

“There’s no such thing.” I took a sip with significance. “How was the interview?”

She banked her palm to stern and aft, and looked pretty, which meant ‘so-so, but it felt great’. She looked around. “It’s nice here.”

“Look up.” I pointed heavenwards.

“I have,” said she but looked up nonetheless. She’s that type of girl. “On Earth it’ll be like this all the time.”

“Oh no! Only in one little corner of it thankfully. I’m hoping the Spanish try harder tomorrow.”

“I like how it looks. The clouds give it...consequence.”

I smiled and happily poured some more vanilla into my coffee. She stopped looking at the sky and began looking at me. “What are you doing?”

“It gives flavor,” said I, and tapped some onto my tongue.

She frowned and looked around. “Is that allowed?”

“It’s free.”

“At each table?”

“Well no, it was at the counter.”

“And you can bring it here?”

“I did bring it here, didn’t I? Look, are you on my side or theirs?”

She quirked an eyebrow. “They being?”

“The world, Toto,” said I grinning and took a deep, hot draught. “I thought you’d figured that out by now.”

I retrieved a cinnamon container, which I'd filched as well, from my pockets, and sprinkled it in and took a deep breath. The scent of the spice wafted up, wrapped with the warmth of the coffee. Toshi looked at me with an air of great patience.

"I wish there was a cold breeze. Maybe some drizzle," said I. "Then it would be perfect."

"Yes, I know," said she. "Last year when I'd gone for a holiday to Korea it'd been like this. It was so romantic. Takano loved it..."

"Look, I can make coffee bubbles." She didn't look, but she said no more about Takano, who was her boyfriend and not my most favorite topic of conversation. I slurped louder than necessary from then on, just in case.

"What are we doing later?" she asked after a while.

"I don't know," said I, but I was pretty sure she did. She never asks these questions unless she has a plan.

"Gustav is going to..." she began.

"Non, Toto, non non," said I, wagging my finger sternly. Gustav is my senior management associate, essentially third in line in the ship. We shall not speak of him yet.

"Well, then, lets see," she looked thoughtful, and poked around on her compu-pad for a while. She's very polite, you see. Likes to make people think they are part of the decision making process.

"There's an art exhibition at the Galerij van Kliene Vreugden. A Tre' Boubourne Romano..." She glanced up. "He's quite famous."

"I bet he is," said I, upturning my cup for those last sugar loaded drops.

"Blatantist. Martian in origin." She fiddled around further. "Has three wives, likes spaghetti, drives a scooped up Inazuma 4S..."

"Yes, yes, fine. We'll go to the exhibition," said I, since I could see that we were. Can never resist rogues, our little Toshi, especially if they have a day job.

"Was arrested for brawling once in Jun, 2234..."

"Does his laundry on Tuesdays, I get it. What's it mean? The name of the gallery?" I could use my own translator, of course, but somehow this seemed like less effort.

She gave a slight smile as she read it, and looked up. "The Gallery of Little Joys."

"Ahhh..." said I.

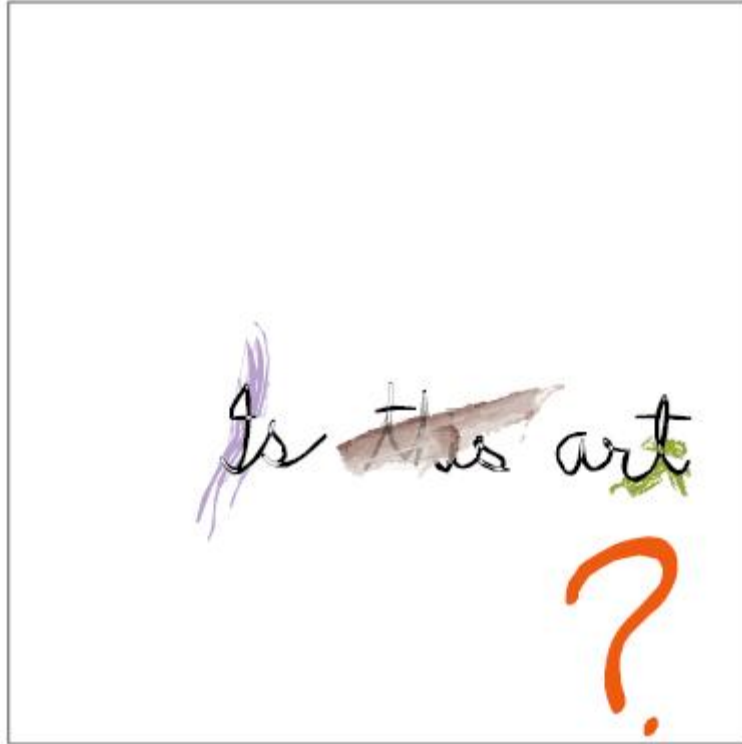
I finished my coffee and we started towards the Galerij. Lavender's public transport system, as you might know, consists of seats whizzing around on tracks, quite alarming since they go at no mean speed, but apparently a tourist attraction. Toshi considered herself a tourist, and there's no arguing with a female second-in-command, as many pater familias throughout history have learnt to their discomfort. So off we went, to the land of great merriment and high speed and low squeals, with her pointing out several blurs as places of interest.

The seats skidded to a stop in front of the Galerij with a special bonus twirl, which made Toshi shriek in bliss, and made me nearly upend my rashly ingested coffee. I stumbled out dizzily and stared.

The Galerij was obviously built with the idea of being worthy of the wonderfulness to be stored within, to house art in art, and like many such noble ideas had ended up looking like an overturned teapot. We went through three security scans, with Monseieur Tre' becoming more famous by the second, and finally were admitted to the presence of his work.

Those who are unacquainted with the Blatantist movement, yes this book is for you too, and I will explain the basics. The Blatantists followed the Graffiti Masters of the last century, who themselves had arrived as a reaction to the Cosmic Surrealists. Essentially their art was considered deceptively simple, and interspersed with words accentuating the meaning of the work. They were considered very no-holds-barred, in a quiet silver cutlery kind of way.

I have nothing against them, anything is an improvement on the Cosmic Surrealists, but Tre' Boubourne Romano didn't endear himself to me, especially when to my astonishment and chagrin I stared at the centerpiece of the exhibition, a piece my publisher has been kind enough to reproduce, and remembered making a joke on the exact idea some time back over lunch.



Now, I'm pretty sure I'd never known this man, whatever his name might be, so I can only guess that he thought it up independently. It's certainly not unlikely; it's a very simple idea, no doubt one that's been put forth to varying degrees of posterity before. Yet, to see it displayed there, in the most posh 'Galerij' in space, the cornerstone of what was undoubtedly a multi-million credit art show, was the most horrible thing that had happened to me in years.

Wolves ran through my head, black ones with yellow fangs, and the excitement that I'd felt from being in Lavender began to die. This was a most cruel joke for Fate to play on someone from Contracting and Procurement.

My ruminations were interrupted by Toshi tugging on my sleeve. "What?" growled I, glaring at the poor girl.

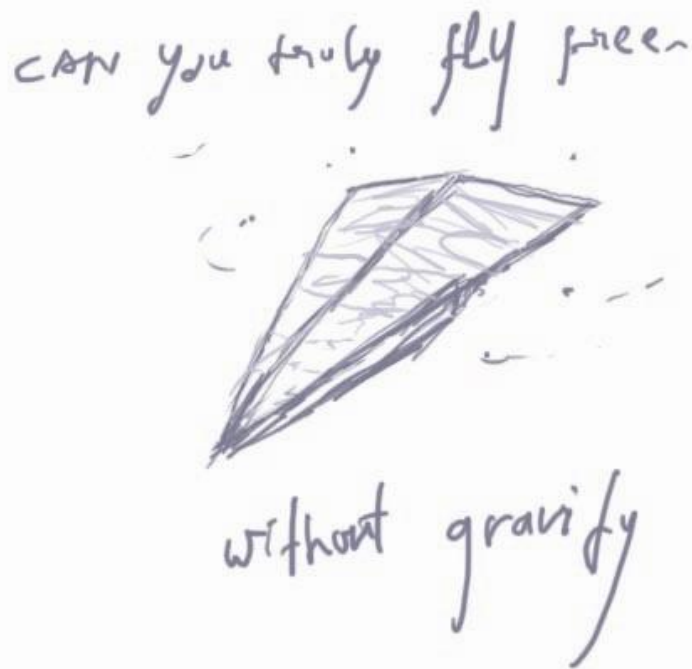
She jumped, and her eyes grew concerned. "Are you alright?"

"No, I am not alright. And I hate your stupid idea to come here." I snarled, perhaps a bit too sulkily since she immediately stopped taking me seriously, and put forth her manner towards little dogs and angry children.

"Awww..." she crooned and I swear she was thinking of petting me. "Do you hate it? That's all right. We can leave. But come see this one thing first."

She dragged me to another painting in the adjoining room, since our prolific artist put only one work in a room. His art needed to breathe, I'm sure. She came to a stop in front

of an enormous display, covering a full wall. Once again, that masterful piece of delusion is presented below.



I personally found it tacky, with its stupid little couplet, but Toshi was all agog. She clutched my arm in an endearing fashion and when she spoke her voice was soft. “Is it true, do you think?”

“What is?”

“This. The painting?”

“It is a bunch of squiggles, and two vaguely triangular...”

“It represents the spirit of flying.”

“...shapes,” continued I. “And a question. Though the punctuation seems to be missing. So, what exactly has a value of truth, here?”

She sighed, which was no reply, and then said, “Gravity here means Earth. It says so in the guide.”

“The guide must know something we don’t.”

“The trial re-opens today.”

“What?” I had no idea what she was talking about at that point, it seemed to me to be a most precipitous change of topic, though doubtless she had a fancy and convoluted connection.

What did occur to me though, was that technology was to blame for this. When it had been difficult to create realistic pictures, as it had been for most of human history, you had beautiful, rich pieces of art, filled with color and shades, with not an inch of canvas left. But now that even a six year old could make absolutely anything her little mind conjured up, the whole game was abandoned. Now it was about ideas, which meant that apes like this Romano could prance about happily with their stick drawings that were of some quality below that of cave paintings made thirty thousand years ago.

“You’re not listening,” complained Toshi, tugging on my sleeve again.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “And I’m not going to.”

She continued regardless, looking serious. “What do you think will happen?”

“To whom? What will happen to whom? And why, for god’s sake, are you asking me?”

“The trial!” she said impatiently. “Zoomer and Khan’s trial!” Then she said something in Japanese which I knew was not polite, and said that I was impossible and didn’t speak to me for the rest of the day.

It is here, at this point, that the events of Ganymeda, as it was later to be known, began to intrude upon my life. I’d known about the trial of course. I’d heard Zoomer’s song and observed her gyrations, and commented on them with cynical interest and, I maintain, great wit. I’d read up a bit about Khan’s life, and briefly discussed the falling prices of his shares. It had always been however, just things happening in the news, a class of object much like ‘Enthusiastic Menopausal Women.’ You hear of their existence, you go ‘Oh’, and you sometimes find them unavoidably popping up in conversations. You never tangle with them. If it were up to me, that is exactly how it would have remained. What happened though, was that I found myself positively dogged by those happenings, chased and hunted and finally caught.

This of course, is hindsight. At the time all I knew was that Tre’ Romano was rich and famous and I was not Tre’ Romano. It is a horrible realization to have, and it kept me sunk in dark brooding thoughts as we took those idiotic seats back to our hotel. Toshi went to her room without a word and I dragged my feet to my captain’s suite. I sat around on the bed for a while, changing channels on the holovision, then got bored with that, went out to the balcony, stared at the moon peeking through silver clouds on Firmament[®], and returned to my bed and fell asleep. I dreamt of forests.

The phone woke me up, and several lemurs fell painfully off their branches behind my eyes. I groaned and sat up, and switched the phone on and made my windows transparent. Toshi’s cheery voice assaulted me; the morning had evidently thawed her frost. I sat

blinking at the bright day, only half listening to her merry prattle, my nose slightly blocked as always on waking up. Sunlight flooded through the window and over Lavender washing over its planes and sliding past its edges, glinting off its metal and its glass and I suddenly realized, with a sharp, surprising heartache, how dearly I had missed sunshine. I switched off the phone, and walked out to the balcony and stood gazing over the city. Where the sun touched it was gold, and the grass and leaves glistened and shone, and I wondered how much a citizen of Lavender was taxed for this amenity. In my view it was worth it.

I sprayed mouth cleaner and decided on clothes. I had been reading up on ancient fashions, being the history buff that I am, and it struck me that clothing had been getting starker ever since the initial excitement at discovering stitching. The average gentleman of the 17th century dressed like a modest cabaret dancer of the 20th and a genetically modified fern of the 23rd.

I called up room service for some breakfast while I got a shower. Tea and pancakes sprung up on the table, piping hot and smelling wonderful and I wondered once again when they'd get around to making pancake scented room freshener. I sipped the tea slowly, luxuriating in the soft honey-like glow that warmed my room. I switched on the holovision but it was full of the trial already, with reporters pecking at stately old Khan and a pouting Zoomer with sparkles in her hair. I switched it off and charged my shoes and slipped on my favorite suit and left.

This is perhaps the point in narration where I should bring in Finnigan McTaggerty, my esteemed contractor, who I hope knows little about libel.

He has never been in Scotland as his parents moved to Lavender before he was born. He doesn't have much hair on his face, which he regrets and no one else does, and is uncommonly slim. All this hasn't stopped him from being the most obsessively Scotch person I know, though admittedly I don't know many. He has haggis for breakfast, keeps pigtails, and resides in a kilt on his chair in his office that is some twenty-five minutes away from this hotel.

I made it in twenty, my posterior clenched just in case it improved my grip on the seat, and the world a blur of sunshine and sweet air and white and green. I climbed into a shifty elevator, made my slithery way up the building and found the secretary's baleful eye on my form.

I smiled. She typed.

“Ro Moniker,” said I.

“We've met before,” said she and coldly announced on the intercom, to warn McTaggerty to stop whatever it is that Scots do when people aren't looking.

“Ahhh finally,” came his voice. “Let ‘im in, let ‘im in.” And so I was, and thankfully his desk had a bottom, for I suspect he was sitting with legs crossed.

“Allo,” said he in greeting, grinning wide. “Ai like yer Zoomer. Fine spunky lass that.”

Well he didn’t put it quite that way, or even if he did you wouldn’t have known it. In fact, without having some experience in conversing with him and at least a slight talent for languages, he could have cursed your mother blind and you would have nodded in polite bewilderment. The English alphabet doesn’t give me a fair chance in trying to express his sounds, which hardly surprising since the English alphabet barely manages to even express English sounds, so I shall just provide slightly misspelled speech and hope that the readers can fill in the effect from their own experience and imagination.

Interestingly enough, towards the middle of the 21st century, when their economy really opened up to foreign influence, the Scots had indeed started speaking quite understandable English. But in the beginning of the next century a man named McSweensy, perhaps you have heard of him, started a campaign to urge his fellowmen to return to their roots, in effect asking them to progressively speak in an ever more unintelligible accent; a movement known to historians as re-brouging. He also claimed to be the last descendant of William Wallace, a claim that was fiercely contested by his son.

Away from this educational interlude, I pulled up a chair and sat down and smiled courteously. There were heavy curtains across the window. He liked to go for the classy, dingy look. “If you call body piercing spunk then I agree she’s up there,” said I, bringing up the documents on holo display from my sleeve.

He shrugged. “Ai quite like hehr fashion style.”

“Ya? Admire her skirts, I bet,” I leaned back and pointed at the documents, “I have been advised to negotiate for a 80-20 split. Eighty percent of the price increase goes to the customer, and we will absorb twenty percent. We will need you to account for five of those.”

He laughed merrily. “Werl, werl. Al biznerss today, arrn’t whe? No how d’ye do? No how’ve ye been?”

Did I mention we’re friends? These things slip me from time to time. “I had to shut you up about Zoomer.”

“Did ye now? An Earhist are ye?” said he, twirling his pigtails.

“No Finnigan. I’m a me-ist, as you should know. And you should keep your curtains open. You’re paying for your sky.”

He looked around in surprise. “I have curtains?”

Mind you, he knew the most obscure functions in his Organiser. “So how are you doing then?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Ai’ve been werl. Got a new caer.”

“Ya?” A sinking feeling arose. Somewhere, Tre’ Romano had a cocktail.

“Aye,” said he, magnificently offhand. “A Marsrover. Convertible.”

“Oh,” said I stupidly, disliking him immensely. The berserking bastard always had too much money; I don’t know how he did it. All I had was a dinky little fiat that sat rusting in my garage. I tried to look enthusiastic. “Nice,” said I, and bobbed about. “Very nice.”

“Aye, aye. Whut ‘bout ye, eh? Ye waer planning to rhite a boohk nae?”

That brought about a grimace. “Ya. No, never got around to it.”

“Oh,” said he. “Ai see.”

“Ya,” said I, and couldn’t think of anything else to say. It was to have been a children’s book, inspired by my lovely little cat. She is named her Majesty Orene Nightfall Indigo, King Elect of the Realm. I had tentatively titled the book *Galactic Pussy*.

“And gels? Found yer gel?”

“Yes. She was with the keys in my back pocket.”

He laughed. I, somehow, didn’t.

“If ye wahnt Ai caen try to intredeuce ye to Nivah’s frhends,” said he, magnanimously.

“Who’s Nivah?”

“This lass Ah’m going out with. Vehry nice. A fashion consultant.”

“Sounds like fun,” said I, thinking about braided pigtails.

“And a yoga instructor. She can do the most amazing...”

“Look documents!” said I, since I didn’t have coffee to make bubbles with.

Thankfully it worked just as well, and he stopped and gave me a look and then looked at the documents. “Right then, Ai suppose we will beahr the five percent, as ye say.” He peered owlshly, scrolling up and down, while I thought about yoga and swam around in my sinking feeling.

“Ye’ve done yer numbers well,” he said finally. “Toshi?”

“And Gustav. You haven’t met him.”

There must have been something in my voice, for he looked up grinning. “A good thing, I suppose?”

I shrugged coolly. “I’ve known skirts to like him before.”

“’Tis a kilt dammit!”

“There’s no need to get defensive. I discriminate equally.”

He sighed. “Aye, aye,” said he, “have yer fun. Dat’s whut yer good at.”

“Each to his own. Now gird your loins and put your signature and let’s get this over with.”

He read through the proposal once more out of simple obstinacy and then entered his ocular print in the system and looked at me. “Alright, now whut?”

“I was thinking we could get Toshi and Gustav down later to discuss the overlay, and then get Legal and Compliance down tomorrow.”

“Dat seems about right,” said he nodding, and then gave a sly look. “So now whut?” he asked again.

I raised my eyebrows in question, but he just continued to sparkle his teeth at me. Then I remembered. “Business lunch?”

“Ai thought you’d ne’er ask,” said he gleefully and quickly and expertly filled it in his claims. “Ai know this lovely place. Newly opened, just next door. Really expensive. Ai’ve been waiting to try it fer months. Indian food too, Ai knew ye’d insist. It’s your one link to nationalism”

“I can assure you that my need for Indian food has very little to do with where it’s from, and a lot to do with how it tastes. On the other hand, that haggis you force yourself to eat tastes like sheep entrails.”

“It is sheep entrails.”

“That’s no excuse to taste like it, and you know that. By the way, could you put on some pants by any chance?”

“Mai legs arre my pride, me mann,” said he, and that was that.

We made our way over to the restaurant and he kept up a constant stream of friendly chatter about happenings in his life and in the Scottish community in Lavender. I find myself at a bit of a loss during such conversations, since I just don't seem to have relevant contributions of my own. When faced with kilt-ruffling matters such as the new corporate tartan adopted by the Banker's Golf club, I tend to say things like "Oh" and "Okay." Sometimes I make jokes.

It is difficult for me to stomach that the political concept of his birth plays so large a part in his life and that of his friends. I hardly get along with my own family, much less an entire community, and much less the idea of one. I've stayed in thirteen cities in three countries in two planets and a moon and I've always found my chances of getting along with someone to be quite the same whether they are one of the three billion citizens of the Indian Sub-Continental Union, or one of the nine billion denizens who are not. That chance has also consistently proven to be on the low side.

I did have an honest, innocent, hedonistic love for the food though, and I was glad to find that the restaurant was just as good and as expensive as he'd promised. Very soon I was sending silent well wishes for that lovely tariff as I munched on a chicken leg, my sinking feeling washed away in exquisite curry.

I think you'll agree that my gratefulness did seem the appropriate emotion at the time, though this will go on to provide one of those little touches of prophetic irony that make such an account to be taken seriously.

McTaggerty, I might mention, didn't share my feelings even then, and I maintain that it was for the wrong reasons. Just because he was vindicated doesn't mean he was right.

"Ai dinnae like it," started he, while by rights he should have been tucking into the murch malai. "This dammed tariff. 'Taint fair."

"Fairness is a human pretense. Ask the poultry now residing in your curry."

He didn't and continued sourly. "And they put that wee lass in prison. That pore wee lil lass."

I raised my eyebrows. "Only for a day, man, and she's hardly wee."

"But 'taint right," said he with feeling. "Whut did she ever do?"

What she had done of course, was camp outside the governor's office with mega speakers and blared out her new song for three days straight – the event now known as 'The Great Treble of August the 16th.' It was supposed to be in protest of the new tariff, and the song, as you might know, was 'My Freedom, My Ass'. I'm sure you've heard it. It's not a radio favorite, but only because no radio would have the guts to play it. In the space colonies it is inescapable even today, almost an anthem. The tune is hummed when people see flags, and when students get detention. It is so widely spread that people know

it without knowing what song they know. The words are often tastefully forgotten. On August the 16th nowadays, the police in half the cities outside Earth are under orders to keep an eye out for large and suspicious speakers.

At the time though what had happened was that three large policemen and a balding government lawyer had marched in, charged her with public nuisance and thrown in the gaol for the night. The record had been out for sale the next day, and she had seemed to become an important part of everyone's lives by the next week.

That was perhaps the end of the beginning, the last point at which events could have forked. It's interesting to wonder what might have been if the governor's taste in music had run more towards the heavy mesoviolsins that lava music consists of. Not least of all, Zoomer might never have gone platinum.

At that point however, the event was merely current affairs, and as such an unworthy interruption to the party carrying on in my mouth. I didn't answer him at all and tried to munch in a manner that would discourage any other uses of the jaw.

But there was no stopping him. "Taint right," repeated he. "'Tis discrimination."

"Against people who blare loud and indelicate music in public places?"

"'Tis ugainst de rhights of indeividual frredom."

"Better hers than mine. Have you heard the song? It's ridiculous." I paused and looked at him. He seemed to be getting petulant. "Look, she knew what she was doing. She's going to make millions. You can admire her marketing managers if you want, but there's no cause for sympathy here."

"Aye? But whut 'bout the tariff, eh? Why should we Spacers have to pay larger tariffs than Eartheners?"

I told him what he already knew - because the infrastructure was more expensive to maintain, because we were highly subsidized even with the revised tariff; and that seeing how neither of us was American or personally affected, the 'we' smacked a bit of affectation.

But he was in a grip, all indignation and spittle, and he ignored the second comment, and brushed aside the first with a "So whut?"

He wagged his knife. "Don't we suffer enuff already? Don't they live it up on Earth while we toil here far away from our own sun and our natural home? For their demmed profit, eh?"

I believe I actually paused in my eating on hearing that - the veritable spoon midway to mouth scenario - and gaped at him. Here he was, the decadent little cad, sitting his kilted

bottom on hundred credit chairs, on someone else's money, with an artificial sky beaming down and modulated temperature, and he was mouthing off about slave freedom.

"Shut up and eat," said I. "Come visit Ganymede before you talk about suffering spacers. Or even better, hop down to the other Martian cities. Mahu Culco's not so far away."

"Mahu Culco has a tradition known as 'Marijuana Monday'."

"Only because they can't afford meatloaf," said I, trying to salvage my regrettable choice for an example.

"Well, at least they don't get oppressed by their government."

"No, they get mostly ignored. It's hardly a better situation."

"Ai saey it is! Bettar to be laeft alone than be treated laike wee lil Zoomer," he bawled, returning to his favorite topic and making me wonder if his curry was spiked. He shook his head. "Such a bonny lass."

"She's a born-again-Goth, Finnigan."

"Well they had no right to lock her up."

"I doubt she's complaining. Look, Khan, I can understand, tough old man, making a stand. His business will get hit hard. But this girl is just an opportunist..."

"She's making a stand too," said he with passion.

"Don't be stupid, by Jove!" said I, getting miffed myself now. "She doesn't even have to pay the bloody tariff! She's not even subtle, for god's sake. It's fools like you who encourage people like her."

He glared at me, highlander that he was, and coldly set down his cutlery. "Ai'm donn."

"Very good," said I, quite frosty myself. My food had gone cold because of his babbling.

To think that great idiots like him got to sit in Lavender, in their gilt offices with their curtains tightly drawn, while I went to and fro like a goddamn cosmic yoyo, and then they dabbed their eyes over that little minx just so she could swindle them of their undeserved cash. And he thought the tariff wasn't fair...

I left quite sullen, angry at all the people who seemed hell bent on ruining my mood on what should have been a most pleasant trip. Romano, and Zoomer and Finnigan and Gustav. Admittedly Gustav hadn't done anything, but he was always on that list.

When I look back now, it does seem that I should have been able to smell the air, but you must understand, it all seemed so silly then. Just a stupid little incident as happens all the time, which people seemed to be making a mountain of, as is their wont. Just proves, I suppose, that you should never underestimate stupidities, for they roam in packs and really love their own.

I spent the next three hours in one of Lavender's large parks. Martian soil was dead by itself but with the right chemicals infused it could become brilliantly productive. Lavender, of course, was the only place to have implemented this in large, generous degrees and with a curious taste for non-photosynthetic gardens, all purple and gold, with slightly acidic dew, but as sweet-scented as you could hope for. Their reproduction must have been intact too, for the bees and butterflies seemed to favor them, and I lay there amongst them, as they fluttered and buzzed all around me, and I wished I'd never have to go back to my stupid grey ship, or that hellish piece of debris which was my home, and which that idiot seemed to so fraternize with.

I must have nodded off, and as usual forgot to sensibly switch off my phone, which allowed Toshi to do her devilment. "What?" I growled irritably, letting her image float up from my left sleeve, where I usually embedded my phone.

"Finnigan has been complaining that you behaved badly," she said sternly.

"Why don't you go comfort him? He'll like that. You can compare hairdos."

"We're going there now. Gustav and I, for preliminary discussions. You're coming too?"

It wasn't a question of course. I told her I would and that her children would hate her and hung up. I sat there for a while, a bit drowsy, taking in the scents, and eyeing a woman who was walking my way. She swayed past, quite pretty, with one of those hybrid dog-cats. I smiled hopefully, but she wasn't biting, and gave me the i-know-what-you're-after-but-you-haven't-a-chance looks.

Being well acquainted with this I have made a special word for its reference – holipy – and since it may appear a few times in this account perhaps my readers would be kind enough to remember it. It's such a long phrase otherwise, and English never seems to have words for such important, much-faced situations.

So, being thus holipied, there was no point in staying, and I sighed and rose, dusting off tiny golden flakes from my person, which swirled around and never seemed to settle.

The evening and the next two days passed quickly, mostly at work. I won't bore you with details for I want you to continue reading, but let me assure you that the details are, indeed, boring. They consist of poring over clauses in a contract both parties already know has to be accepted and debating them for the sake of officiousness. A sacrifice of time to the Gods of Cubicles. What leisure I got I spent away from the rest. None of them

were very happy with me, and I wasn't much pleased with them either. Besides, my taste in conversation doesn't match theirs.

I remember thinking at the time that don't they realize it doesn't matter to them? What difference will it make to their personal lives, either way that trial they so grimly discuss goes?

I myself have a firm policy to take no interest in affairs till they become long gone history and a bit prettier with age. There too my interest in them is purely academic, curiosity really. I don't pretend that the large dances of the worlds really affect my daily digestion, and I maintain that people only do it because they love believing in their own importance. You do too, my dear reader, I know it. You've picked up this book since you thought that the secession was important. It's nothing to be ashamed of, just a human thing, like body odor.

Of course though I stand firmly by my view, well thought out as it is, there is one exception. Sometimes it does matter to you. Most of the time you'll know it if it does, but there are times when you'll have no idea how an event so far away from your life will come crashing through. Causality is a much tentacled creature, and an unkind one.

Being thus oblivious of the future I spent my evenings wandering through the city, through roads and plazas and alleys, peering at doors and trees, and staring up at the sky every once in a while. It was nice, very pleasant and peaceful and I enjoyed it, even though my tastes generally run to the more chaotic, lively, somewhat over-populated environs common in Indian or Chinese cities. It's like watching a play and its backstage simultaneously. Humanity spread out on a canvas, with its little hopes and little dreams and its many little amusements.

I also went to a salon. After getting holiplied a few times more I'd decided to get a new haircut. It'd grown too long anyway. I had fancies of style, a hairdo that would make an Adonis of me. But as always I was thwarted when after taking my seat in a reasonably expensive salon the barber inquired how I would like it cut. I didn't know of course, I never do, and there ended that adventure.

It's strange really, many people a few hundred years ago thought that technology would get rid of the vocations like hair-cutting. Yet here they are still, asking ridiculous questions, just as, I suppose, they had then. It's not that surprising. Anything that concerns human satisfaction will need to be performed by humans at some level. Even if machines are programmed to operate to preference, that preference still has to be determined by humans, who will still ask unanswerable questions.

Anyhow, the new contract was finally decided on, and we were ready to leave Lavender. I was loathe to go and was in quite a sour mood, but I reined it in. Two days of roaming had brought me serenity. I had already made my peace with Finnigan, but I apologized once more, since I believe in being an easy apologist. You can get away with so much more bad behavior then.

We had to retrieve the supplies that still fell under the old contract, the procurement part of the job, and for that we had to travel to Shuiyen, the Chinese city in Mars, which along with Tarapur and Miso-Calahari formed the triangle of heavy production.

Shuiyen is the most advanced of the three, specializing in high-tech components for large complicated machinery, but no prettier because of it. While I didn't mind the convoluted mess that it was, Mars is not Earth. Nothing grows here. There is no sense of life, no moments of greenery. Shuiyen had ended up not much more than a giant industrial compound, making use of Mars' abundant radioactive resources and its close location to Jupiter and other Martian cities to survive. It also has the only large spacetunnel in the area.

We traveled the only way possible - by train - where I had business class tickets, but Toshi and Gustav didn't. I didn't mind. I'd have their company before long; there's nothing like a spaceship for forced companionship. Much like a prison really, even more so than other offices. It also allows me to continue ignoring Gustav's existence in this account, a pleasant side effect, though his entrance draws inexorably near.

I spent the time leaning back as far as the seat would allow, which wasn't much, and reading *Deep City Superhero*, which I consider a classic, and staring out of the window from time to time. There wasn't much to see. Mars is boring geologically, and the only thing it usually has to offer is a panoramic view to the horizon, something you Eartheners won't be able to find so easily since your planet is so filled in with hill and dale and city. I'm sure this causes you to burn with envy.

It was not a short journey, even at 350 km/h, and took us the good part of another day and night, and by the end of it I was quite out of my store of entertainment and glad to get off. The sentiment didn't last beyond the docking station.

The place was worse than I'd remembered it. The robot coolies were half rusted, more green and red and fungus than metal. The pavement was slushy and muddy, with oil and grease coating it in places, and food and garbage littered all over. Though the Chinese Republic had no problems with prosperity, Shuiyen, like most Martian cities, seemed to get only poorer, dirtier, and smellier. Most of the people stumbled around in rags and bones, a majority from the Central Asian countries, where the population explosion had positioned them to become effective and cheap labor for China, though from the greasiness of their skin and slurred loudness of their voice I would say most of them had spent their lives there in Shuiyen, perhaps even been born there. The place has a knack of getting grime all the way till the ear-drum. There were fair amounts from the African colonies of China as well, which just shows that even 'mercy colonization', as the obnoxiously ambitious historical term goes, can only provide so much mercy.

Anyway, apart from the abstraction, the moment unfortunately arrives where I must make an introduction of Gustav. I wish I could cut him out of the book altogether, for I'm enjoying writing this, and his thought is not welcome in my playtime. He has, however,

too great a role to play later. Indeed, you can say that without him this book would never have been written, and a good many other things might not have occurred, and a great deal of trouble may well have been avoided. But things standing as they do, I can delay the inevitable no longer, and will present to you the curse that is Gustav Olafsson.

He is blonde of course, and large, and if he weren't clean-shaven and lived around two thousand years back, he would have made a respectable Viking. Quite probably he has an undiluted bloodline. In later centuries, he could probably have made a go as a cavalry officer. He has the personality for it, to ride into the valley of death and so forth, cannon fodder written all over his broad chest. Perhaps he could even have built a name for himself as an experimental pilot, or as a stunt double in the last few centuries. If he traced his family tree he'll probably find my views justified.

Unfortunately, these things were not to be. He was born late, far too late. And as such, he ended up as a management trainee on a spaceship; a tragedy for everyone concerned, especially me.

He knew I didn't like him since I took great pains to show it, and while he was one of those people who couldn't for the life of him fathom how this could be, he took to it like a fish takes to a net. Bewildered detestation was his answer, and it suited me fine since he never stopped trying his wits on me and never stopped failing. In fact, if I didn't have to be cooped up in a ship with him, running amok all over space, I might even have liked him simply for the sport he provided.

This was, of course, before the events that followed. Now I would gut him on sight if I could.

At this point he was glaring at me as I handed him my luggage.

"I'm not carrying your bags!" he growled, subtle as always.

"But Mr. Olafsson," said I, looking indignant. "It was in your contract, you know. Didn't you read the fine print? What did you think Special Projects meant?"

He started to turn red, which is his natural defense against words and other things he doesn't understand. "I am a Management Trainee!" he gurgled.

"Precisely!" said I. "If you were Operations, you'd be carrying Toshi's bags too."

He wasn't convinced, and would surely have come up with a sparkling reply presently, but Toshi had found a coolie by then and in she came with it clattering behind. It was a tottering little piece with wobbly wheels and the front of its basket dented. I mentioned how I still preferred Gustav but it wasn't to be.

We made our way to our hotel, rattling along in the peculiar and uncomfortable half-open five wheelers which dot the city. They are the cheapest transportation possible, running

on a mixture of chemicals easily found in the Martian crust, and substitute for public transport in these cities. Tarapur has its own version, three wheelers, which are able to accommodate approximately two and a half people. They would be quaint really, except for the fact that Mars abounds in sulphur and phosphorous and carbon and other wonderfully noxious substances which make these smell like some of the least enjoyable bodily emissions. Quite evocative, as you may imagine.

Shuiyen's roads are large and wide, and its buildings small and grimy, a clever economic ploy which crams in labor and yet provides effective infrastructure. We tore across the first, to arrive quite breathless and sore at the second, the red dust having entered our hair and clothes, and Toshi having developed a sneezing fit. She always does on the first day, though by the second she is usually and miraculously the most adjusted.

We stumbled out, gazing upon the low grey building that was supposed to house us for the next two days. It wasn't bad really, one of the city's best, just very, well, industrial in appearance, as if there were ghosts of worn down robots roaming its corridors. Toshi and I were quite used to it though, so I didn't lose a single breath in marching in, getting a porter with its circuits hanging out for the luggage, and leaving an unsuspecting Gustav to handle the payment for our transport.

I'd like to mention here that payment is the particularly fun part of these tremendously fun joyrides. All the machines are rigged to ask outrageously high prices, so high that even a novice like our orangutan management trainee can notice it. The journey from the station to our hotel came to about twice what a similar distance in Ganymede would cost, when it's evident that it should be cheap as dirt. Experienced commuters just put in an appropriate fare and walk away, leaving the vehicle to beep and blare in protest and play recorded messages of legal warnings.

As long as the fare exceeds the actual cost and gives a decent profit, things are fine, and another business transaction has been successfully concluded. If, however, it doesn't, then rumor has it that you get a visit from some of the people who own the racket, and the sight of their tattoos usually convinces you to pay them for both the ride and their inconvenience. It's a bit tricky since nobody really knows the actual price, and the instinct for caution has seen the common payment show a gradual trend upwards. As you can see, I take care to provide a challenging environment for my employees.

I, meanwhile, took a long hot shower, squirming around under the water and willing it to drip faster, and rinsed away the grime and dust that is Mars. There is no rain or ground water, so the topsoil is all pebble and grain and dry dust. Lavender bypasses this by covering every inch of the city with pavement or specially treated soil that supports vegetation. The Japanese cities use their usual big box approach, they don't even bother with transparent domes. The other, poorer cities are left to persevere.

I followed my shower by a short, dead nap and when I woke I felt marginally less weary. For once I had the pleasure of waking Toshi instead of the other way round. The poor girl was done in, her hair a mess, dark circles under her eyes, and still sniffing from the dust.

But, well, duty is duty. Besides I wasn't going to wander around in this wilderness with Gustav alone. Who knew when that ape would crack under the pressure of civilization? He looked quite spent as it was, and he complained that it had taken him so much time to conclude the payment, where he had supposedly called up the owners and haggled directly with them, that he hadn't got time for any sleep at all. I believe I chuckled most sympathetically.

We were meeting our supplier in the docks to make sure the cargo was being loaded properly and that it was complete. Thus it was one more uncomfortable journey for us. That's what Mars usually means for me, one long, dust covered, bone-rattling ride at the end of which I'm almost thankful to be back on my ship.

The docks are the worst of it, a tremendous expanse of concrete and metal and cargo and people. There is a perpetual cloud of dust, an ochre fog, churned up by the activity. Giant machines loom overhead, immense robotic arms with horrible silhouettes. Colossal trucks lurch by on rollers three stories high. All through this there are stalls selling food and knick-knacks and mementoes and hollering their heads off.

At the centre of this chaos is the tunnel itself, and though it is like every other spacetunnel there is something about the surroundings that accentuates it. Makes it seem larger. A pillar to the sky, rising through the mist, with the sunlight glinting cruelly off its face. Rising, till it is lost to the eye.

At its base lies a gargantuan bulb, the size of thirty football fields, inside which there is no gravity. Here the freight waits in spiraling queues to enter the tunnel, many thousands of tons of cargo, from sonic turbulators to large blocks of potassium rich soil, all being prodded forward, inching their way to the anti-gravitronic stream which will push them upwards all the way to space.

The crowd accumulates around this centre, as do the stalls, and the place seethes with humanity. You can't hear yourself speak, and you can't smell yourself smell. That is where we had our appointment, in front of one of the side gates, and it took us the better part of the hour to jostle our way there.

Our supplier was a large Kirghiz, whose family had been in Shuiyen for the past two generations. I have a feeling that he is a good, jolly man, who tells lewd jokes and cares deeply for puppies, but I can't be sure since I only ever understand every fourth word he's saying. He certainly makes it a point to offer me some of the food he's eating whenever he sees me, and strangely enough seems to be eating whenever I see him.

I would love to say that this has led to a deep, friendly bond to develop between us, despite the difference in our cultures and backgrounds. I can't, though. It's not true. You see, the last time I'd seen him, he had been eating pig's tentacles, supposedly steamed. The time before that he had been eating fried scorpions. This time it was roasted silk larvae. They are, I presume, worth their weight in silk.

Now I have nothing against this. I've traveled a lot and been suitably appalled by the myriad characteristics of every people, including, I may add, his own. I completely understand that taste is almost entirely developed by indoctrination. You like what you have grown up eating. I get it. But there still remains one question that has always confounded me, and it relates not only to the exotic tongue-twisters I mentioned, but even to more established edibles like prawns and squid and froggy bits. It goes something like this:

How did it begin? Who was the first genius to come across a lobster and think it a good idea to eat that? What part of the crustacean exoskeleton, the large claws, the long feelers and whiskers, the general alien monstrosity, gave rise to the thought that this would be absolutely delicious when broiled? I don't understand it. I never have. But then again, the same thing may be said about cabbages, except that they are not delicious either way.

Aside from that, to look over the cargo we had to enter the weightless zone, since it had already been put in queue. It's not a comfortable operation and contains some risk since there is a lot of tonnage floating around, some of it with some momentum. It took us three-four hours of exhausting, grueling work, poking about, running scans for weight and number and purity, until finally we were ready to give it a good to go. We crawled outside and contacted the ship and made sure that it was in the receiving position and the people were ready. Then we returned to our hotel, completely worn out, and for all I know the universe might have been remade in the night, for I wouldn't have noticed.

The next morning we left Mars.

2.

The elevator had seats, but not very clean ones, and the elevation itself took a good three mind-numbing hours. The ship, as is normal procedure, was attached to the Shuiyen space dock at an altitude of twenty thousand kilometers, and the elevator, which used the same space tunnel, didn't have enough acceleration adjustment to go any faster than two km per sec.

The atmosphere inside a space elevator is always the same, and is in fact a member of a much larger and distinguished family of atmospheres. You can find them in clinics, and in airports, the pedigree born out of many people waiting for something to get over. My own troupe contributed earnestly.

Toshi had managed to buy a colossal soft toy of a green pasty-faced creature that had been the popular conception of a martian two hundred years ago. They have a huge statue of it up north and it serves as Mars' chief icon, selling thousands of mugs and toys, usually wearing a red shirt with 'I ♥ MARS' scrawled across. She sat hugging it and staring at the nearest convenient wall.

Gustav bought a sleazy looking lamp and sat with it in his lap, his foot tapping erratically. I bought nothing and walked around in the cramped space, listening to music and causing the sitting people to stare surreptitiously.

Finally, we reached the dock. The passenger capsules are deposited in a higher level while freight goes into a circular stream occupying the lower levels of the dock from where they can be extracted by their recipients. Passengers instead have to walk past long rows of dingy shops that were put there in an optimistic moment, along corridors having the fetching color of rotting green, their feet clanging on floors of metal grating.

As we neared our ship's entrance, I noticed Toshi change the way she held the marsman. It was now tucked under her arm instead of being hugged to her chest. Gustav was looking ahead, as he usually does.

There was a welcoming party for us, albeit a modest one. Mr. Tango, head of our logistics team was beaming. He had many wonderful teeth. He could display these even while speaking. Along him were two young and eager people who I did not know, but they looked positive. I increased the volume of my earphones correspondingly.

The teeth moved. He was speaking.

Dum dum dah dah.....Dum dum dahh dahh..

The teeth moved further. Faint snatches carried to my ear. "-----secure in ----- . ---
----- lockdown -----"

Dum Dum deyy dahh dahhhh daadaahhh...

The teeth started to die. The positive people were developing small frowns. "I'm sorry, Mr. Tango, I seem to have developed this inability to hear anything."

The Teeth gave rise to lips. I heard a sullen mention of 'earphones'...

"Ahh...yes, well done. Good work! Toshi will be expecting a report within the hour." That made them seem a little happier. Damn positive people, I have to say.

I left them talking animatedly to a beleaguered Toshi, and made my way to my rooms. The ship, like all ships of this purpose, looks like an upside-down water bottle. The ion generators and thrusters and gravitron generators are at the bottom, and then rises a fat cylinder which houses level after level of offices and quarters, mine being at the very top. Upper Management loves a little symbolism. It also means that my ceiling has a rather neat view of stars whizzing past as we move. It's supposed to infuse zeal and forward thinking. Its gives good dreams as well.

I dropped my luggage at the entrance of the door, in the hope that people may trip over it, and kicked off my shoes, and stood looking out of the side windows.

Mars hung coldly, a dead ball of red rock. There were some lights on the far side that was in shadow, and of course giant umbilical cords snaked out, but otherwise you could not have said that it was alive. Far away on one side was Earth, with its oceans and valleys and mud and leaves and animals. On the other side, even further away, was home, grey and brown and covered in ice, with everyone living in boxes.

Somewhere, perhaps, Tre' Romano put on suntan lotion.

Toshi would handle the departure. She always did. She was wonderful. And so I could lie on my bed, and hug my bolster and stare up at the stars and remember what could have been. I wished my kitty was here, but I'd left her with someone and I didn't feel like moving to go get her.

After a while, the stars started to move. I closed my eyes and slept and dreamt of sunlit beaches.

When I woke, it was late at night, or if you're a puritan – early in the morning. For those of my readers who have never actually left Earth, and don't usually read, and have picked up this book mistakenly thinking it will be good for their school project, they might be surprised to learn that all Spacers follow steady day-night cycles with distinct night hours. Biology is not to be denied, as I try telling many women.

We were going at a fair and steady speed by then and I told myself to remember to drop a kind word to Toshi sometime. I stumbled out of the bed, stared out of the window at the now empty inkiness and suddenly felt really, achingly hungry.

The closest available food was a vending machine in the mess, but it was that or starvation, so I slipped on my particularly bumptious slippers and made my way down. This late there were very few people about, and even the mess was quite deserted, with just a few fledglings clustered in front of a holovision set. They didn't notice me, which was absolutely fine. I like to avoid conversations causing mutual pain.

It was one of those nights though, the ones where the vending machine shows 'out of stock' for everything except soybean products, and the world seems to conspire against you.

Regardless, the dispenser seemed unabashed. "Greetings, valued customer," it said tidily.

"Your mother is a toaster," muttered I in reply. My eyes scanned the list twice over, and three times I tried one of the unavailable items in blind hope, since I am somewhat human too. Finally, broken and defeated, I took a choc-soya and started walking back while working up courage to open the can.

Sounds from the holovision reached me then. It was the news, and there seemed to be perturbation. Normally of course, I'm not an avid fan of reality shows, but things are different in the night – you feel more...unsafe, it's in our blood. The shadows seem sinister and news seems more important.

There were three minions thronging the set, two males and a bright little female, all quite young. They were watching with rapt attention, oblivious to my approach.

The screen showed Zoomer. It was the court. She was grinding her hips and singing loudly, and, in my judgement, more than slightly hoAssly. The lawyers seemed quite lost. One of them shrugged. The judge, an old man, jumped up and down, shaking a gnarled finger and shrieking for order.

"So she's in prison again?" asked I, instead of going 'boo!,' as was my first instinct.

The effect was much the same however, and they jumped slightly, and turned and stared.

"Oh! G-good...morning, sir," said one.

"If you say so," said I. "Contempt of court, I'm guessing?"

They were not quite sure and I waved them to silence as the newscaster returned.

"Zoomer's actions have shocked both the court and the government. The Governor's office has released an official statement of condemnation, sternly reminding the lava star that such behavior is not acceptable from anyone and that no citizen has a right to mock the primary civil institutions of this country."

The broadcast changed to show a middle-aged man on a dais, with the great bald eagle's on the crest behind him, giving the strange impression of rising out of his head. "We further state," lectured he, "that such behavior is not acceptable from anyone and that no citizen has a right to mock the primary civil institutions of this country."

It is fun to watch breaking news.

The newscaster returned, looking a bit sheepish. "The Judge, Hon'ble Mr. Mulholland Drive, has also taken a strong stand in the matter. He has already issued a contempt of court order on Zoomer that has caused her to be placed in judicial prison. He has, however, been admitted to the hospital for hyperventilation, thus causing the trial to be adjourned indefinitely once again."

"It's all the grinding," said I, sagely.

"The young singer, who has reached celebrity status, and who's single 'My Freedom, My Ass' has already sold more than a million copies, appears to have left even her own attorneys floundering. Her defence lawyer, Ms Salekh, has no comment to make on her client's behavior. She has stated though, that her firm will not be challenging the judge's verdict."

"Of course they won't." I glanced around at my compadres. They looked concerned and young. "As I said ... prison again."

"It's really unfair," said the girl, and pouted.

"You think so?" said I, giving her a look. "What would you have the judge do? Boogie with her?"

"She was just expressing herself," shot back the girl.

Her lips were beautiful, soft, full. If it was up to me she would pout forever.

"The song," continued the news, "which is titled 'I Dare Ya To Do Me Again,' has already hit the infonet, with StormEye Records claiming that there have already been over seven thousand downloads since the song was released two hours back."

"Well, it's certainly a statement. I'm just not sure what of."

One of the guys sniggered. The girl drew herself up. "She's really brave," said she stoutly, and I noted with some interest my first observation of a case of heroine-worship. It was really cute.

"The people of New Chicago, on the other hand, seem to be supporting Zoomer wholeheartedly. In a poll conducted by NewsAmerica, above seventy percent of citizens from the Ganymedan colony showed enthusiastic support for their celebrity. Outside New

Chicago, however, support was far less, reaching above forty percent only in Neighbour and Lincoln in Mars, and Icetown in Callisto. Several international cities have also shown strong support for the Jovian star, most notably Paris, Lavender, and Mumbai. The Nippon Space City polled equally on both sides of the issue.”

I sighed. It had to be admitted that the woman was succeeding. She had a talent for finding ways to sing her way to prison. “What about Khan?” I asked.

The other guy, a quiet, serious looking kid, spoke up. “They say he’s probably going to get three years. They got a strict judge for his trial.”

“Three years?” I repeated, taken aback.

“Yes. On the charge of treasonous non-compliance.”

“I see,” said I, frowning. “That’s a bit harsh.”

“Isn’t it always?” said the kid.

“The Jovian Church has also shown strong support for Zoomer, calling her a champion of the sons and daughters of Jove. Bishop Antonio, who is in charge of extra-Jovian relations, gave an exclusive interview to NewsAmerica.”

Bishop Antonio appeared on the screen, glaring through red-rimmed eyes, his stubble a week old and his mouth twitching. The Jovian Church has a tendency to attract the reformed criminal type; on occasion even the not so reformed.

The bishop smoothed his white robes and sat himself. He touched his neck, lips and forehead gravely and fingered the lightning amulet around his thick neck. I could see that a certain loss of dignity was about to transpire.

The interviewer smiled and introduced him and then asked him what he thought about the twin trials of Zoomer and Khan. There was a deep intaking of breath, a puffing up of the chest, and there it was:

“Treason, they say! Contempt, they say!” bawled he, shaking his fist. “But let me tell you, it is they who are treacherous. It is they who are in contempt in the eyes of our Father Jove!” His voice trembled. “They shall not be forgiven. Storms shall surround them. Lightning shall strike them down. They shall burn in the eternal fires of the sun. They shall...”

It was the Church of Jove at its very best. One moment all quiet serenity, welcoming the sheep to the fold and so on, and the next, ranting that would make the Association of Megalomaniac Dictators shuffle their feet and avoid eye contact.

I decided it was time for me to return to my den and took my leave of the cubs, advising them to watch Animal Planet instead as I did so. The rest of the night I spent in front of my holoscreen, determined to make better use of the time that we had net-connectivity than in watching news. Details will not be provided.

The next morning I sat bleary-eyed in my office with a genial, satisfied smile on my face. Her Majesty, Princess Orene, who I had collected on my way there, lounged on my table most disdainfully. I tickled her chin.

“... And then the little man said, ‘You’re a dragon? I thought dragons were just a myth.’ The dragon sighed. ‘I’m not a myth,’ it said, looking sad. ‘I’m just shy.’”

“You’re talking to the cat?”

I looked up blearily. It was Toshi, looking prim and proper and efficient, and with an amused expression on her face.

“No,” said I. “I’m telling her a story. There’s a difference.”

“Of course,” said she with a laugh. “You didn’t sleep?”

“Who needs sleep? All I need is lurrve.”

“It’s not usually called that.”

“It could have been. I blame the Cathars for losing.”

“Right.” She popped up a projection of some documents. “I have some shipwise operational reports for you to look at.”

I sighed. “I wish I was a lesbian. Don’t you wish you were a lesbian?”

She transferred the reports. “No, I’m fine as I am.”

I grunted. “You’re obviously not a man.”

She quirked a brow. “Please look at these as soon as possible,” said she, in a clear change of topic.

“What’s the hurry,” said I. “The ship won’t stop running if it hasn’t already.”

“It contains the engine report from the launch, Ro. It has to be reviewed.”

“But why?” said I. “What could possibly have happened? We’re in space. There isn’t a single molecule of matter outside us for a thousand miles. There’s no friction, there’s hardly any force. What could the report possibly contain that is of any importance?”

She gave me a level look. “Basher dropped his watch into the core.”

“What?” That snapped me out of my loquaciousness. “Bashful Basher?”

“Yes.”

“The nuclear core?”

“Yes.”

“Did anything happen?”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“I read a comic once where that happened and there was an explosion and the guy caught in the blast radius got super-powers of time-travel.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Not if you all get it too. What’s the point then?”

She nodded solemnly.

I vacantly stared at her Majesty. “Basher! The idiot! I’d left Orene with him, you know.”

“Oh I’m sure he took great care of her,” said she carefully.

“No wonder he seemed so kitschy today when I went to collect her.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. He always seems like that.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Oh don’t be too hard on him. He’s such a nice guy.”

“He’s a damn fool. He just seemed so enthusiastic that I thought it’d be fine. Just proves what I always maintained. Enthusiasm is not to be trusted. Never seen an eager person yet who could be relied on.”

“You’d be the most reliable person around then.”

“I’ve got the room with the view, haven’t I? Anyway, go away now. I have things to do.”

“The reports...”

“Are safe with me. I shall take the greatest care of them. Now, go, go, go...” I waved my hands around, muttering spells to make her disappear. She soon did.

I sat back, and looked at her Majesty. She is glossy black, except for some white fluff on the underside of her neck and the tips of her whiskers. I tickled under her chin so that she rolled over luxuriously and gazed upon me with her deep sea green eyes.

I spent the rest of the morning trying to teach her how to fetch. I was less successful than I had hoped, and the procedure mostly ended up with me throwing the ball and then fetching it back as well. By lunchtime I was quite somber.

Toshi called for lunch but I wanted to avoid her, as I knew she would bug me about the report, so I told her instead that I had yet to meet Jones, who is the ship’s cook and almost my friend, and doing so would be a good opportunity to inspect the galley as well. She didn’t press, which somewhat irked me, and there was nothing left to do but to carry out my excuse and make a visit to the formidable fiefdom of Porridge Jones, as he was commonly known.

Let me introduce him here, since he is worth it. He is a large, tough man of indeterminate race, perhaps with some Maori in him, and some European. He has a big doughy face and a ponytail and a thin reedy voice, and nothing much is known about him except that he is surprisingly good with a knife, and surprisingly bad with anything else to do with cooking. He doesn’t much like the honorific he has acquired, and it’s a good thing that he doesn’t know it was I who came up with it, not only because he is a bit unnerving but because as lord of the galley of a long-range ship his good grace means everything.

As such I have spent some effort in trying to cultivate his friendship. I can’t say that I have had corresponding success. He is a difficult person to win over. He doesn’t talk much, he’s not a great patron of witticisms, no one knows if he has a family or anything of the sort, and he seems to have no interests at all except in salamanders.

The only point of access therefore, is salamanders, and therein lies a problem. I know nothing about them. I pride myself on my scholarliness, and I know about how snails shoot love arrows like a particularly slimy cupid and how the ancient Egyptians considered the dung pellets of a scarab symbols of this world and put carved figures of the insect in place of the heart of those mummified, but I know nothing about salamanders, and I don’t seem to be able to. I try reading up on them from time to time but they are just not a very documented species.

To make matters worse, Gustav has the very same idea, and he, though having all the brains of an intelligent wall, seems to have had a newt for a pet when he was a child. Just the kind of thing you’d expect from the Olafssons, and it gives him an edge that I cannot overcome.

It was therefore with some alarm that I found him sitting with Porridge as I entered.

“Porr...Jones! Jones, how are you, Jones?” I called out, beaming like a car-dealer.

“Ro.” He nodded sagely.

“In the flesh.” I petted her Royal Highness who I was carrying in my arms. “Gustav,” I smiled, “adjusted already? Did Toshi show you the reports she had for you?”

“Oh no,” said he, with hulking innocence. “But I had passed her some reports that you had to see.”

Did I say I always win against him? Well I do. Mostly. It would hardly be fun if he can't put up a good one from time to time, when circumstance favors him. The score stands, I think, at 1037 to 2.

“Ro,” said Porridge, “the kitty can't come in.”

“What? You mean Her Majesty?” I stared at him, disbelievingly, though I knew the routine. He kept a clean galley, despite his culinary incompetence, and cats, it must be admitted, for all their grace and beauty and personal hygiene, aren't too easy on their surroundings. I would normally never have dreamt of indulging such behavior from subordinates, but I was never quite sure that Porridge knew he was one.

So I settled her outside, much to her dissatisfaction going by the looks she was giving me, and leaving her to roam these halls as she willed, I returned into Porridge's presence.

I took my seat at their table, and Gustav gave me a disparaging look. “That is a ridiculous name for a cat, you know.”

I arched my brow. “Well, a cat is a ridiculous thing to name. Do they look like they care? Do they ever respond?” There. 1038 to 2. “Besides, how do you know it's not true?”

“What's not true?”

“Her title. Maybe she is the King Elect?”

He shook his head in a long-suffering fashion. I told him he should have faith or he couldn't expect to be redeemed in the afterlife. Porridge turned a knife over in his hands and gazed at it in concentration.

“So, Jones,” said I, “how's it cooking?”

“Good,” said Porridge slowly. “Supplies were proper.”

“Good, good. That's good.”

“And Gustav got a gift for me.” He lifted a mug with a nasty looking lizard painted on its face.

“Oh,” said I. When had the sneaky little bastard bought that? With a salamander look alike, no less.

“It’s nice. Very...quaint.” Then inspiration struck. “Well, I bought something for you too,” said I, and smiled generously “A Marsman. A huge one.”

Gustav started, and gave me a glare. “The one that Toshi has?”

“Toshi?” said I, to the best of my innocence. “Oh, yes, she was carrying it. She loves carrying my stuff for me. I can’t help it. Japanese determination, you know.”

Now if only I could manage to procure it from her. She wouldn’t let it go easily. Maybe I would have to do those reports after all.

After that there was silence, I’d say the awkward kind, for I certainly felt fiddly and Gustav was wriggling around in his seat. Porridge however seemed perfectly at ease and began to pick dirt from his nail with the knife. I have noticed that he treats any moment of embarrassed silence as one of militaresque solidarity, like what you’d expect to find in a marine transport minutes before drop-off. He inevitably starts to look like he’s thinking about long lost loves while doing something to pass the aching seconds, all the time knowing that he may never return but still having determination to carry out the mission. It makes you feel quite inadequate really, and it’s not surprising if you end up staring at his nails.

By the time he got to his pinky however, I could stand it no longer, and I blurted out what came first to my head. It just happened to be about how Khan was expected to get three years in prison, something I would never have brought up normally.

Porridge grunted something unintelligible, but Gustav began at once, cursing zealously and mentioning how they should all be shot, by which I suppose he meant the government. I nodded sympathetically.

“They should do something!” he continued, and now I was somewhat confused.

“Who? The government?” asked I.

“No, the government should be shot!”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Yes!”

“So who should do something?”

“Escalon! He should do something. That’s what his party stands for, doesn’t it? That’s what they said in their patriot rallies.”

“There were patriot rallies?” asked I. That’s what happens if you don’t keep abreast of the news. It sneaks up from behind.

“Yes. Didn’t you know?” said Gustav. He looked quite surprised, bless his narrow mind. Porridge looked impressively into the distance. “They were very big. Before last election. Thousands attended.”

“Really? Where was I?” Probably at the pool, when I think about it. Planetside holidays are precious.

“Toshi went to one. Didn’t she tell you?”

“No,” said I. “Did she? That was wanton of her.”

He frowned, but didn’t venture to ask what I meant. Why should he? I’m sure he knew quite well why men and women really go to rallies of any kind, though you wouldn’t catch the bastard admitting it.

“He said how us Jovians should stand together, how we are blessed to be here, in the very shadow of our Father Jupiter. How any citizen of the ages past would have given anything to be us. How we should be proud.” The moron! I swear his voice was shaking.

From what he said I couldn’t see what was so special about these rallies. That’s what the Jovian Nationalist Party always said, and they never won; though they had been getting stronger. I certainly wouldn’t expect anything from them. But then I didn’t know Cado Escalon at that point. I knew he was leader of the JNP, and led the opposition, and was young for a politician and credited with much of the rise in JNP’s popularity. But I didn’t know him. I hadn’t heard him speak, having never even considered his rallies, and I hadn’t seen the way his eyes looked at things.

Meanwhile, the dimwit continued. “Where is the pride now?” said he, bawling theatrically. “When our heroes are being enslaved!”

I didn’t point out that they had become heroes only after they became enslaved, as he put it. I was tired of this conversation, so I said nothing and looked solemn and gazed upon the table. After a few minutes of heavy breathing Gustav subsided. There was another silence, less awkward this time since we each had other things on our mind. Gustav, perhaps, dreaming of Balaclava, while I contemplated mankind, and was left unimpressed.

Suddenly Porridge spoke. “Some salamanders breathe through their skins,” said he.

I sat up. "I knew that!" said I, brightly. "I did."

It didn't last much longer, and I was soon making my way back, having acquired some personal supplies of ice-cream and eatables which might help me survive in this corporate wilderness, and having promised to get Porridge his gift next time I see him. Perhaps I could delay that by a year or two. I was quite spent so I didn't bother returning to my office and trundled back to my quarters instead.

I tried downloading a safari simulation, and some others that I won't mention, but speeds were already slowing and after a while I gave up. I read some graphic novels instead, which downloaded fast enough, but got bored of them soon, not to mention quite disappointed. Graphic novels do that to me often.

It's strange, I'd found some essays once, which dated some three hundred years back, and the writer had been lamenting that once video gets more immersive and simulations become affordable, books and comics will surely be lost. He'd pointed out how those early movies had already driven noble theatre to the edges, and replaced them by stars with needlessly stylish hairstyles, who presumably weren't nearly so noble.

That essayist would perhaps have heaved a sigh of relief if he could see how well these mediums were actually doing today. The poor fellow had completely missed out the fact that books and comics are so much cheaper to make that for every minute of simulation worth experiencing there are a hundred affordable hours of entertainment to be had in words.

On second thoughts he might not have liked it that much. Being wrong is a bitter affair, especially for essayists.

The afternoon wore on, and grew into evening, and I sat staring at the window and the stars shooting down past them. The journey to eternity, ever upward, with only oblivion for company.

It is then the loneliness hit. It always does, when you leave a planet, and the sky and the ground, and it's worse if you're alone and have been alone for very long.

Have you ever felt that, good dear reader?

So lonely that your stomach seems to hollow out and your chest hurts, and you can't think? And you don't know if it's better to close your eyes or keep them open, whether the darkness is lonelier or the light. And you can't bear to talk to anyone or meet them or even see them because they all seem so happy, and so uncaring, and so ignorant of you. And you can't tell them, because if you could then you wouldn't be lonely in the first place. And you want to listen to a beautiful sad song but no song is beautiful enough or quite sad enough and has too much percussion or not a sufficient amount of it. And you really need to hold something in your arms so you hug your knees. So lonely that you

want to be sad because it feels right to be so. And sometimes you cry and then you sleep and dream of nothing at all.

I think you have, for I am not feeling lonely presently, so I know that everyone does from time to time.

I woke up once in the middle of the night when her Royal Highness returned and coolly dug her claws into my back to indicate that I'd forgotten to serve her dinner. The next time I woke up it was ten in the morning and the ambient lighting of the walls of my room had become quite bright. I irritably turned it down again and hugged my pillows for a few more minutes and then sat up and stared blearily at the offending world. It was to be the most important day of my life and all I knew was that I wanted coffee. Lots of coffee.

I scheduled an inspection of the engines in the morning, something I needed to do for the reports. Our engine crew consisted of sixteen people, led by Manoranjan Desai, a Lunar Indian, who was a very nice and very apologetic person. He was vegetarian, and as far as I know survived on lettuce since there were never much green supplies on the ship. He apologized for it frequently.

"I'm sary, Sar," said he with great remorse when I met him now. "I couldd naut contact you earrier. I tried but de phone diddn't seem to be warking. Perrhaps..."

"Don't give me excuses, man! Give me results!" said I, since I'd always wanted to say that and since he didn't know that I'd blocked his incoming calls.

"Yes sar, yes. I have good news far you. Everything has gone vary smoothly."

"I thought Basher'd dropped his watch into the core?"

"Yes sar, but dere seems to be no prablem. Things arr running vary smoothly," said he, contritely.

"Well, that's good. Where is he, by the way? I'd left my cat with him, you know."

"Yes sar. It was often around here only. I, myself, have often thought it is so cute."

I stared at him. "He brought her to the engines?"

"Yes sar. All around it would go."

"She, not it," said I irritably. "She didn't go any deeper, did she? Just the control room, right?"

"Yes sar. Only here," said he, ruefully.

I sighed in relief.

“Yes sar,” he continued. “Except when Mr. Basher had duty. Then he took it with him where he went. Very careful he was. Always kept it with him.”

“What?” I cried out.

“Yes sar. Always. Sometimes not in gravitronic generator,” he shook his head regretfully, “since he said it didn’t like that, but otherwise always.”

I believe at this point I swore and asked where that damned fool was. Before he could answer though Toshi entered and I immediately put on my best behavior.

“Good morning, sir,” said she brightly.

“The transbulators, Desai. What’s their operational speed being maintained as?” said I. “Morning Toto, morning. Looking good. Nice shoes.”

She beamed and Desai started explaining the transbulators while I tried to figure out how I could get her to give up her marsman.

Suddenly, the aft door burst open and who else but Basher himself ran through, tripped, straightened himself and gasped, “Escalon has made a declaration!” He panted, his hands on his knees, and looked at us. “He’s resigning!”

I couldn’t see what the big deal was, but Toshi immediately ran out, so I followed her. We ran all the way down the corridor, and walked briskly after that, and took the elevator to the recreation level, which housed the mess, and some lounges and gaming rooms. The elevator was empty except for one middle-aged woman, who I think was called Mrs. Tan, and worked in Compliance.

She stepped back respectfully when we entered, and gave a timid smile. Neither she nor Toshi spoke a word for the next ten seconds, as the elevator made its way upward, but both had the same expression on their faces, an intense, fervent look, with a mad excitement in their eyes, and by the time we exited I was quite spooked.

It was worse in the mess. The room was packed, and every holovision in the place was playing the news, and at least six different channels were airing, all loudly and together. The people, standing shoulder to shoulder and foot to foot in the hall, with more entering every minute, were listening. Intently and quietly. There were a few pockets of boisterous sound, I could hear Gustav hooting somewhere, but mostly they were silent, their faces anxious and excited at once, and you could feel an energy in the air that I can’t quite describe. Something like the coming of a storm when you are at sea, but not quite, nothing poetic, and quite unique - the feeling when a large number of people are thinking about exactly the same thing and know that they are, and are agitated.

One of the screens changed to show a short, stout man, with close cropped hair thinning in the front, a strong jaw, thick eyebrows and deep set eyes. He wore black, with a deep, dark sapphire design down one side. He was Cado Escalon, and there was a flurry of calls to mute the other sets as his address was repeated once more on this channel.

“... events of the past few days have convinced me that this government no longer has the interests of the Jovian people in mind,” said he in a brisk and powerful voice. “This government is no longer our government. I have always stood for the rights of the people of Ganymeda and Callista“ – I had never heard either word before – “and I thereby feel compelled to now resign my position as member of the colonial parliament. I cannot abide by a law which says that the bravest of our people are criminals.” He paused and looked dead into the camera. “And I cannot allow it.”

If it was another, more sympathetic writer, you might have read that in that moment he felt a solidarity with his fellow shipmen, his fellow Jovians, that he believes he will never forget. A feeling of warmth and fuzziness, a thudding of the heart, and so on. I, though, just felt very queasy.

Before it was even over another channel began the speech again, and people immediately shifted their attention to that one and watched it again. The noise slowly grew, and now the newscaster’s analysis of these ‘alarming developments’ was booed and jeered. I left since I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

There were more people entering and some of them were eager for discussion but I avoided them, and made my way to the pool that, as might be expected, was wonderfully empty. I practiced my starfish stroke and lay staring up at the ceiling, wondering what I should feel.

The rest of the day passed strangely, almost in a daze. I don’t know how many others felt the same way but I did notice several others walking, or sitting quietly, their faces thoughtful and their eyes looking at the people around them in long, slow glances. I avoided company, as I usually do when I suspect people will want to talk, but I couldn’t help a sudden, strong desire to have people around me, and not be alone. I walked around the corridors, giving an impression that it was an inspection, which stopped people from bothering me, but allowed me their presence.

Everyone seemed affected, a good number were quiet and unsure, but many were feverishly excited. Toshi and Gustav were amongst them, though Toshi kept it under wraps since she probably thought it was improper to do otherwise. Even Porridge didn’t seem his usual Buddhist self, and was frowning to himself as he shaved himself with a cleaver in the kitchen. I didn’t stay long.

What had everyone on edge was, of course, that it wasn’t over. It was a beginning, not an end, and there was a feeling of a collective indrawn breath that was waiting to be exhaled. The news was checked obsessively, I myself checked it every ten minutes for at least

three hours, and the newscasters were not getting popular with their audience as hour after hour passed and there was a lot of repeated analysis but no new news.

Nothing happened the entire day. By the evening I gave orders to reduce speed to a minimum so that our connectivity would last longer. It was a major decision since any change of momentum meant a waste of fuel and had to be duly recorded and audited and required my express authorization and verification lock.

Ten in the night, as I was in my quarters with some cinnamon ice-cream I'd procured from Porridge and watching her Highness paw her reflection, the phone rang. I was on my feet before I'd turned it on, and had switched on the HV almost before Toshi's voice rang out.

"It's happening! It's happening! It's happening!" came her squeal and the set threw out an image of a dark alley, barely lit by the mellow golden light which New Chicago uses for its streets at night.

People were slowly congregating at a junction behind a group of persons at the head of who was a stout long-coated figure with his hands in pockets.

"Here we see," gushed the newscaster, "that the people of New Chicago are responding to the summons of popular leader Cado Escalon, who today morning resigned from his position of opposition leader in the American Colonial Parliament."

The view shifted to show the classical façade of the building down the street. "Mr. Escalon has apparently set his goal as the court jail, where Solomon Khan and the lava star Zoomer are being held till their trial is formally concluded. Though Mr. Escalon has made no statement to the press since the one in the morning, it is assumed that he means to free the..."

The phone rang again, loudly, a different tune which indicated that it was a satellite beamed call. I jumped, and lost the end of that statement. I switched it on, frowning as McTaggerty's voice crackled in.

"It's 'appening, me mann, it's 'appening!"

"So I heard," said I and increased the HV's volume.

"...as we can see, though there is a strong police presence, they don't..."

"They're doing nutthing! Aye! Nutthing at orl! Look at them!"

"I am. I'm looking at them. Shut up."

The camera panned slowly over row after row of blue-clad officers, standing blankly by their vehicles. The crowd had grown to quite a size. Escalon was looking around.

“He’s going to start,” came Toshi’s whispered voice.

“You’re still on the line?” said I.

“G’evening Toshi,” said McTaggerty.

“...and Mr. Escalon has started walking. As expected he is marching down the street towards the court prison. The crowd is following. The police are not stopping them.”

I stared at the screen, as I believe did countless others. You might have as well. Do you remember it? Escalon at the head of that column, walking slowly, deliberately. The walls wearing their shadows, the police fringing the road. The dim, glowering light. And slowly, the chant rising.

“Ganymeda. That is what they are saying. Ganymeda.” And then the newscaster felt silent as well, just as my other companions had. The sound became the focus, and the camera shifted to show Escalon. His eyes looked straight ahead, and his face was set. There was no heroism in his expression, just certainty, and the chant grew ever louder behind him.

The crowd stopped at a short distance from the building, and he and the line of his party members carried on forward. A small part of me wondered how they managed that so seamlessly.

“Mr. Escalon has reached the building. The guards are stepping aside. One of them is opening the door. They are not allowing the press to get any closer but as we can see Mr. Escalon and two other JNP leaders have entered the prison, accompanied by a guard. Three other JNP members are still outside with the crowd. They have been identified as Ms. Ayadali, Mr. Joseph James and Ms. Durrani.”

The newscaster started on their histories but those were nothing remarkable, and the camera slid around over their faces and then over the crowd and then back at the door of the building past which we were not allowed to see.

“Whut’s ‘appening?” whispered McTaggerty.

“He’s gone inside to get them,” whispered back Toshi.

“Why arren’t they allowing the caamera inside?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ro?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is yer family dere? Are they alright?”

“They are in Earth. Bro’s in the Space City.”

“Ai wasn’t arsking ye. Ai know where yer family is. Ai was arsking Toshi.”

I sighed and sat down heavily on my bed. I wondered what the others in the ship were doing. Were they jubilant? Were they shocked? Were they raising toast, or gaping open-mouthed, or pondering the circumstances. Were they alone or huddled together? What would they do once this was over? Would they sleep? Stay up talking and drinking?

It’s a strange thing to consider. So many lives, all reacting to the same event.

Toshi said she was sure her family was fine, and though her boyfriend was involved with JNP he could take care of himself. McTaggerty said he had a nephew in Callisto. They started talking about their families and about the JNP and I sat with eyes opened wide, and staring at the screen while a cold uneasiness spread through me.

I hadn’t seen it coming at all you see. I hadn’t even imagined it. I had never bothered with politics or even much with the news. My head is a nice place to stay, and stay there I did, and to suddenly find my life invaded like this without having the slightest clue beforehand was a frightening thing. Perhaps those of you who are dreamers know this feeling.

Suddenly there was a movement in the crowd and the cameras immediately zoomed in and the newscaster interrupted his thoughts on why Mr. Joseph James might keep his collar buttoned.

“Now we are seeing a sudden spurt of activity in the crowd. It seems that some people were carrying torches in bags, and here we can see that they are now distributing these torches in the crowd. The torches seem to be neon sticks of some kind, they appear to be quite harmless. Every person in the crowd is been given one. They are not being lit yet. Also, if you notice towards the back, we are actually seeing more people join. The people of New Chicago can be seen coming in from all the side streets, a slow trickle still, but it does seem to be just the beginning.”

“It’s rrevolution!” cried McTaggerty.

“It’s curiosity,” said I quietly, as the camera focused on the incoming stream.

The original crowd was Escalon’s own. Arranged and organized, just as the police were. The people joining them now were what we would have been had we been in New Chicago then. Some supporters, others just there for a look. Some enthusiastic, some excited, some perhaps feeling a pleasant tingle of nervousness and adrenalin.

A roar went up from the crowd and the camera panned and focused on the entrance where Escalon had now appeared. He took a few steps forward, and following him where Khan and Zoomer and the two JNP leaders. They spread out on each side of him and the roar strengthened. The newscaster started talking but I didn't notice. Zoomer stood at Escalon's right and took a step or two forward again. She had her hair down, unlike her usual upstanding fashion. Her face had no makeup, except perhaps accentuation for the dark circles under her eyes. She wore white, a long flowing dress, and she looked beautiful. The camera suddenly pulled back and the crowd now had their torches lit, holding it to their breast or above their head.

"She's going to sing," said Toshi.

And sing she did. An old song, one of those wandering, lilting songs of the earliest settlers, about the wonder of looking up at the looming, red presence of Jupiter, of how it glowed in the night and shone in the day. Of the countless moons that spiraled through the night, and of the lava flowing below the ice, and making tendrils of gold appear on the grey brown surface. A song of Ganymede and Jupiter in their primal glory, before man built his meager, uncomfortable cities and turned poetry to prose.

She sang it beautifully, the song of her lifetime, and for the first time I realized how lovely her voice was, how deep and powerful and silken, like a panther's coat.

And when the song was over there was silence for a few moments and then a great cheer went up and Escalon and Zoomer and Khan descended the steps and the crowd engulfed them, the cheer redoubling, and Zoomer could be seen lifted on shoulders a few seconds later.

The camera work got confused, not knowing now what to focus on. For a moment, it rested on one of two men who'd accompanied Escalon inside. He was a tall, lanky old man, looking much like a scarecrow with his broad brimmed hat, and he looked straight at the camera with a strange look. Like that of a fox.

Then the camera returned to Zoomer's face, her hair tumbling across as she was carried around, her hands outstretched and her face shining.

"She's beautiful," said Toshi softly.

"Aye," said McTaggerty. "Aye, she is that. Whut d'ye say now eh? Ro? I'nt she magical? What d'ye say now?"

I gazed at the screen. She was laughing. She was very beautiful. "I know why the cameras weren't allowed inside," said I.

"Aye? Why? Why waeren't de?"

"For the song," said I, lying back slowly. "For preparation."

I reached back and fluffed my pillows up, and propped my head against them, and though I didn't know it at the time, I started to get very angry.

3.

The rest of the night the news showed interviews of various people who had been part of that crowd. All of them expressed enthusiastic support for Escalon, and pledged that they would never allow Zoomer and Khan to be kept in jail and generally mentioned how wonderful they thought them to be.

After a while McTaggerty signed off, since there is a limit to what even he can reclaim. Soon after, Toshi left as well, probably to share the experience of Jovian pride with those more appropriate.

I watched for a while, and then tried to sleep, though without much success. Most of the night I tossed and turned, and once when sleep deigned to cover me, her Majesty, who had been absent the entire evening returned and dug in her little claws once again with great affection. As endearing as any princess, as you can see.

As usual I was woken by Toshi's call. I stumbled up, expecting further happenings, but supposedly everyone concerned was unavailable for comment.

"Compliance wants a meeting of the management staff held though," said she.

Pained groaning sound. "About what?"

"About compliance."

Creaking of bones. A yawn. "But after yesterday?"

"Work must go on, sir." Stern stentorian tones. "We must think of precedent."

I thought of my bed. It gazed at me invitingly. "Channel 32," I croaked and the HV blared to life.

"...unavailable for comment but we have confirmed that Mr Khan and Ms Zoomer are presently guests at Mr. Excalon's home. The Commissioner of Police and the Governor have also been noticeably absent..."

"I see your point," said I with a sigh. "Two hours then, and we can have your compliance meeting."

She signed off pretty briskly and I wondered if it was the newfound pride working already. Bad habits those.

I made myself some coffee and served her Majesty breakfast and sat down. I regarded my coffee and yesterday. I wished I had sunlight. Mornings are horrible without sunlight. I thought of Escalon. I thought once again of Tre' Romano. I thought of Gustav and

Zoomer and Toshi and the thin, old man who looked like a fox. I thought of Khan and of the Americans watching their sets yesterday. It had been a great show. Even the most patriotic American wouldn't be able to fault their faraway city's denizens for their disturbance.

I wondered how it would have been if the situation had been different, if it had been more chaotic. It often is and can't help being, as history will attest. What if, suppose, some younger members of the JNP had felt compelled to act on their own? Not unlikely perhaps if Escalon hadn't moved for a couple more days. What if they had not his sophistication? If they spent their effort in pelting stones through windows and setting fire to vehicles? My own countrymen delight in such proclivities. What if it led to a riot, and the police had not been so well advised? What would their distant brothers and sisters think then? What would Escalon have done then, if things hadn't been so neat?

I was rinsing my mouth when the answer hit me, and I think I must have stood a good minute or two with my cheeks blown out and cleaner trickling past the edge of my lip as I pondered its significance. You see, what I figured was that Escalon would have done the same thing, no matter what the stake was, no matter even what he actually thought of the situation. When politicians stake their entire status on an ideology, and a situation arises where it is under fire, they have no choice but to defend it. If they don't, they will lose all respect, all credibility, all that is currency in their trade, all that they have ever worked for. No matter how dangerous, how suicidal or how silly it is they have to stand by it. Completely intelligent people might thus lead the most idiotic movements, a situation that every history student might have sometime wondered about. Heroes might find themselves rising to occasions that they had perhaps thought to be quite safely impossible.

I shudder, even now, to think how much of history might be based on this little personal dilemma.

I exercised for a little while, something I did every month or so in the optimistic hope of one day developing large and powerful muscles. After that I took a lovely long hot shower since that is the true essence of civilization and followed it up with a steaming apple danish.

Feeling thus fulfilled and content for the moment I tucked her Highness into my arms and hopped downstairs to Compliance. We keep them in the bottom floors, just above IT and the engines, since it really gets their goat. The meeting was in a large room that was not very aptly named St. Petersburg. All meeting rooms in Macauley-Yang are named after cities, a brilliant decision that causes splendid mix-ups in more Earthbound offices.

I wasn't the last one in, surprisingly, and not at all befitting my dignity. I took my place at the head of the table, next to Ms. Polly, who was very pretty and had golden hair.

"Ooooh," squealed she. "It's your lovely lil kitty. Eeee...kitty kitty kitty...What was her name again? Orain? Oreiny?"

“Princess Orene Nightfall Indigo, King Elect of the Realm,” said I politely. “Orene means the 'Daughter of the Sky' in the cat's language.”

“Ooooooh...that's beautiful,” said she in gurgles. I liked Ms. Polly.

“And the sun is called Oratloh. It means Light of the Sky.”

She beamed most satisfactorily. I couldn't help noticing that everyone else was talking about Escalon. “And earth is called R'le,” continued I. “The 'R' being the word root for sky and 'le' from the word root for earth.”

She was going to say something but Gustav suddenly arrived and positioned himself behind my seat and interrupted her. “So!” said he with excitement, causing me to crane my neck. “He isn't so bad after all, huh? He didn't let us down after all!”

He seemed quite oblivious to what I actually had been talking about, primate that he was. In my rules a person who interrupts something without even knowing it is best avoided. I shrugged in what I hoped was a discouraging fashion. “It was a good show...”

“Damn right about that!” said he with a happy, moronic laugh. “Damn right!” And the fool actually slapped my back before going his way. I grimaced with distaste, but Ms. Polly seemed quite interested and her eyes followed his form.

“He's very handsome, isn't he,” said she in a half sigh and I immediately lost my affection for her.

“Just like my grandma, in fact,” I grunted.

She tittered, the stupid woman. “You don't like what Escalon did, sir?” she asked.

“I don't much care,” said I, a bit grumpily, knowing that I'd lost my audience.

“Oh,” said she. “You're apolitical.”

“No, Ms. Polly. I'm not apolitical, I'm just disinterested.” Gustav's corner of the table erupted in hurrahs. I heard references to Zoomer.

Toshi entered, looking nice in a slightly loose suit, and along with her came the Compliance Woman, looking fearsome in a mild-mannered way. I'd tell you her name but it's really more fun to call her the Compliance Woman since she loves being so. I'd never heard her say any sentence not related to her job, and being what it was that meant that in at least every two or three sentences she said 'compliance' once, or its derivatives. I shall illustrate.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, sir.” See how maliciously she separated me from the gentlemen. Anyway, here it begins. “Today _____ Compliance _____ very important _____ comply _____ standards.”

Complying

_____ Audit _____ requires _____ Report _____ Compliance _____ important to Macauley-Yang’s product portfolio of Offering Complete Solutions _____ Compliance Tools _____ intranet _____ Proper Documentation _____ Filing Standards _____ compliancy. _____ Corporate Strategy _____ Vision for the Future _____ New Paradigm _____ Complete Compliance.”

And so on. I spent my time scratching her Highness’ ears in order to survive. At some point Compliance Woman tried to catch me unawares and asked “Isn’t that so, sir?” but I, being highly intelligent, said “Yes, definitely!” without the slightest hesitation. I may have to pay for it later on, but you don’t get to my position without taking a few risks.

After a few thousand years it was over, and I was up and out of the room before she finished thanking us for our time. I asked Toshi for lunch, but she made some excuse. I understood well enough. She had gone to Escalon’s rallies. She would want to celebrate him in her conversations today. But we are fools, you and I, and when has understanding stopped us from anger, and I fumed about her as I packed some lunch and ate in my room and then took a stress-induced nap.

I woke up late in the evening, having overslept terribly, and the air-con had slid towards tundra temperatures. It’s strange how a nap of the right size after lunch can be so refreshing, and one over-extended can make your head feel like a gnarled stump with an axe sticking out of it.

I checked the news but there seemed to be no new developments. It was quite strange, as if the authorities were hoping the situation would disappear if they ignored it just right. I couldn’t help feeling it was the wrong thing to do. Escalon had broken the law very clearly and publicly. There would have to be some action taken against him. Perhaps he would have to be arrested. The more time they gave people to rerun his histrionics before that, the more trouble there’d be.

I think now though that I was too harsh in my judgment. I think its possible they knew what would happen better than I, at least till a point, and how inevitable it was, and were, quite sensibly, too panic-stricken to do anything.

My thoughts were fleeting ghostly things though, soon lost from my fog-ridden mind. I tramped to my mirror to set my hair and stood there looking at myself. Behind me was a window and stars trickled past, like raindrops lit by neon. Drizzling stars. Drops of diamonds.

It struck me that it had been such a very long time that I'd been in the rain.

The memory assaulted me.

Drops hitting skin, mouth, eyes. Rain in the air, rain on the earth, rain on grass. Smell. Dark skies. Cold wind through your clothes, your hair. Feet in warm puddles. Heat from the road. Dancing surfaces of water.

It had been so long. I remembered it though. It used to feel like I owned the world.

I am not a beautiful person, though there was a time when I was young enough to think that I am. It is understandable. I am not ill featured, and youth is brash. No more though. Many women have through the years educated me on this matter. Some of them were beautiful, some were just idle, some I'm sure thought they were being very witty, and most quite liked me. Anyway, I no longer think I am overly attractive. My shoulders are too small. I am not tall enough. My hair is too scraggly, my face too round. As such I am fairly sure of not being too picturesque a sight in the rain. But somehow, it didn't feel like that.

I don't know why I remembered that suddenly, with a deep, powerful urge, but I found myself loading my favorite storm simulation. I had taken it myself, during my third year in university, where I had almost never missed a chance to rainwalk. My holocorder had never worked again, but it was one instance of technological suicide that I didn't regret. A heroic death is not to be mourned; especially if it isn't yours.

I set the projector in the centre of the room, and set the ambient light accordingly. I switched it on, and the images swam out. Grass spread beneath my feet though I could still feel the carpet beneath my soles. Trees appeared around, and leaves materialized, shaking and dying in an unfelt wind. Raindrops began to fall, all of a sudden, an army of water, and I stared at them, at their pattern and wished I could feel them on my skin and face and mouth.

Suddenly I got one of those flashes of brilliance that bring about minor near-death experiences. It occurred to me that if I could get the projector near my shower and project into it, then I could have my rain. It seemed perfect at the time. I was congratulating myself on bettering even Firmament[®], and feeling intensely clever. I always do when I'm carrying on something like this. Needless to say it didn't work.

I am not going to divulge details, for I believe honesty to be appropriate only in amounts, but there was stretching and slipping involved, as well as fire alarm sprinklers. In the end

I got my water droplets but accompanied by the uncomfortable wetting of my carpet and some odd looks.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, both within and without. The powers that be in New Chicago kept absolutely mum, and I once again spent my time in fruitful pursuits on the fading internet.

I made a mess of my sleep as usual, and when it was time to wake up the next morning I had slept for only four hours and my mood was black. I remembered Ms Polly and Romano and Gustav and Escalon and nothing else, and felt quite irrationally and equally angry at all of them. At the time I could think of no reason for my displeasure, but neither could I will it away. It is something that happens to me often, and exists in increasing amounts for a few days till I sit down and sort it out. This time however the answer was fated to find me.

I actually did work that morning, though slowly and listlessly, since I was too irritated even for entertainment. I finished the initial reports that Toshi had plonked on me and then wrote a host of memos that I hoped would ruin many a day, and even indulged in the mysterious art of trend analysis.

There was still nothing new from Ganymede and we, the audience, were starting to get restless. I kept the news constantly running in the background, along with music, while I worked, but to no avail. Such was the effect of this dawdling that Toshi even condescended to have lunch with me, but I refused in order to make one of those points that people feel like making once a while.

I ate something that could have equally been spaghetti or noodles and thought unhappy thoughts.

Sometime after lunch had passed, my computer crashed. I had been trying to stop myself from dozing off by checking out pictures uploaded by amazingly talented photographers who happened to be female and loved making themselves part of their art, so naturally I was quite upset. I called up IT immediately and told them to send someone in and promptly fell asleep.

An undefined amount of time later I was woken by the buzzer. I blearily opened my eyes and the door and stared vacantly as the woman I'd interviewed in Mars marched into the room.

“Good afternoon sir,” said she.

“Y-you,” said I.

“Robin Marquez, sir,” said she. “You remember? You interviewed me.”

I remembered. I was just not sure whether this was actually happening or was some sort of nightmare.

She looked at me, her eyes narrowing, and I decided if she lunged for my throat then it was safely unreal. Instead, she spoke.

“Ms Yamamoto said I had been hired by your express decision.”

“What?” said I, and corrected myself, “Yes, yes of course. You-you really impressed me with your...moral fiber.”

She glared at me quite openly now. I squirmed. “My computer’s crashed.” I pointed at it with a limp finger. Her eyes slid over to the machine and then returned to my face. She was wearing orange.

“You didn’t, did you,” said she in a cold and dangerous voice. “You didn’t hire me.”

“Sure I did,” said I valiantly. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

She put her hands on her hips and took a deep angry breath. I gave up. “Look, I leave these things to Toshi. She handles these. I...I do other important stuff.”

“What do you have against feminism?” said she tersely. She was standing in a power stance. I couldn’t help imagining her in a wrestling suit and it did nothing to ease my discomfort.

“Feminism?” said I. “Why nothing. Nothing at all. I have told you before, I have great affection for women. Very nice people, mostly, and they always remember birthdays.”

“Then is it me?” asked she, never letting up on the scowl. “You do have some problem with me. I can see that.”

“You?” I sighed. “No, no I have no problem with you. I was just bored. And I have nothing against feminism either. Nothing specific. I just...just...” I stopped. She waited. And to my greatest surprise I found myself speaking again. “It’s just that I get irritated by things like that. By causes. And everyone is so...so happy and busy and tangled up in their own world and they never seem to realize that it’s just as made up and silly as mine...and...and you’re all so serious about it...and...” And they could have their world. And I couldn’t have mine. And I was lonely.

But I didn’t say that. It was already too much. I needed alcohol.

She’d gone quiet now, probably out of bewilderment. I sighed again. The news was loud in the silence, still replaying analysis of the day before’s excitement. They could drag it for a year if need be. I turned towards the set since I’d had enough eye contact for a while.

“Look,” said I. “I’m sorry...if I vexed you. You don’t need to worry about the computer right now. Do you know much about Ganymede?”

“N-no,” said she.

“You should find out about it. It might be important.”

“Yes sir.”

“Thank you.”

She took the cue and wished me good day and made her exit. I gave Toshi a call.

“Hallo,” she chirped.

“Are you crazy?” I screamed. “Are you mad? Do you want to kill me?”

“What? What happened?”

“You hired her? The feminist wrestler? By Jove, what’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, Robin.”

“Yes! Yes, Robin! Dear ol’ Robin. What, please tell, is Robin doing on my ship?”

“You said I could hire whoever I wanted.”

“She’s a wrestler. I’m politically incorrect. We are stuck inside a spaceship. It’s murder Toshi! Are you understanding this?”

“Look, you were horrible to her. What if it was her first interview? She could have completely lost her confidence.”

“Oh c’mon! She looks stalwart enough, doesn’t she? She can take life’s little knocks.”

“Well, sir, I thought so could you.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Sir, I’m a bit busy. I’ll talk to you later.” Her voice had got distinctly colder. I began to wonder if I needed to cajole her a bit more, fatten up the pig, so to say. Truth is though she is probably always like this, and I just notice it when I’m upset.

I decided that I very definitely needed alcohol. I traipsed down to the galley, determined to obtain some, though I was quite dispossessed of Porridge's promised gift as the situation lay.

As expected, he gave trouble.

"I don't have any. Only the lounge serves alcohol," said he with a sniff, his eyes streaming as he chopped onions.

Seeing him thus vulnerable gave me a bit of a fillip. "You have a stack of wine, Jones. I know you do."

"I don't know what you are talking about," snuffled he and wiped his eyes with a mighty sleeve.

"Listen, Porridge," said I, taking a deep breath, "you may be creepy and scary and alarmingly good with knives, but I can assure you it will be less trouble to you to give me a bottle than not."

That I thought was pretty impressive, but most of his attention was taken by the onions and he didn't seem to have been listening much. I was about to rephrase when my eyes fell on the HV set behind him and I saw Escalon being hurried into a police vehicle.

"Volume higher," I cried and Porridge whipped around and wept like a man as the set came to life.

"We are witnessing the arrest of Cado -----was in his house along -----
----an and Zoomer. They ----- have also been put un-----st. The...."

"What's happening? Why's it breaking up?" said he, sniveling violently.

I stared at the screen and sighed. "We're losing connectivity." I gave him a look. "Why are you chopping onions manually, Jones?"

"It builds resistance," he muttered.

I didn't question further, and gave Toshi a call instead. Her voice was shaky.

"You're at your office?" asked I.

"Y-yes sir."

"Tell everyone to use only voice for their news. We don't have enough bandwidth otherwise."

"Yes sir."

“Do it now, please.”

“Yes sir.”

I hung up and watched the screen, waiting. Presently it became smooth again as everyone else freed their bandwidth. Obedience is lovely sometimes.

The picture showed the police chief of New Chicago as he did a fair impression of a drowning man.

“Yes. Yes Mr. Escalon will be prosecuted. What? No, I do not answer for the conduct of those policemen. Wha-young lady that is not correct. I’ll have you know I was in hospital for the last four days. Yes, I was actually sick! What kind of question is that? Next, please. Yes, you sir. Yes, yes we have every intention of carrying forward with this. No, no let me clear this up right now, the law does not differentiate between – what? What charges?” The camera, almost with premonition, focused on his face. The poor man was quite red, and sweating profusely. His eyes were bleary, he looked old. Quite accidentally he looked at the camera, and said the worst thing he could have ever said.

“Insurrection. He is charged with spreading insurrection. Now –“

But he got no further. The press erupted with questions, and the unfortunate man was completely overwhelmed. He retreated, much harried, with the police holding back the press. I couldn’t help wondering if Escalon got to watch this.

The cameraman and presenter got lost in the crowd so the view sneakily shifted to the newsroom. A well-dressed woman and a man with swirls of grey hair looked grim.

“Mr. Ahoy, the Police Commissioner of New Chicago has issued a statement that Cado Escalon has been arrested for spreading insurrection. Mr. Khan and Ms. Zoomer have also been re-arrested and will now face charges of insurrection above their previous charges. Earlier we saw the arrest of Mr. Escalon, when police entered his house. Mr. Escalon appeared to provide no resistance, and was seen being hurried into the police transport. Ms. Zoomer though was seen struggling violently against the police.”

A clip of the incident started showing Zoomer rearing back against one policeman to deliver a kick in the stomach of another, her arms thrashing on either side. Her words were blocked out but the general gist could be gleaned from watching her face. Finally the men managed to pin her arms and legs and proceeded to carry her away. The voice came back on and we were treated to a defiant bawling of ‘My Freedom, My Ass’.

The newsroom returned and began repeating the same thing and I grew disinterested. Things had obviously not started happening yet, though I could see they would.

“I’ll be going to my room,” said I.

Porridge turned from the HV towards me, his beefy face set. “I have some whisky.”

I nodded. “It’ll do.”

I got drunk then, that late afternoon, while the world spiraled and danced in strange twirls. Then I slept, after promising her Highness that I would never let anyone hurt her, ever, and that I would see to it that she was restored to her parents and her throne.

I woke around ten in the night, strangely alert, and switched on the news. Her Majesty was curled up in her basket, her tiny furry belly rising and falling in soft breaths. In New Chicago, there was uproar. The reaction had been even stronger than anticipated. The Church of Jove had declared it as outright evil, and the JNP claimed the arrest was an insult to the people of Ganymede and the government that made it was treasonous. There was already a crowd protesting outside the police headquarters and boots had been thrown at the windows of some posts. Another crowd was gathering outside the governor’s office, this one armed with slogans and poster boards.

The connection was really breaking up now, and you couldn’t get more than sound reception, even with everyone promising they didn’t have their video on. I began to worry about this. A bit farther from Mars and our connection would be lost completely. Three weeks without any inkling of what we were heading for was a painful proposition to contemplate. To think that it was just a few days back when I had been standing under Firmament[®] in lovely Lavender and proclaiming the uselessness of news. Hadn’t I said that bad, humbling things were coming?

Things were going to get worse, I could see that now. I know that much about people. I know that they spend most of their lives getting bored, all of the time just waiting for an adventure, a mission, a cause. And if by pleasant chance they can find one, they will take any discomfort upon themselves to fulfill it, and the worse it gets, the warmer and purer they will feel. That’s what happens when creatures designed and evolved to kill and survive discover the wonders of orderly work distribution.

I knew this girl in university, for example, who had read everything and had a galaxy of interests and should by rights have known what money can do for her. Instead she claimed that she didn’t care for wealth at all and would rather sink every credit she had to join charity work. And I remember one day she had been ranting over the stupidity of some religious protests without the slightest inkling that those people and she had exactly the same reason for their actions, and that their respective beliefs were just a matter of circumstance. I don’t remember if I told her that. We didn’t remain friends long though, so I might have.

So, you see, I thought I had a fair idea of what was coming. Protests would increase, strikes would spread and it wouldn’t stop till this government was toppled. The American Parliament would have to repeal its little tax, and new provincial elections would have to

be held amidst some violence and finally the JNP would be voted into power in New Chicago for the very first time. I think most people at the time had the same picture in mind.

We were wrong of course, but that's beside the point. What occurred to me was that the whole shebang was going to take some time, a month or two at least, and things were definitely going to get worse before they got better. If in this time of chaos and violent uncertainty I was to return to Mars in order to protect my organization's assets and cargo, who in their right mind could fault me. Lavender would be the logical choice, since it was after all the nearest headquarters. And there it was, suddenly blooming across my world, like a brand new shining dawn on Firmament[®].

A holiday!

And not just any holiday, but a month long paid vacation in dear old Lavender. I might even go traveling. I might finally see Tharsis, and the Mariner's valley, and watch the Amazing Martian Pole-dance. Hope flooded over me for the first time since I'd thought of *Galactic Pussy*.

It was a brilliant idea. I couldn't see any way it could fail, which just shows how Fate plays us for fools. Anyhow, at the time the only obstacle I could see was of timing. The real trouble could only be expected to start slowly, and before that we may lose our connectivity. Yet, if I did not order a change of direction before that, it would become much more difficult to justify, since I would be unaware of the new developments. I thought long over this, ruminating, with her Majesty for company, until I decided I would change direction tomorrow itself, if all went well. Hopefully there would be some further disturbance before that, and even if there was not, there was bound to be some by the time we returned to Mars.

It was a tremendously cheering thought, and I was so happy that I promptly managed to fall asleep again, and dreamt of happy things, of wings, and people made of water.

I woke up early next morning, bright and fresh, and when I checked the news - lo and behold, things seemed to be going my way. There had been sporadic rioting in New Chicago, and some police action. Three people were in hospital. In Lavender, the Catalans had won a week of their weather.

The key, I knew, was to convince Toshi. She ran the ship, and if she was on your side, you could do pretty much what you wanted. No one would ever deny her, except me sometimes. That had always been the secret of my continuing livelihood.

I made my way to my office and called Toshi over, and prepared myself for some tact. I composed my face into a concerned and grim expression, read through some tragic tales of starving children, and ruffled my hair to an untidy mess. I felt ready.

When she arrived though, I was a bit taken aback. She looked far worse than me. Her pretty face was haggard, and there were circles beneath her eyes.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“It’s horrible,” she said softly.

“Yes,” said I solemnly. “Yes, it is.”

“I can’t believe the police would do this. Three people are in the hospital.”

One of them might even be that Takano. I shook my head gravely. “Unspeakable.”

She nodded and pursed her lips and looked small. “So why did you call me?”

I took a deep breath. “Tosh,” said I, “I think we should go back to Mars. Things are going to get worse, and by the time we get there...” I paused. “There’s a lot of money in these shipments, and we’re accountable for it.”

Her eyes opened wide. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“We turn back now, and go to Mars. In two weeks it’ll be chaos in New Chicago. It won’t be a good idea to bring in the delivery then.”

She frowned and slowly sank into a seat. I leaned on the table next to her.

“Do you think it’ll get that bad?” asked she.

I looked down at her. Her eyes were wide and anxious. “I don’t know Tosh. But I’m worried. People are like that. When riots start, they never end with just a few small skirmishes. Either they don’t start.... or they stop only when a lot of blood flows.”

Her lips compressed, and her eyes fell. “I can’t believe it. In my own city. I can’t believe this happened.”

I twirled a little glass globe that sat on my table.

“What do you think will happen next?” asked she.

“If there is enough violence, then DSAA will probably dissolve the government and hold re-elections. The JNP will win, and Escalon will become the Governor.”

“I see.” Her fingers fiddled with each other. She looked up. “That’ll be good, at least.”

I gazed intently into her eyes. “Yes, but you see, all the rioting will be suppressed first. Otherwise, the government will look like its losing control.”

She swore in Japanese. “They wouldn’t do this if it was actually Chicago or New York.”

“Wouldn’t they? If there were riots? I think they would be even harsher. But this wouldn’t happen in New York or Chicago. There Zoomer would go to prison, and sell her records, and be out on bail two days later, and no one would think of it further.”

She sighed and slumped in the chair. “Well, I suppose we could ask head-quarters what they want us to do.”

I stiffened. I’m ashamed to say I hadn’t seen that coming at all. That’s how happy I’d been with my scheme. I wasn’t prepared however, to be thwarted so easily. I leaned forward.

“What do you think Tosh?” said I, earnest as a virgin. “Do you think they can take a correct decision on this one? Do you think they have any idea of how bad this can get? They won’t have any idea of how important Escalon is. It’s going to cost fuel after all. That’s all they will think about.”

Perhaps I overdid it, for she frowned slowly and looked at me. “You’re scared,” said she softly. “You’re scared to go back.”

My eyebrows rose, and then I controlled myself. “Yes Tosh,” said I, with a shake in my voice. “I am. I’m very scared.” I clenched my jaw and continued. “But I don’t think I’m wrong. That’s why they take people like me to manage these ships, you know, and not some dashing daredevil.”

“I-I suppose,” said she, rubbing her temple with her dainty fingers and looking as perturbed as an unfed cat. Then she looked up at me with large eyes and I had to stop myself from hugging her tight. “It is going to get bad, isn’t it?”

I nodded, and managed to not console her. She sighed. “Do you think...people will die?”

“I hope not, Tosh” said I. “I hope not.”

Then she hugged me on her own, and my world was a nice place.

There was determination on her face as she left, and soon after, she grimly announced the course change to the crew, silenced Gustav, overrode Desai, and smiled sadly at various people till S76-IB7 fired its directional thrusters and did a large spatial tumble and ended up with its head where its feet had been and neatly facing back towards Mars.

I settled down pleased, aware of a job well done. I felt so cheerful that I didn’t even mind a bit of work. I hummed to the world while examining spreadsheets, and smiled benevolently at storage reports and legal papers. When I felt my enthusiasm lagging, I set

all my windows to screens of golden sky and thundered music from my speakers, and walked around my room while reading, and felt as if grass grew where my feet fell.

The day passed well. The situation in New Chicago grew worse quicker than expected, something that should have served as a warning of things to come, but I personally felt only elation at the time. For once, thought I to myself, the absolute idiocy of my fellow man may bring me profit. Gustav may charm all the women he likes, but his kind would provide me a holiday through their toil. Seems quite fair from my point of view, you'll have to agree, or if not fair then at least possessing a certain poetic neatness.

So when news came of further violence, of a mob clashing with the police, I exchanged grave nods with Toshi while secretly toasting her Highness' health, and thinking of a solemn speech to encourage our brave fools to lunge in thick head first.

In the night the JNP once again insisted that the government must be dissolved and my mother sent a rather anxious mail regarding her dear child's well-being. The dear child duly informed her of his robustness and further asked after her and father's health and happiness. He also refused to answer questions about what he was eating and whether his nails were cut based on the fundamental right of human dignity. He assured them of his distance from New Chicago, and mentioned how he was returning to Mars till this rolled over. She would surely appreciate such good sense from the apple of her eye.

Then, having performed these filial duties, I drank another couple of pegs of the whiskey, saw a movie about giant robots who just wanted to lead a happy rural life but were forced by the government to fight as soldiers in terrible wars, and then fell happily to sleep. I dreamt of dim sum.

The next day I woke up early, around seven, and lay on my bed for a while, looking at the stars fall by. I set my windows to early morning and got up and walked about the room idly. On one wall hung my wooden sword that I had bought when I'd found that the metal one cost twice my month's salary and needed a licence. It had been love at second sight. I carefully took it down and proceeded to swing it around wildly and stopped only when her Majesty shrieked and ran under the bed.

I dealt with my computer next. My brother had left me a video message sometime in the wee hours of the morning. It showed him waving cheerfully and telling me to not die if I could help it. He had a bowl of cornflakes in his hands and a beautiful girl in the background. I decided I could reply later.

I was checking the news, reading some of the analysis that had been so sincerely penned and which in hindsight seem like such a joke, when suddenly breaking news flashed across the screen, a strip of letters that made even my skin prickle and my hair stand up.

The army had been called in.

I tried to switch on video streaming and route it to my larger holo screen but my computer took that opportune moment to crash again. Nothing I did, which I admit was not much, would get it to work. I jumped and yelled and slammed the input pad and cursed that Mexican menace of a woman and called up Toshi.

“Y-yes, sir,” said she groggily.

“Toshi the army’s been called in. My system’s crashed. Get up.”

“Oh my god! You’re joking!” she cried and I could hear hurried rustling of sheets. The next second came the sound of the HV and a gasp. “Oh my god!” she repeated.

“Get decent Tosh, I’m coming there. Say goodbye to any company you’re entertaining.”

She didn’t tell me to go to the mess instead. She didn’t say she hadn’t any company either, but I think it can be assumed in my favor.

I put on my regal looking housecoat and my bunny slippers and padded to her room. I thank my century most for its auto-carpeting solutions and its efficient lil’ cleanybots, which now form a multi-billion credit industry and deserve to, as they allow bunny slippers to go almost anywhere.

I reached her room and knocked before entering, since I needed her to be happy with me, and waited patiently till she bade me to enter. She was wearing soft pink pajamas with silver stars drawn on them. I took a deep breath.

“You’re up early,” said she with a tight little smile.

“Couldn’t sleep,” said I. The HV was alive with pictures of marching soldiers and at the sight of it I fell quiet. A transport ship made a landing on Ho Chi Minh Avenue, two lanes away from one of my favorite restaurants. Against the HV projector rested a large soft toy of a grizzly bear.

Toshi watched wordlessly as soldiers were shown enforcing curfew. There seemed to be little protest and hardly any people, but then it was still early morning. I sat myself on her bed. It had lilac and cream covers. The corner of my eye spied the marsman lying in one corner, propped up against a side table.

After a while, nothing new seemed to happen. I looked about the room. Toshi came and sat beside me. Her shoulders were slumped.

I watched her as she sat quite still. “It’ll be alright,” I said quietly.

She turned to me, her face tilted up. I sighed. “He’ll be alright,” said I, “if he has any sense. And your family has sense, I know, so they’ll be fine too.”

She nodded. After a few moments she asked in a little girl voice, “Why do these things happen?”

I could have told her. I could have told her it was because of Gustav, all the Gustavs everywhere, and the girl I knew in university, and because of Toshis attending rallies and Ros hating their jobs. Perhaps I could even have pulled her close to me and held her tight. But it wouldn’t have done. So I left instead, patting her shoulder as I went and casting a last look at the marsman.

My slippers flip-flapped on the carpet as I returned and I wondered if there were soldiers in Ganymeda right now, their footsteps keeping time with mine as they marched.

Once back I sent a mail to all my underlings, urging them to keep their faith and courage and to spend a few moments praying for our brothers and sisters back at home. This I followed with some research and found that though the best nightlife in Mars was to be found in Nacillé, the best value for money was probably in Sangkion, and if I could manage to stay till the end of the month, I would catch the start the tourist season and the bountiful supply of helpful women.

Now at this point I must pause my narrative for a while, to get your attention, my reader. You might have noticed that I have taken to somewhat ignoring your presence lately, but it is here that I must ask a bit more of your indulgence, while presenting my thanks for keeping me company for so long. You see, it is here that it happens, it is now, and the rest of the book and indeed my life will no longer be quite the same. Mind you I will not realize this so soon, and you will perhaps find amusement in my little blindness. Nonetheless, it will happen now, and the reason for this aside is that I am afraid. I have always thought of writing, you see, and have scribbles lingering all over, but this is the farthest I’ve ever got in a book, and this is the happiest I’ve ever been with the result, and I am unsure of what to do now. So much has been already written about it you see, about the Declaration of Jovian Independence. And yet to me, it happened so ordinarily, so simply. I was preparing to go to lunch, changing my shirt, humming a Sangkion carnival tune, and there it was. Escalon in the news, calmly delivering words that were to cause so much trouble to so many people, including yours truly. Words that he probably thought he would always be remembered by.

“We,” said he, leaning forward on the dais slightly, “the people of the Jovian Colonies, of Ganymeda and Callista, no longer agree to the dictates and laws of those who sit many thousands of miles away. We are not their people, and they are not ours. We hereby declare that we are a free and separate state, with the sovereign right to forge our own constitution and laws. The reasons for this step are well known and many, but it will suffice to say that our paths are no longer the same and thus we must diverge. We bear no ill-will towards our former governors, the Democratic States of North America and Africa, and hope that we can continue to enjoy a friendly and fruitful relationship with them, as with all nations and dominions of Earth.”

A small speech, hardly a few minutes long, his face betraying no emotion. There was a dumpy looking man standing by the side in uniform. General Pachon, I was to learn later, who had been invited to keep peace in the streets by the previous government and looked happy with himself.

So, what did I do, at this epic moment? Those of you who have been following carefully might see the pattern when I say I did nothing at all. I didn't feel roused or patriotic or excited, a little confused perhaps, since I couldn't see what the man expected to achieve. I couldn't believe he thought he would be allowed to get away with it. The last time anyone tried to secede from America was about three hundred years ago and led to war for seven years with more than a million casualties.

What I felt instead was gip, another word that I have made up since I live a significant portion of my life in its court. Gip is that wonderful feeling where you feel everything is absolutely meaningless and can't seem to rouse yourself to do anything whatsoever. It is probable that you know of it, since you have read this far. Or did you just find me amusing? Well, either way, I cancelled all thoughts of lunch and sat curled up atop the desk by a window and stared at space and her Majesty by turn and wallowed in gippiness.

Toshi called soon enough, and her voice was full of awe and disbelief and a good bit of panic. It is in times like this when I prove my quality.

"Calm down Tosh. Listen, calm down, get a drink. We will proceed as planned. See, it was a good decision, wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes I guess. I don't know. I can't believe it."

"I'm sure you're not the only one."

"What'll happen?" asked she, in a small scared voice, and I pressed my head back against the window.

"I don't think it's been decided yet. But whatever happens, it shouldn't really affect us. Don't worry."

There, you see? Blindness! Utter, blissful, ignorant blindness.

"Ok," said she, and there was a pause. "Can I come over?"

Now there was a pause from my end. "No Tosh," said I softly. "I need to think."

I didn't though. Or if I did, then I did so very slowly, and my thoughts were not lines but swirls and mists, like fog in a cavern. About half an hour later though I did rouse myself, and held her Majesty close while I sent an address to the crew informing them of our intention to continue as before. I kept it short, since I was feeling a bit embarrassed of my last mail now, and thought it best to make no comments.

It was only about two hours later, when I was almost asleep that an actual thought bubbled up through the bog of my consciousness. But ahh, when it did what a thought it was, and I saw my reflection in the window sit up and smile as the stars swam by.

Asylum. Like a glorious giant rising from the sea the thought reared up inside my head. If there was war, and I was in Lavender I could apply for asylum. In fact forget Lavender, I could try for it back on Earth itself. I might get it. There were not too many Jovians around, and not many Eartheners had ever been to Ganymede. It could happen. And if I could get residence in America, or India, then I was fairly sure I could use my experience with Macauley-Yang to get a new job.

It makes all the difference in the world, you see, the economy you are present in. Employees in Macauley-Yang in the leading countries in Earth get paid up to ten times what they get paid in Ganymede. Now I cannot apply to an Earthern job without residence, since it is precisely the residence that allows you to create greater value for the company so they pay you more, and while it is possible for Macauley-Yang to post me on Earth, it is unlikely. I don't work quite hard enough.

But if there is war, if I can get asylum, a whole new world of opportunity would open up. I could have rain again. I could have wet leaves and dew-drops, and sunlight and clouds and soft breeze. All those things that I should never have left. I could go to the beach. I could see lizards and squirrels and birds.

Her Majesty mewed, and nuzzled my arm, perhaps because she sensed my excitement, or more likely because she noticed my lack of attention. I scratched her tiny ears and picked her up and gazed into her eyes. "It could happen Princess," said I softly, tickling her chin with a finger. She sniffed and half closed those green embers. "We could be going home."

I tried to sleep again but so filled was my head with excited, jumping thoughts, and long unstirred memories that I couldn't. I always live slightly out of sync with the present, it's my way of coping, but now I regressed to all out reminiscing. After so very long I thought of my school, and the many people I'd known. My university, and the long, aimless walks that I'd spent most of my time taking. I thought of my parents when they were younger, and my brother when he resembled an overgrown toadstool.

I listened to a song about the eyes of a concubine, and tried reading about what had actually happened. The net was slow and the news was confused and vague, but the general consensus was that the good general had released Escalon after he managed his curfew. Some commentators were even brave enough to suspect that it was possible that had been the plan all along, and that General Pacho and Escalon had been colluding from the beginning.

I thought that was quite clever. It didn't matter much to me anyway.

Some time later, at the start of the evening, there came a call at my door. "Who is it?" asked I. I paused the scribble I was making of a huge eagle who was trying to pick up a paintbrush.

"It's me," came the answer. After a moment or two was added, "Gustav."

"Right. Please come in." I think this was the first time Gustav had ever called on my room. I could sense there was trouble coming.

He entered sheepishly enough, and glanced back out of the door once or twice.

"Is there someone with you?" asked I, frowning.

"Yes," said he with greasy smile. "Timo."

I continued frowning. "You know him?" said he, "From Accounting." I didn't, and I didn't think I'd want to. "He's a little shy."

"And I'm little busy, Gustav. There are so many new considerations. I'm sure you can understand."

"Yes, actually, that's why I wanted to see you." He walked to my desk, and stood with arms folded and shifted from foot to foot. "You're not really from Ganymede, right?"

"I'm really not, yes," said I, my voice cold. I couldn't think of anything good that could come out of this.

"Must have been strange for you, these last few days."

"If you're here for commiseration, I don't think you need to troub-..."

"I'm still trying to take it in myself," he cut in. "We all are."

"Great. I hope you shall have an enjoyable time do-..."

"We're free," said he, with a curious intensity in his gaze that really annoyed me. "Can you imagine? We're free."

I shifted on my desk, and faced him. "Really? I don't think I can. You're free? Free to do what, exactly?"

He ignored me, in the way that his kind have the ability to do. "How would it be? To step foot there now...at the very beginning of our new state, our new life?"

"That's meant as a rhetorical question, I guess. But since you asked, I think it'll be quite the same."

He paused his postulating and glanced at me, and looked a bit irritated. “There are many of us who’d like to try it for ourselves.”

My eyebrows rose. “Many of us wish we were nebulous monsters with pleasing tentacles. We learn to deal with it.”

“Look, what difference does it make to you. There’s no danger. You aren’t Ganymedan, you don’t understand...what this means to us...”

“Actually, I said some very similar things yesterday.”

“How do you even know this is what we’re supposed to do? We have to make this delivery, don’t we? This cargo needs to get to Ganymede, not back to Mars.”

You could see he was presidential material. But he should have considered his timing as carefully as I had, for though it had slipped my mind, the pendulum had swung, and I was quite sure that now headquarters wouldn’t mind me coming back at all. In fact, it had probably slipped their mind as well or they would have already ordered our recall.

“Fine,” said I. “You’ve convinced me.” I paused to see his face light up. “I’ll call up Mars this second and see what they want.”

His face fell and I smiled graciously. “Mephisto,” said I, as I jumped off the desk.

"What?"

“That’s my computer, it’s a real devil. Mephisto, set up a call to Macauley-Yang headquarters, Lavender. Subject – S76-Ib7 returning to Mars. Transcribe to log.”

Mephisto complied, behaving for once. There was a period of busy connecting, in which I stood around beaming and Gustav stood around squirming.

This was followed by a wheezy woman’s voice. “Is this Mr. Moniker?”

“That it is, Ma’am.” I gave Gustav a thumbs up. It was Ms Shekle, my boss’ boss. Her sons had left home many a year back and the look in her eyes when she saw me said she really wanted to bake me cookies. Women tend to do that. It’s the only talent I have with them.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Moniker? We thought you would have been out of range by now.”

“I turned around yesterday, Ma’am.”

“Yesterday?” I could hear a dry chuckle. “Good call.”

I could feel ovens warming and the smell of dough. “Thank you, Ma’am.”

“I take it you’re headed back?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Though some of the crew are expressing doubts.”

“Hmmm...no, I think it’s for the best.” There was a pause, and then she added in the sly old woman voice, “Though I do wonder that you didn’t confer with us before making your decision.”

What can I say? She’s a classy lady. “I’m sure you would have made much the same decision, Ma’am.”

There was a croaking laugh. “Yes. Yes, I think I would have.”

I gave Gustav a blithe grin. Cheerfulness is easy when you’re winning. “How’re things in Lavender, Ma’am? What do people think of the situation?”

“You’ll see soon enough when you get here. Satellite calls cost money, Mr. Moniker,” said she with what she probably wanted to be a stern voice, but she couldn’t help some motherly indulgence seeping through. I could see Toshi’s future quite clearly.

“Yes Ma’am,” said I. “Sorry. I’ll see you when I get there then.”

That pleased her. “Godspeed, Mr. Moniker,” said she and I had no doubt that her sons were going to get calls from mommy dear soon.

Gustav looked absolutely shattered, and I almost felt pity for the meager brains of the man. If he had actually hoped this would work in his favor then his expectation of what was going to happen to his precious Ganymeda was as deluded as Escalon’s.

Well anyhow, away he slunk and I ordered myself a large dinner. It was quite horrible of course, like anything else that is manufactured in our galley, but endorphins give flavor to the blandest food and I munched away with contentment.

Now, I have mentioned many times how Gustav is responsible for inflicting terrible disaster on me, and how he has a major part to play in this story. You may have been wondering about that, since so far, though irritating every time he appears, he has hardly been of consequence. Well, he is going to have his finest hour now, and if it seems unexpected, let me remind you of my warning. This book is about my life and it was hijacked quite unusually by the circumstances of freedom.

It happened in the morning, when I am at my most vulnerable. I’d had a good sleep and had made my way to my office. Her Majesty was still asleep, and didn’t seem to want to accompany me, so I’d left her behind in my room.

Toshi was not to be seen, and Ngyuen, who sat outside my room, was busy browsing profiles of Vietnamese singles, so it felt quite right to idle around on the net myself and search for photos of Zoomer without makeup.

Presently Gustav appeared at the door. I looked up at him, a bit surprised. He smiled widely and let himself in. Behind him was a giant of a man, so large that he dwarfed even Gustav. He had close-cropped hair and a bright red face. He bent his head to get past the door.

“This is Timo,” said Gustav. “From Accounting.”

“Ahh, the shy one,” said I, gazing with wonder. I hadn’t even known he was a part of my crew and he was about seven feet tall. “Hello, Timo. How are things?”

Timo smiled uncertainly, and got redder. I wondered how it would be if Gustav had an entire gang of giant noodleheads, amongst whom he himself was the chief source of wit and inspiration. It was a cheering thought, in a way.

“So why did you take Accounting, Timo?” asked I conversationally.

Timo hesitated for a moment and glanced at his friend. “I-I like numbers. And I like to keep things neatly. And...”

“We’ve decided we are going back to Ganymede,” cut in Gustav.

I sighed. “Is it about that again? Look Gustav, I think you’re taking the management part of management trainee too seriously. I assure you, you have no say in this matter.”

“We are not taking no for an answer.”

“Look, you dimwit,” said I, losing the little patience I had with him, “you heard the lady. It’s a no-go. So leave now, please. Go entertain yourselves. Arm wrestle if you have to. Or make up a national anthem consisting entirely of three letter words.”

He didn’t budge, and instead set his jaw and pulled himself up further. “We are unable to accept these rules. We no longer agree to your dictates,” said he stoically.

I groaned, and rubbed my temples. “I’m warning you both. If you continue this nonsense I’ll call Toshi and she’ll come and scold you and you know how horrible you’ll feel then. Timo, tell him!”

Timo was about to open his mouth but Gustav didn’t give him a chance. “The people want to go back!” said he.

“Well the people don’t own the ship,” said I in exasperation, and I admit I regret it to this day.

He put his hands on his hips and planted his feet apart and gave a heroic tilt to his jaw. "They do now," said he, in a way he had probably wanted to since he saw his first movie.

I stared at him uncomprehendingly, thus quite spoiling the moment he was trying to set up. "That makes no sense. Now go away, please."

"Just because you don't understand what it means doesn't mean it doesn't make sense."

"Learnt that from personal experience, did you?"

"Ro Moniker, the people are taking over this ship."

I was beginning to get alarmed. "A Marxist regime is not tenable on a commercial transport, Gustav," said I. "Or anywhere else, for that matter. Mephisto, call Toshi. Subject: Gustav's lost it."

Gustav motioned to Timo and the man moved to the door and deposited himself in the entrance. I began to feel physical danger. They were both so much larger, after all.

"Cut the call, Ro," said he.

"Toshi! HELP!" screamed I instead. He made a lunge for me from across the table but I sidestepped. "Toshi! He's attacking me!"

He circled the table and I circled with him, keeping the angle intact. "What's the conclusion you're hoping for, Gustav," said I, between pants. "This isn't a bar-fight. You're on my ship. Don't make it worse for yourself than it already is."

He grunted. I continued rapidly, "I may even be willing to forget all this if you don't actually hit me."

"Hey! What's going on?" came Toshi's voice from outside. Thank Jove her office was nearby.

"Toshi! Arrest them! Restrain them!" shouted I. "They're attacking me, Toshi! Hurry!"

"Timo! Let me go in," said Toshi sternly.

"No, Timo," cried Gustav. "Keep your position."

"Step aside, Timo," I pitched in, "Let them in, or your accounting career's over!"

Timo stiffened, and looked this way and that. I picked up a projector and waved it threateningly.

“What are you doing Gustav?” came Toshi's voice. There were now mutterings from outside, and more voices.

“We're going home, Toshi. We're taking emergency control of the ship.” He grinned at me, the bloody maniac. “We'll need you to tell the system to hand over control to me, Ro.”

“That seems to me to be a problem, not a solution,” said I coldly, with the benefit of a large table and an average projector in front of me.

“You won't do it?”

“Tosh! He is thinking about hurting me! I can see it in his face! Get in here!”

“Let her in, Timo,” said Gustav, straightening.

Timo stood aside and Toshi walked in, far slower than I would have liked. Her face was set in a frown, but there seemed none of the rigor that by rights should have been oozing out of her. She looked like an angry girl, not the headmistress in shining armor that I'd been waiting for.

“Why wasn't I told about this?” she asked quietly, and I gaped in bewilderment.

Gustav shrugged and Toshi glanced at me. “Everyone else knows.”

“What do you mean everyone?” asked I, a chill developing in my stomach. This was beginning to feel most surreal.

“The people,” said Gustav, with an Alexandrian smirk.

“Stop with the people, for God's sake! Keep the damn people out of this!”

I looked at Toshi and at Timo and back at Gustav. People were peeking in now. Toshi was quiet.

“You mean to say everyone is in with this lunatic?” The projector was beginning to feel less reassuring even as much of my worldview seemed to be getting validated.

“A lot of people want to go back to Ganymeda. They're afraid that soon it might become complicated.”

A lot of people seemed to have gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick, but that was unsurprising.

“It's still not correct, Tosh,” said I, with the vehemence of one who has found himself to be on the principled side for once. “This is company property.”

Toshi's delicate little jaw worked hard. Her eyes turned to Gustav. I wondered if she knew karate.

"I can't be a part of this, Gus," said she, gravely.

"Gus?" croaked I. "What do you mean Gus? Tosh?"

Gus' smirk grew even wider. "That's why we didn't tell you. Don't worry, I'm taking the responsibility."

I stared at them both, and then peered outside. Timo was standing sideways, and I could see several others behind him. None of them seemed about to rush in to the rescue.

I tried to think of some way to sneak a message through to Mars, but I wasn't getting any thinking room, and my brain came up blank.

"Ro," said Gustav, "you have to tell the system to pass emergency control to me."

"Or what?" said I. He wasn't the only patron of cinema.

Toshi stepped up to the table. "You're not going to hurt him, Gus."

"That was a sentence, not a question," I clarified. Better to not put faith on subtleties in such situations.

Gustav merely sneered. "Timo," he called out, "tell Basher to bring the cat."

"The cat?" said Toshi.

"My cat?" said I.

"Yes," said Gustav, and half of his mouth curled in a smile. "She is in our control."

"She is?" said I, my eyebrows rising. "Perhaps you can get her to fetch. I never could."

"We'll see who's making the smart remarks soon," said he. It is this very optimism that got his ancestors through the winters.

Basher rushed in, cradling her Majesty in his arms, and sweating most guiltily. The princess mewled with dignity and nuzzled against his arm.

Basher looked distraught, and supremely conscience-stricken. He was sweating profusely. It was so out worldly. A bunch of corporate flunkies trying their hand at glorified mutiny. They'd all lost their minds.

Toshi spoke. “Gustav, what exactly do you plan to do with the kitten?” Notice how cat became kitten even as she began to get more stentorian.

She stood in the power stance in front of Gustav. I focused my gaze on Basher, in an attempt to melt him into a puddle of shame.

“We shall do nothing,” said Gustav. “But we shall put her in a cage and not feed her till Ro agrees to co-operate.”

“Where will you find a cage?” asked I.

Gustav’s mighty brow creased, imbecile that he was. “We shall keep her in a room then. Either way, she’s our hostage.”

“Well, if it’s going to be your room, I’ll just warn you she’s in one of her shedding phases. Ask Basher.” I glanced at him with narrowed eyes, and his adam’s apple bobbed in contrition.

I decided this was the moment to act. The fool had given me a chance. “Well, if that’s all...” said I and started to walk away, giving Basher a pat as I passed. “Take care of her, kid. Keep a bowl of water or she’ll drink from the toilet and get sick. Remember, she’s a princess.”

The idiot’s lips started to tremble, and his eyes grew moist. I smiled sadly and walked on.

“Hey! Where are you going?” called out Gustav.

“To consider your proposal. And to repose. Mutiny is taxing from either side.”

I made it to the door before Timo stuck his arm out and barred my way. I could see the crowd outside. No one seemed to especially want to meet my gaze. It is such a strange thing that people actually do this; what possible difference could it make if they looked at me? I may wish to be able to shoot lightning through my eyes, but I can’t really.

“Timo, I am going to my room,” said I. “You might consider how it will be easier to restrain my communications there, instead of at the actual command center of the ship.”

The bastard didn’t move his arm. He looked troubled. “Gus. Cats can survive longer than two days without food and water.”

“So?” said Gustav, displaying what a fine thick skull he keeps hidden beneath those goldilocks.

“By then, we’ll be...” began Timo, but got no further as I, having an acute sense of where I wouldn’t like to get hit, elbowed him hard on the side of his stomach and ducked his arm and ran for it.

In front of me was Nguyen and an elderly gent who I think is named Mr. Roswell. I went shoulder first into the old man with glee and gusto, and then through two women and then I was clear, feet losing their slippers and thumping down the carpeted corridor.

Behind me, Gustav yelled, “Get him!” in the best tradition of villains everywhere, followed by a loud crash and curses.

Basher could be heard howling, “I can’t do it!” and then came the sound of thunderous footsteps, and of people getting barged into.

Timo was after me.

At this point, you, sitting cozily in your life, snuggled up with this book and no doubt happy that there’s finally a bit of action, may be curious as to what my plan was. If so, then woe be upon you. This is a serious real-life account, not some two-bit action flick where the hero is a secret agent and the women just need some loving. I declare quite freely that I had no plan. I didn’t know why I was running except that I was and it seemed like a good idea to continue. I did have the presence of mind however to scream continuously and pull things in the way after me and to shout at anyone I passed to “Stop them! I’ll fire you all! Stop them!”

I don’t think anyone tried, but people have a tendency to lean towards what they are looking, even when it means sticking their head in its path, and going by the number of crashes I heard behind me I didn’t do too badly. I ran on, beginning to tire, and hoping to hell that those people caught that giant lout’s shoulder right in their throat. They deserved it, the bastards, for letting this happen.

It couldn’t have lasted, of course. Perhaps if I had been able to make it to a communications panel, and stopped them from interrupting me, I might have been able to inform Mars. If I could have locked myself in somewhere, I might have been able to hold out for two days and emerge, victorious but bedraggled, in Lavender. It might have been possible, and then perhaps I would have been lounging in a beach right now, instead of writing this book while freezing in the overly enthusiastic air-conditioning in Jovian public transport.

But these things were not probable. Most doors in the ship don’t lock, and when they do it’s usually by express command of the room’s owner. Communication panels for satellite-based point-to-point communication are not scattered around. Add to this my habit and predilection for a sedentary lifestyle and you’ll agree that I did quite well to make it across one floor and into an elevator and down five.

It turned out, as it often does with me, to be less smart an idea than I’d imagined. When I left the elevator I was in the IT floor and greeting me were a host of geeky yet determined looking individuals. Watery eyes were narrowed, spindly fingers were clenched. It was quite a poignant sight actually, though I of course was trying my hardest to get the

elevator to close so I could get away from there. That was not to be however. The thin, mostly bluish-grey line parted, and from behind lunged a large, fearsome woman. I confess I stood transfixed, my mouth gloppy and gaping, as she flew at me, hair streaming behind, bosom bludgeoning through the air. Then she hit me, scowling face slamming in the chest, and I went down in a heap.

Before I knew it, I was staring up at her as she expertly pressed her knee to my clavicle. “Et tu, Marquez?” gasped I.

Don't get them excited. That's the key.

If you are ever in trouble, if ever your subordinates threaten you with physical harm, or your sibling says you really shouldn't have scribbled dirty doodles in the scrapbook, don't get their adrenalin flowing. I know this because I have made these mistakes. For example, I should never have run.

Earlier, they were thinking up quaint plans like starving my cat, now they swore and glowered and manhandled me into a room roughly, and closed the door behind. It didn't look good.

Timo held me, my arms pinned behind my back. Robin and a few others from IT stood around. She had a bruise over her eye, sustained when she had so cunningly rammed her countenance into my torso. In a few days it might color enough to match her clothes.

There was a flurry of sound outside. The door opened and Gustav marched in. "What happened? Is he here?"

"We got him," said Robin, beaming. Timo twisted my arm a bit more for emphasis.

Gustav walked over to me and then noticed Robin's bruise. He whipped around. "What did you do to her?" he growled.

"Nothing that nature didn't better," said I, because I can't help myself.

He roared, and would have hit me but Robin caught his arm. It occurred to me that this was getting quite Shakespearean.

"Don't, darling!" cried she. "He didn't hurt me. This was an accident."

I stared at her. "Darling?" croaked I.

Robin gave a defiant glare. Gustav looked evasive.

"Is that why you're helping him?" asked I. "You do know that he's trying to take us back to what will probably be a war zone soon."

"Well, it's our war zone!" bellowed Gustav.

Robin slipped her arm in his. "I know everything about Ganymeda."

"Last time I met you, you said otherwise."

“That was before I met Gustav!” said she with pride.

I gaped at her. Then I gaped at him. Then I gaped at her some more. “You met him yesterday?”

“Day before!” said she, with almost a squeal. Gustav twitched.

“Oh you stupid, stupid wom-“

“Timo!” cut in Gustav. “Twist his arm!”

“No Timo, no. Don’t twist my arm. Don’t do that.”

“If you don’t give us course control, we’ll break your arm!” hissed Gustav.

“Oh I’ll give it to you, goddammit. Take the damn thing, you stupid fool! Just leave me alone.”

“Ahhhh!” Gustav beamed and clapped his hands.

Timo glanced down at me and then at Gustav. “So I guess I won’t have to twist his arm after all?”

“Yes, you won’t have to, you oaf!” snapped I.

“But I didn’t even start.”

“So? You’re judging me now?” I pulled away, and he let me go. “What’s the point of enduring pain if I’m going to give in at the end anyway?”

“He’s a smart man,” sneered Gustav. I didn’t deign to reply.

The passing of management control down the chain of command is allowed only in situations of dire medical or psychological distress, and this has to be confirmed by the ship’s medic and recorded in logs and accounts. Thus they called in Dr. Ogoni, who had been in on the plan from the beginning, while they set up the system.

It was over soon enough. A few forms completed, a few retina scans, and Gustav Olafsson was acting CMO of S76-IB7. I, on the other hand, was marched to my quarters and locked inside. Her Majesty was already there, unharmed and nonchalant. I picked her up and sat atop my soft bed and stroked her soft fur.

After a while, I got a call. It was Toshi. For a few moments I didn’t pick up, but then what was the point. Besides, talking is therapeutic.

“I’m not happy, Tosh. Your parents are going to hear of this,” said I.

“I’m so sorry, Ro. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know about this at all, I promise. I didn’t know anything.”

“So I gathered. Thank Jove that you acted so decisively once you found out.”

She sighed. “I did trip Gus when he tried to run after you.”

I paused. “You did?”

“Yes.”

“He threatened to break my arm, you know.”

“He’s doing what he thinks is right.”

“Yes, well it doesn’t count if what he thinks is wrong,” said I coldly.

She sighed again and fell quiet. I took deep breaths to try and calm myself. For a while there was silence. I fell back on my pillows and stared at the ceiling. The stars began to change direction. I tousled her Majesty’s coat.

After a while she asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Oh.” She paused, and then asked, “About what?”

“I’m thinking about this girl,” said I, my voice sounding hollow. “I was thirteen. I saw her on the beach. She was lying in the sand, with hands outstretched on both sides, and looking up. Just lying there.”

“I see.”

“She was around fifteen, sixteen? Her hair was spread out around her face.”

The air-conditioning was cold. I took another intake of breath.

“I asked her what she was doing. And she looked at me, and smiled, and she said, ‘I’m hugging the sky.’”

“Oh. That’s...that’s cool.”

“Then I dropped my ice cream.”

She didn't laugh. There was another silence. The ship started moving forward once again. Her Highness mewled and plonked on my stomach and began to clean herself.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"In my room," said she. "I'm sitting on my bed with Mr. Green."

"That's the name you've given to the marsman?"

"Yes. We've gotten close."

"That's good to hear," said I. It hardly mattered now anyway. "Mephisto, connect to headquarters, Lavender. Subject : Ship in Distress."

The computer didn't answer. I hadn't expected any different.

"You'll have to get me a guest profile, Toshi. It's at least two weeks to Ganymede. I'll get very bored otherwise."

"Yes, sir," said she obediently.

"So you're locked up too?"

"In my room, yes."

I prodded her Highness off me and rolled over onto my belly. Pillows are your only friends in times like these. I buried my face in them and nuzzled the softness. "How convenient. Now you can't possibly be held responsible. Did you have to ask them, or were they thoughtful enough to oblige by themselves?"

She didn't answer immediately. "I tripped him," she said finally. "He fell pretty hard."

"Of course." I piled one pillow on top of my head and closed my eyes. The room faded away and was replaced by vivid yet vague lines and shapes and colors. Green and gold and spider webs in grass. And pigeons, who look dull and grey but are actually the color of storm-clouds and can out-fly falcons.

"Are you still there?" she asked after some time.

"Yes," said I and opened my eyes. "Do you know why patterns repeat?"

"What do you mean?"

"Patterns. They repeat. Always. Everywhere. On the sea shore and on branches, and in people. Do you know why?"

“Tell me,” said she.

“Causality. Systems find equilibrium, otherwise they are lost and we do not know about them. And when they do, there are circumstances that repeat, since that is what equilibrium means when it's over a period of time. And these circumstances, they have consequences, consequences other than the one that make them indispensable, side-effects if you will, and these form patterns. Patterns that we see, that seem mindless and arbitrary, repeated over and over, endlessly, as long as the system maintains.”

“I see,” said she.

“Do you? Gustav is a hero. All heroes have been him, because if you are not like him, you will not do what heroes do. And women love him, as they have always loved heroes, and that is why heroes exist. And Escalon is a leader, someone who understands politics, and procures. And the heroes follow him, because heroes need causes.”

Bagpipes played in my head. Strange, sad tunes.

“But leaders make mistakes. Because the kind of person who is a leader is someone who is compelled to be a leader. It is not an easy thing to become. And someone who is compelled to be a leader, is compelled to take it further, to be glorious. And the heroes, because they are heroes, follow him. Regardless. And therein lies the pattern of war.”

There was a long, deep silence. I could hear my own breathing, and the soft cat sounds her Majesty made, and cemetery bagpipes in my head.

“And I,” asked Toshi suddenly. “What am I?”

I had thought about that often. “You are not one thing,” said I. “Most people aren't. That's is why they have good lives, and not famous ones.”

“I see,” said she, quietly. “And what are you?”

“I? I am tired,” said I. “Exceedingly tired. I think I shall sleep.” I closed my eyes again and thankfully, I did.

I woke to the sound of declaration. It was Gustav. He was making an address to the crew, and he sounded pleased with himself.

“We, the people of the Jovian Colonies, are going home. We no longer agree to the dictates of our company's management. We shall be true to Ganymeda. Let them try to stop us! We shall not stop! We shall persevere! We shall...what?...yes...we shall be given a grand welcome when we return to Ganymeda. To our free Ganymeda! To our home! To our birthright! To...yes, yes...to tax cuts and better retirement benefits? Happy? We shall return as the beloved sons of our – yes, alright, no – “

“Thank you for listening everyone –“ That was Timo’s voice.

“Give that back. Glory shall be ours! Wait - ”

“There’s no need to worry at all. We’ll be with our families soon enough.”

It occurred to me that Timo had hidden depths. I tried to resume my slumber but couldn’t. My chest felt knotted up and my face felt full of sinuses. I sat up and stared at the ceiling. We were moving very fast. Waves of anger and hate and bitterness and despair crashed against the shaky shores of my mind. It was one of those feelings where you have to do something. Storms and lightning burst in your heart, and if you are brave you punch the wall, and if you are like me you slam the pillow onto the bed with great malevolence.

“I got you a profile,” came Toshi’s voice.

I sat there, gripping the pillow with whitened knuckles, my chest heaving.

“I feel like screaming,” I whispered.

“I’m so sorry,” said she. Her voice shook. “You shouldn’t have been caught in this.

I swore, and took a deep breath and swore some more. “I hate you all. I hate you all so very much.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

I nodded, which didn’t help, as the video wasn’t on. After a while she said, “Porridge wanted to apologize.”

I frowned. “He did? What did he do?”

“He says he should have been there.”

“He does?” I rubbed my face blearily. “That’s unexpected.”

She gave a small tinkle of a laugh. “You’re better than you think you are. He says he wants to send you something special to make up.”

I considered that. “By something special I hope he means something he hasn’t cooked himself.”

She chuckled. “He says it’s a bottle of Versenue. It tastes like vanilla and has fifty five percent alcohol.”

“Thank you,” said I with a sigh, and fell back spread-eagled on the bed. Her Majesty was sleeping on the table, curled up in a little black ball.

“I shall have it sent immediately,” said Toshi.

“You’re a nice girl, Toshi. Did I ever mention that?”

“I always knew that’s what you meant, sir.”

I laughed. “Right.” I rolled over. “Computer.”

“Good morning, Mr. Moniker,” said the computer conversationally.

There has been as yet no software to determine which mornings were actually, when you came down to it, not so good. It had been argued once by the PR head of NanoSquish Technologies though that any morning in which you were alive enough to address the computer was, all things considered, a good morning. He has been retrenched since, but reportedly was making a good living as a motivational speaker.

“I christen thee Prophet Sin Sin, the Messiah of Eastern Materialism.”

“Yes, Mr. Moniker.”

“Try to get a Chinese accent, if you can.”

“Processing, Mr. Moniker,” it said, and didn’t return.

I did nothing much for a while and then the buzzer sounded. I jumped up.

“Toshi? Is that your man?”

“Yes, sir. It’s Basher. With the bottle and some food.”

“Can I try to escape?”

“Please don’t.”

“Can I hit him really hard?”

“Preferably not.”

I sighed. “Come in. Don’t worry, I’m not behind the door with my sword held ready. I won’t smash your head in at all.”

There was no reply for a while. Then the door opened and a trembling baguette issued forth and waved about.

“I’m sitting on the bed,” said I helpfully.

His head appeared and ducked again and appeared once more. He gave a sheepish grin.

“I’m sorry Mr. Moniker,” said he, shuffling in.

“People have been saying that to me a lot lately.”

“I didn’t hurt her, Mr. Moniker. I swear I didn’t. I let her go. I didn’t do anything.”

“I know, Basher, I know,” said I, and smiled reassuringly. I got off the bed and walked to my table. “C’mon, just keep the food here.”

He dutifully made his way to the table and deposited the food. The bottle was safely out of his hands. I smiled again, widely, and moved closer to inspect the food, and lifted the chair nearest to him a fraction, and dropped its leg onto his foot. They were nice heavy chairs, styled wood and metal. He yelped most satisfactorily.

He jumped around for few minutes, while I regarded the contents of the bottle, and then he gave a flushed grin. “I guess I deserved that, Mr. Moniker.”

I nodded. “You’re a very deserving person, Basher. You deserve so very much.”

I poured myself three-fourths of a glass and one-fourth of another for him. “Cheers,” said I.

He smiled and raised his drink. We clinked our glasses. “You know,” said I. “This custom originally meant the guest trusts the host hasn’t poisoned his drink.”

“Oh. What did he do if he didn’t trust the guy?”

“I don’t know. Stick a knife in him, perhaps?”

“You can trust me Mr. Moniker,” said he, which I thought was a bit optimistic, but on further inspection it seemed to be something more. His face had taken on a furtive look, and I believe he was winking. I frowned. He did a mime of long hair and then a swipe of the hand.

“Glad...to know that...Basher. Sometimes I just don’t understand you though,” said I carefully.

He pointed to the floor and then to his ears and then swiped again and then repeated the hair mime. I realized that one of us was not especially sharp at dumb charades. Then he lip-synced “oh” and “eeh” and I realized what he meant.

“Sin Sin, end call with Toshi.”

“Good drink, sir,” said he with a smile.

I waited till I was sure the call was ended, and then said, “What is it?”

“I’m with you, sir,” said he earnestly, placing his glass on the table. “I’m sorry for what happened before. I want to help you.”

I looked at him skeptically. The last time he’d said that I’d left my cat with him.

“Porridge is with you too, sir,” he continued. “He told me to tell you he’s ready to deploy.”

“He did?” I took a large swig of the drink. “What exactly is he ready to deploy?”

“Himself, sir.”

“That’s fairly disturbing, Basher.”

“He has knives, sir.”

“Not to forget baguettes.”

“Tell us what to do and we’ll do it, sir.”

I grunted and sat myself on the table. “Does Toshi know of this?”

“No, sir. Porridge and I decided on our own.”

“I see.” I took another, even larger swig. Sweet vanilla flowed down my throat, and my head felt dizzy. “That’s...that’s nice,” said I thoughtfully.

“So what do you say, sir?”

“Interesting things, I hope?”

But he wasn’t letting go. His eyes had that doggy look. Give me a rabbit, they said. That’s what you are here for. I’m your dog. Give me a rabbit to chase.

Master though wasn’t in a mood to play. “I don’t know, Basher,” said I. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I just don’t have any ideas right now.”

“We could put rat poison in their food, sir,” said he, brightly.

I stared at him. They were all the same really, when you came down to it, just the same. And I’d had enough of all of them.

“Go away, Basher,” said I. “Let me have my drink in peace.”

“But, we could set you free, Mr. Moniker. We could take back the ship.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Just, perhaps, not right now? I’ve had a long day. Tomorrow maybe?”

“Oh.” His face fell slightly. “Alright Mr. Moniker. If you say so.”

I smiled. “I’ll see you tomorrow then. Get some more...” I rummaged around in the basket. “What is this? Baguettes and cheese? What kind of meal is that?”

“And olives, sir,” said he timidly, pointing them out.

“Olives. I see. There better be meat next time, Basher. Cooked, with curry. And cake. And chocolate for dessert. Understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Moniker. Yes, sir.”

“Alright. Get going then. I’ll think of something.”

He seemed happier now, and skipped out obligingly. People like him always feel better when they are getting spoken to sternly. Makes them feel the world is all right.

I chewed on the baguette and popped an olive in my mouth. Then I finished the rest of my glass in one gulp, got dizzy and fell off the table.

I spent the rest of the day doing variations on that very theme, and while I cannot claim to have ever drunk myself to unconsciousness, I did quaff myself to extreme sleepiness and then nodded off. Dreams have no sense of dramatic timing and didn’t appear on stage.

When I woke up the next day, my head felt like an earthquake and Basher’s suggestion seemed quite fair and just and appropriate.

I thought about researching Escalon and the way the situation was proceeding, but we had already lost connectivity. I hadn’t realized how fast we’d been going. Gustav was in a big hurry.

It occurred to me that not being a Ganymedan, and not even having American citizenship I would essentially be a political prisoner once we reached our destination. It was a disturbing thought. Escalon had seemed quite equitable in his speeches so far, but then he had declared independence all of a sudden and against all odds. You never knew with people like that. Robespierre had been a visionary when he started out. Hitler had sounded more than sane, promising economic prosperity and responsible governance. Mopobo had been called the boon of Africa, their very redeemer. And then things had started to go wrong, and people had started to die, first a few, then hundreds, then tens of thousands.

Soon the Gustavs and Bashers would get going, and there was no knowing what would happen. The dog leads the master, as often as not.

Rat poison, I thought again. Dissolving their stomach. Acid dripping into their intestine. It would be agony. They would live, of course. Nobody dies that easily any more. But it would be agony.

It was far easier than that actually. There were emergency pods on the ship. Not many, and no one knew if they worked, but they existed. I didn't need to take back control of the ship. I didn't need to put rat poison in their food. The escape pods had radio beacons. I could get a message through from the ship before I left. It would be quite safe really.

But then, I would be in a capsule in space. A small little capsule, with only the most rudimentary of control and navigation. And I would be all alone. In a tiny little capsule, with no one else, spinning in space, with a few inches of metal and plastic the only thing between nothing and me.

I grew up on earth, you see. I can't think of space as Spacers can. It's like sailors and the sea. Or teenage girls and malls. They look out at the infinity and say to themselves, there are a lot of fish, or hair-bands, as the case may be, in there, and go forth with excitement. Someone like me, on the other hand, thinks about the many eternities of waves (or people), the loneliness of being surrounded by horizons (or shops) and the danger of sharks (or people), and the prospect of being helpless amidst all that.

There is such a thing as space vertigo. It is, after all, a long way down all around.

I needed more time to think, or worst coming to worst, mentally prepare myself. I'm a great believer in mental preparation. Sane people need to fool themselves into doing insane things.

I was interrupted in this meditation by the unexpected arrival of Gustav. He walked in without buzzer or warning, without the door even giving a beep. I didn't know the CMO could do that.

"You might want to knock," warned I. "Who knows what I might be doing when imprisoned alone in a room."

"Trying to escape?" said he, being of that type.

"Perhaps something far more embarrassing for the both of us."

He grimaced and looked around the room. Then he pulled up a chair and sat at the table. "Olives," said he.

"Lovely little things. Great as weapons."

“I didn’t know we had olives on the ship.”

“I’ve been getting a certain amount of sympathy food.”

He nodded and stared out of the window. He put his foot atop the table.

“So,” said I, “you’re not here to hit me?”

He gave me a sideways glance. “I never wanted to hit you. I get no happiness from your pain.”

I gave a wry smile. “You’d like to think so, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m doing nothing wrong,” said he, with a proud tilt of his chin.

“It would be smarter not to try to find validation from the person who especially wants to use pliers on your nails.”

He frowned. “Pliers?”

“To pull them out,” I explained.

“Ahh, yes, I see.” He resumed his contemplation.

“It used to be a popular form of torture. It’s easy to set up, you see. Doesn’t need much equipment.”

“You’re not a very nice person,” said he.

I stopped abruptly, and gave him a look. “Did you just say I’m not a nice person?”

He waved his hand airily. “You don’t have principles.”

“Principles?” I could feel the rage building again, the anger that had been simmering ever since Escalon’s march. “Principles?” I said again, almost in a whisper.

He looked at me with arched brows. “Do you disagree? Why did you actually turn the ship back towards Mars?”

My fingers unclenched. “What do you think?” said I, slowly.

He leant forward, and his lips curled in the familiar sneer. “You were afraid,” said he in a hiss.

I stared at him for a long moment and then I burst out laughing. He glared at me. “What? What did I say? Why are you laughing?”

There were tears in my eyes. I fell back with shaking, shuddering laughter. “Because...because you’re all so...so...stupid!” said I, in stitches. “Principles? My god!”

That didn’t please him. He got up. “What do you mean, dammit?” yelled he. “What’s so funny?”

I would have answered but I couldn’t stop laughing. He let out a growl and started towards the door. “I should never have come here,” said he sullenly.

“Wait, wait,” said I, slightly out of breath. “Listen, wait. Why...why did you come here?”

He turned to look at me. “There has been an embargo declared. No ship is to go near Ganymede.”

“Oh,” said I, subsiding slightly, and panting for air. “I see.” He turned again to leave and I called out. “Gustav. Listen. Do you know what a principle is?”

His eyebrows knit together. His eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“The word. Do you know its definition?”

“Are you saying I’m unprincipled?” said he in a low, cold voice.

“No. Not at all. I just want to point out an etymological issue.” I sat up. “So, before you go, just indulge me. Tell me what your definition of the word is.”

His eyes were wary. “It...is a belief,” said he slowly. “Something that is precious to you. That you live your life by.”

“Right,” said I. “Some sort of guideline, am I correct? Some rule that you try to obey.”

“Yes,” said he.

“In all situations, right? Regardless of the circumstances.”

“Yes. Regardless. That’s what it means.”

I smiled. “That is why it can get you into trouble, Gustav. That's why it's not very clever.”

He frowned and stood unmoving for a few moments then shook his head and left.

I sprang off the bed. It was quite clear now what I had to do. The idiot would try to run the gauntlet. He had to, or he wouldn’t be able to live with himself. I, therefore, would

have to be on the escape capsule as soon as possible. Space, empty as it was, terrifying though I found it, would have to be embraced.

It was really quite safe. All it meant was that I would be earning my asylum. Well, so what? It would be all the sweeter for it.

So, you see, what I said about sane men convincing themselves into insanity? I looked at Her Majesty. Cats are a different matter altogether. She raised her head languidly, perhaps sensing my gaze, and gave a little yawn and then returned to her repose. I wondered what dreams cats had. They did have dreams, that you could see when they slept. Their paws moved. Sometimes their whiskers felt the air.

Cats have high standards of sanity. They like to remain in control. I would be lucky to come out of it without my face clawed out.

Still, what had to be done had to be done. I called Toshi, since everyone else was banned. "Send me Basher again, Tosh," said I without preamble and without thought.

She was immediately suspicious. "Why?" asked she.

"Just do it, Toshi," said I, irritably.

She didn't listen, neither to the words nor the tone. "You switched off the phone yesterday when Basher was there. Are you planning something?"

Wrath bubbled inside me. Fury rose like waves of bile. "And if I am?" hissed I. "What will you do then? Haven't you done quite enough?"

"I'm just worried, Ro."

"Right. I think we both know which side you're on Toshi. After all these years of...of..." Unfortunately, honesty reared her blushing head. "of being..." Honesty had naked eyes. "...moderately nice to you, you betrayed me for your home and freedom." I paused and took a reflective breath. "So, yes...just...leave me alone. Keep your nose out of it."

"I see," said she softly.

"And don't worry, I won't upset your plans. So, don't get your Japanese knickers in a twist."

He who is horrible last is remembered the longest.

I paced around the room till Basher arrived. He looked excited. I looked, I believe, like I was about to throw up.

"We're ready Cap'n," said he. So it was captain now.

“Basher,” said I. “I am not a captain. The naval term doesn’t apply.”

“Oh,” said he, looking deflated. Uncertainty pooled in his eyes.

“But I am somewhat like a captain,” said I, hurriedly. “Equivalent, you might say. Just a technicality, really.” This wasn’t the time to look uncertain. I needed him working for me. As long as he did, he could think of me as anything he goddamn wanted.

“Right, Cap’n,” said he, beaming again, and I had to stop myself from socking him in the face.

“So this is what you have to do Basher.”

“Yes, Cap’n.”

“Let me speak, Basher.”

“Aye, aye Cap’n.”

I sighed. “I’m going to take an emergency capsule. That’s the easiest way. The people in the ship want to go back to their home. It’ll be too difficult to stop them all.”

“But we could do it, Cap’n!”

“Don’t tell me about rat poison, Basher.”

“Sleeping pills, Cap’n. We could put them all to sleep.”

“No! No, Basher, shut up! No rat poison. No sleeping pills.”

He opened his mouth to speak. “No knives,” I growled. He kept quiet.

“Just get my door unlocked, Basher. And get an escape capsule ready to launch. Without anyone knowing.”

“Yes, Cap’n.”

“By tonight. It must be ready in the night. No one will be about then.”

“I’ll see to it, Cap’n.”

“Thank you, Basher. You’re...you’re a good guy, Basher, when the chips are down.”

“Thank you, Cap’n. It was a pleasure knowing you, sir.”

I winced. “Don’t use the past tense Basher. This isn’t the time for bad grammar.”

Visions of space swam past my eyes. My nose pressed against oblivion.

“In fact, why don’t you go away now,” said I, eyes closed tightly, “before I assault you.”

“Yes, Cap’n. Lots to do Cap’n.”

“Good, good. And get me a few of those sleeping pills after all.”

He nodded and left. I stared at the window.

The rest of the day, as you may imagine, was torture. The waiting is always the worst. A tiger may freeze your blood, petrify you with its eyes, but hiding in the cave, staring at the dark night beyond, hearing its growl and waiting for the sound of its soft pads on perhaps the stray twig...that is when we experience actual fear. That is when, deep in our consciousness, the stories are created.

I packed what I could, my body trembling with nervous energy. Then I paced around for a while and then when that wasn’t enough, jumped around shadowboxing. Cities, I thought, could run on the energy created by enough agitated people. In a way, of course, they already did.

Sometime in the night, when I had dozed off for a few minutes, the phone rang. I jumped up, sinister swirls of luminescent colors melting away as my dream shattered. I switched the phone on blearily. “Toshi?” I rasped.

“No, Cap’n. It’s me, Basher.”

“Oh.” I sat up and blinked rapidly. “Is it ready?”

“Cap’n. I have a question.”

“What? Is everything alright?” Her Majesty mewled and jumped up into my lap.

“Oh yes, sir. Everything’s fine. Just had a question.”

“Alright,” said I, with a sinking feeling. “What is it?”

“How, exactly, do we prepare the escape capsule, sir?”

“Wh-what do you mean how?” croaked I.

“As in, what exactly do we do, Cap’n?”

“I don’t know! How the hell am I supposed to know?” I stumbled as I got to my feet. “You said you could handle it, you damn fool!”

“Y-yes sir. Just that, I’ve never done this before. And Porridge doesn’t really...”

“You idiot! You bloody idiot!” I was screaming now, my hands balled into fists, my mind a vortex of painful, helpless rage. “And you’re asking me!” I kicked over a chair. “Me!” I smashed a small ornament against the wall. “How, in the name eternity, am I supposed to know, how things work?” roared I, and toppled the table.

Sometimes you needs to do these things.

After a while, I cooled down. Her Majesty peeked from behind the chair. “Just let me out from here, Basher. I’ll see what I can do.”

"Y-yes, sir."

“And help me put Orene to sleep.”

“Oh god, I can’t!”

“With the sleeping pills, you fool. Actual sleep, not the...doggy kind.” I wished Toshi was here to help. She would know what to do. You didn’t need to explain these things to her.

Basher arrived soon enough, and the door slid open. He slunk inside. “Porridge came too, Cap’n.”

“He did?” I didn’t even have time to wince before someone lunged through the door and rolled twice before rising to a crouch. He had a knife at the ready.

“It would have been more helpful if you’d found a way to ready the capsule, Jones,” said I, weakly.

He straightened. “Forgive me, Ro. I tried.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just a bit tense. I want to thank you two for your help.”

“We’re not out of the water yet, Cap’n,” said Basher.

“Right. Don’t speak too much, Basher. Please. And here, I’ll hold her and you pop the pills in.”

“She’s not opening her mouth, Cap’n,”

“Poke her stomach or something.”

He yelped. “She bit me, Cap’n.”

“At least the pills went in. Alright, we're set to go then. Jones, is it clear outside?”

“Cap’n. It’s bleeding. She has sharp little teeth.”

“Yes, Basher. Cats tend to. You’ll live.”

“She’s dangerous, Cap’n.”

“Shut up, Basher. What are you doing, Jones?”

“That means all clear,” said Porridge, repeating the gesture with his fingers.

“It looks like something quite different, Jones.” He shrugged. “Just use words, alright?”

Then we were through the door, my bag over my shoulder, her Majesty curled in my arms, Porridge sliding along the wall in front and Basher scampering on my heels. We met no one in the corridor and took the elevator without any incident.

Seven levels down, then we took to the corridors again. Porridge motioned us to stop at a corner and we waited while there were voices ahead. After a few moments he motioned all clear again.

“He’s like a shadow,” whispered Basher, sidling up to me.

I nodded and then my guts felt like they’d melted, and my gullet stuck in my throat, and her Majesty let out a squeal and tried to jump out of my arms but being drowsy as she was, toppled instead and hung suspended in air, spinning slowly. She began to howl. Alarms began to ring.

“The gravity!” said Basher, his eyes wide open. He gave a little jump and bumped his head against the ceiling.

I grabbed her Majesty, and held her as she scratched at my arms and chest panic stricken. “Basher, something’s gone wrong. Stop fooling around. Come on.”

I kicked off and rebounded off the corner. Porridge was floating towards us slowly in the corridor.

“Ro,” said he. “There are people up ahead. Lots of people.”

“What happened? Why did the gravity go out?” I was already past him, whizzing down towards the next bend.

“I don’t know,” said he. The alarms continued, programmed to go off if ever the gravity system failed. Suddenly, a man shot past me from the coming bend, colliding with my feet and causing me to spin and her Majesty to nearly claw out my eye.

Thankfully I was wearing my shoes, and I ordered them to grip mode as I reached the ceiling head on, and then tumbled my feet against them. Upside down, I saw the man yell as he reached Porridge and then get caught in those large podgy arms and get head butted. Blood spurted from his nose and there was a crunching sound. When he was released he floated limply and quietly. With great effort I swallowed back my rising bile. Basher, unfortunately, didn’t.

Porridge propelled himself towards me, one step ahead of Basher’s expulsion.

“Wh-Why did you do that?” I croaked.

He pulled up beside me in a smooth upside down crouch. “Listen, Ro. I have something to tell you.”

“I can see that.”

He glanced back and then wrenched open an air-con vent. “In here,” said he, and pulled himself up inside it.

I gulped and glanced upwards and then at the arriving spew and taking a deep breath followed him. Her Majesty had fallen asleep thankfully.

The vent was narrow and cold. The hairs on my arms stood up, and my skin trembled. I was just at his feet, taking every turn he took as we shot through that maze.

“I have a confession, Ro,” said he again. “I’m not a...a...” He paused.

“A Buddhist?” I ventured.

“I’m not a cook, Ro,” said he.

We rounded another bend and he stopped against a vent. I pulled up behind him and sighed. “You know, Jones, somehow, I’d always suspected.”

He looked at me blankly, and then pointed past the vent. My eyes followed his finger and then I yelled.

“No! No! Wait!”

I barged through the vent and into the opposite transparent wall, but it was too late. In the next chamber, in front of my eyes, the last of the emergency capsules took off.

I screamed incoherently and ran to an intercom module.

“Gustav!” I roared. “What’s going on? What have you done?”

There was no answer, and I was about to shout again but then came a weak whisper. “We’ve got a missile after us, Ro. They fired a missile at us. How could they do that?”

“A missile?” came my eloquent reply. “What do you mean, a missile?”

“They ordered us to turn back. Then they fired a missile. How could they fire a missile?”

“You didn’t listen?” gasped I. “You didn’t listen to them?”

“There’s not enough fuel, Ro. We can’t turn around. We can’t even stop. I’ve just enough fuel left to synchronize with the approach vector in Ganymeda.”

“You-you did what? You – oh bloody hell – oh god. You idiot! You stupid fool!”

“But how could they fire a missile at us?”

“Maybe you have a relative on their end,” said I. My mind groped for sanity, sailing through red and black seas. There were no capsules left. I was stuck on this ship. And now there was a missile. “Where are you?”

“In the engine control centre,” said he. He sounded dazed. “Timo left.”

“I’m coming up.”

Porridge was at my side, his face drawn, knife at the ready.

“Why is this happening to me?” asked I.

“Perhaps it is because of karma?” said he gravely.

“Perhaps it is because I’m surrounded by morons,” said I, through clenched teeth.

We spiraled back, pushing past people who were floating around with varying degrees of panic and despair. They had also been trying for the capsules. Some of them were injured. There had obviously been a scramble. Many of them tried to get my attention but I had neither time nor inclination for them and Porridge’s presence made sure they didn’t press too hard.

We drifted into the elevator. I thanked every scientist ever born, and the good fortune of being born in this century for power soles on shoes. Of course I would probably not have needed them if I had been born earlier.

Once inside I glanced at Porridge. “So what are you then?” asked I.

“I am a government operative,” said he, quietly. “Was.” He seemed embarrassed.

“What happened?”

“I was...” His jaw dropped. “let go of. They felt we were moving in different directions.”

“I see. What did you do wrong?”

He took a deep breath. His face grew slightly red. “They started a new testing scheme. I couldn’t pass the EQ criteria.”

“Really,” said I, since it is one of those few words for this purpose.

“I was a topper in applied negotiation,” said he, sadly.

“Think you can negotiate us out of this mess?”

“I’m better when I’m close up. I’m very hands-on.”

“Of course.”

We reached the engine control floor and pushed out into the main room. Gustav was talking to Toshi. His voice was broken and there were tears in his eyes. Robin was settled on the wall, her face sullen and uncertain. Her bruise was now yellow.

“Toshi, you knew about this?” asked I, drifting closer.

“Only after the gravity got cut. Are you alright?”

“As of now.” I placed Her Majesty onto a seat. The poor thing was asleep, or perhaps unconscious.

“All the emergency capsules have launched.”

“I noticed. How long till the missile hits?”

“About an hour. There are still more than a hundred and fifty people left aboard,” said she.

“I’m interested in only one of them,” I muttered.

“Oh,” said she and looked at me. Her eyes gazed into mine.

“I meant me,” I grunted. I turned to Gustav. “How did they communicate with you?”

“Satellite message.”

“And the gravity? What happened to that?”

“I wanted to divert all energy to the engines.”

“To outrun a missile? Is there anything at all between those ears?”

“Hey, he was under a lot of pressure!” said Robin, glaring at me.

“You understand, don’t you, that he’s getting us all killed?” said I.

“We won’t get killed,” said she in a mutter. “Jesus will protect us.”

I stared at her. She looked back at me with surliness.

“Oh I hate you all so much,” said I, shaking my head. “So, so much.” I took a few deep breaths, trying to think. “Desai,” said I finally, “set up the channel they used.”

Desai, who had been fiddling around some panels, sprang into action.

“Who spoke to you?” I asked Gustav.

“A-a general.”

“What was he like?”

“I don’t know. He fired a missile.”

“Good point.” I needed to think. I needed to pace. You can’t think when your feet are off the ground and your stomach is halfway up your chest. “Desai, bring back the gravity. And route the call to my office. And set up another channel to Macauley-Yang, Mars. Toshi, tell them what happened.”

I pushed off towards the elevator again, my mind feverish with fear and my thoughts darting desperately. I needed to live more, longer. There were so many things I hadn’t done. And so many things I hadn’t done enough. I had to live. I couldn’t afford to die yet.

I had to bribe him. That much was clear. That was the principle. Payment. Cost and benefit. I’d read enough history and knew enough about people to understand that. Everything had a price. Whether it was a cop on the beat, or a king you wanted to depose, it was the same thing. Generals could be bribed. Every miraculous victory had probably been won by bribes. There were only two situations where a bribe would not work. First, if he actually wanted to hurt you, and second, if you couldn’t pay the price.

Therein lay the problem.

I got to my room and Desai had the connection ready. “Sar, sar,” called he urgently over the phone, “de general is on the line.”

I swore and hurried to my desk. “And the gravity?”

“I am warking on it, sar. Very sarry.”

“Hurry up, man.” I lowered myself to my seat, gripping the arms so I didn’t float away if I shuffled. It occurred to me that I’d never seen a blue whale. I switched on the channel.

The man was towards the largish side, with a bushy mustache and clean eyebrows and a modest double chin. His eyes were deep set and slightly vague. He looked like what might be generally considered bluff.

“Mortuiari salutant,” said I and fixed my gaze with his. I knew all about bluff.

He looked slightly disconcerted.

“It means ‘We who are about to die salute you’. I thought it would be appropriate. The military likes salutes, doesn’t it?”

He shifted in his seat. “The message said you are the captain of the ship?”

“No, that is a naval term. We are civilians. I am the Chief Managing Officer of this transportation vessel.”

“Who was the other one then? The one I spoke to earlier?”

“A management trainee. There was a mutiny on the ship.”

“Really?” said he with a slight sneer. “Isn’t mutiny a naval term as well?”

“Apparently not. But then we live in strange times, don’t we? Times when missiles are fired at unarmed civilian transport ships.”

“Rebel supplies, Captain, and don’t try to play the innocent with me. I already told the other guy, surrender and turn around and we will call back the missile.”

“We can’t turn around, General. We have no fuel left.” I couldn’t keep the brittleness away from my voice. I could taste adrenalin, bitter on my tongue. My breath felt labored.

Coral reefs. Cheetahs. A whirlwind romance.

The general raised his eyebrows and made an elaborate expression. “No fuel? Even for one turn?”

“Yes,” said I. “This hasn’t been a normal voyage. We – “

“You carry extra fuel, don’t you?” he interrupted. “I thought shipping law requires you to carry enough fuel for at least two normal voyages.”

“It’s all over.”

“That seems very convenient, Captain. Very convenient indeed.”

“Convenient?” I choked. “It’s going to get us all killed!”

That silenced him for the moment. The look on his face that people like him get when they are thinking they are being clever subsided. He glanced to his side and I heard snatches of a voice.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts.

Istanbul. Moscow. The Pyramids.

The price. The price would be high. How could I meet the price?

“Desai,” said I aloud, my eyes opening. The general’s attention returned to me. “Is Toshi talking to Macauley-Yang?”

“Yes, sar,” came the answer.

“Contact the news channels, Desai. I want them watching. And listening. As many as possible.”

The general frowned. “Is that supposed to scare me, Captain? Don’t you think I am aware the public will know of your ship.”

“You are going to kill hundred and fifty civilians, General, simply because they have been caught in the wrong circumstance. We will not die unheard.”

His eyes narrowed. I heard more whispering from the side. “You want to be a martyr? I could block your channels, you know. I could even block your story.”

“Would you like to hear the story yourself? Desai, send our engine reports on fuel conditions to this channel.”

“Those can easily be fabricated,” said the general. His fingers drummed on the table.

“These are generated directly by the computer.”

“It can still be fabricated, and you know it. I will not be taken in by the simplest of guile,” growled he, sitting up and leaning forward.

I snapped. “Guile?” I screamed. My fist slammed into the table and everything on it began floating up. “Guile? We are a bloody transport ship! I work in Contracting and Procurement! We are a goddamned paper-pushing office!”

“Yes. So you say,” said he, his voice oily yet defensive. “But tell me, Captain, what exactly it is you are transporting?”

“Heavy Gold packets, and IVG. Standard cargo. Our ship is listed with the Commercial Transports Authority.”

“Quite, quite. But the embargo, you see, covers exactly that list. Especially those pieces of cargo that are used to make gravitrons, the principle economic activity of the rebel Jovian colony.”

The cargo.

That was what was driving up the price. There was no way we would be allowed to leave. Not with six and a half billion credits worth of material used to make gravitrons. It was political.

Yellow and black spots danced in my head. I felt dizzy, and sweaty, and nauseous. And then, suddenly, inspiration struck. The tiniest ray of sunshine, breaking through the thickest and darkest of thunderclouds. And my mind, miraculously, found the eye of the storm.

I sighed. “General, is that what the issue is about? Are you basing our guilt on the fact that our cargo is economically beneficial to New Chicago?”

“I’m basing your guilt on the fact that you’re breaking the embargo!”

I felt cold. Cold and alive. “There was a mutiny aboard my ship. By a rebel supporter. You spoke to him earlier. He’s used up all our fuel in speeding up the ship so he could get home quickly.”

“Aha! Running the gauntlet!”

“He’s not very smart.” My little glass globe floated by my head. A stylus and a glass tumbler danced through the air. “I, on the other hand, am not a rebel supporter at all. I’m not even from the Jovian colonies. The mutiny was because I had turned the ship back towards Mars.”

“So, what you are saying is that you are innocent but stuck helplessly in this-this den of rebels.” He was regarding me carefully.

“Not quite,” said I. “I’m no longer helpless. I can dump the cargo.”

That got his attention. His expression grew thoughtful, and he shifted his bulk. There was frantic whispering from the side.

“Who is that?” asked I, leaning back carefully.

He smiled. “My aide. She’s very...efficient.”

I smiled back. “Mine too. She’s reporting to our headquarters right now.”

“What do you mean?” said he, frowning.

“I mean the story will get out, General. You are going to blow up one of their ships with a missile. Containing hundred and fifty tax paying, white collar citizens. There are fifty more people in escape capsules whose friends and colleagues would have been murdered. The story will get out. You look like a man who has kids in school.”

“Yes, I do,” said he. His hand rubbed his chin.

“Children are not nice, General. They are quite merciless. Towards their classmates. Towards their parents.”

Cost and benefit. Every decision is a balance of inconveniences, a weighing of opportunities.

“But if I were to dump the cargo, then I think Macauley-Yang will find it difficult to keep claim to that cargo, seeing how one of their ships committed treason by breaking the embargo. We have already paid the suppliers, so it doesn't belong to them either. Six and a half billion in the form of heavy gold will be floating free in space, unaccounted for.”

And here it was. The price. I held his gaze, and hoped that he was a man of subtlety.

“You would have won, General,” said I quietly. “Your country would have won. There will be no bad press. And though the detailed accounts of our cargo are somewhere with us, and I have no idea where the accountants are so we can probably never gauge the exact amount of the gold we are carrying, but I am pretty sure it can build quite a few libraries.”

I looked him in the eye again. Did he understand? There would no accounts, no owners. One pocketful would buy him a new car. One bagful would buy him a house in Earth. We were carrying many thousands of ingots. He was a general. He could do far better than one bagful.

“All the rebels will get,” I continued, “will be a few more of their number, and especially stupid ones at that. They will all be bunched together in one place anyway.”

He frowned thoughtfully, and looked to the side. There was more whispering. He looked back at me. “And what about you, Captain?”

“Me?”

“You said you are not a rebel. Why are you still on the ship?”

“I was placed under arrest during the mutiny. By the time I got free all the capsules had been taken.”

He sighed and settled back. “What are you going to do now? Say, if we accept this proposal of yours. What about you then?”

I took a deep breath. “I shall be alive, General,” said I. “That’s enough for today.”

“Unload your cargo. A ship of your size should be carrying at least thirty tons of goods. When our sensors note that amount of free matter around your ship, we will disengage the missile.”

“What assurance do we have?” My voice had started shaking.

He smiled. “The story will get out, Captain, as you say. We must show a firm hand, not a mad one. We have a colony to win back.”

And then he held my gaze, and though I will never know it for sure, I think his children may look forward to a life of considerable luxury.

“Thank you,” said I, blinking. “Thank you, we will message you once we’re done. Thank you.”

I ended the call and got in touch with the control room.

“Desai, Toshi, unload the cargo, all of it. He says he will disengage the missile once that is done.”

“Really?” said Toshi.

“Yes, yes. Do it now.”

“I told Macauley-Yang.”

“Yes, now do this. Quickly.”

“Sar,” said Desai, “the media channels?”

“Forget them Desai. Unload the damn cargo.”

“Yes, sar. And the gravity, sar? Ai am sorry, the generator takes time to start.”

“Ahh the gravity.” I felt hollow. I felt ecstatic. A thought seared through my brain and body and I laughed. “Oh yes, Desai. Bring back the gravity quickly. Get Gustav to help with the unloading too. I’ll meet you all there.”

Ten minutes later, the gravity had returned and I marched into the cargo control room. There were around twenty people there, some on various panels and bulkheads, some just standing around. I couldn’t see Robin.

Toshi ran to me and hugged me. A slightly uncertain cheer rose.

I smiled and pulled away from her and walked to Gustav and offered him my hand. He smiled back weakly and nervously and shook it. There was another, even vaguer cheer. Some people tried to clap but it didn’t catch on. I nodded and then called Toshi over.

“Show me the status?” said I and began walking towards Desai’s panel. She followed, and so did Gustav.

“Right. We’re ten percent done. We’re grouping them together by the ton, so it’ll be easier to detect,” said she, and picked up her compu-pad.

I took it from her and glanced at the figures. It was not very heavy, but what was to be done. I smiled and turned and swung my foot into Gustav’s groin.

He’d expected it though. He wasn’t dim that way. He bent up and managed to move his hands to stop it. But then I had the edge of the compu-pad whizzing towards his face.

There was a scrunching noise, and blood spurted from his finely crafted nose. His hands rose to his face. My foot connected this time. I laughed.

“I’m going to write a book about this,” said I, laughing quite manically. Then I ran.

Porridge and Basher, hiding on either side of the door managed to grab Robin as she went past, chasing me. Basher, I believe, was slightly injured, but I escaped unharmed. This was good, since the doctor had taken one of the capsules.

5.

Less than half an hour later, ingots of heavy gold packed together by the ton slid softly into space, to the hiss of escaping air and the creak of robotic arms.

And they kept their word.

I did not take any further part in the proceedings. I wasn't in any state to do so. I instructed Toshi on what to do and recovered her Majesty. My head still felt on fire, and my nerves like shining silver. I half ran to my room, and jumped up on to the bed and kept jumping till I hurt my elbow. Then I lay on the bed shivering and clutching Orene close. She was still sleeping.

After a while, I deposited her outside, and then spent many hours running simulations her royal eyes shouldn't see till I finally felt able to sleep as well.

The next ten days passed quickly, in a strange, swirly haze. They were a most unusual amalgam of giddiness and godly power and utter loneliness, intercepted frequently by actions of self-love. It was almost like being a teenager all over again.

There was no work done, at least none by me. I slept when I wanted and woke up when I did. No one was allowed to disturb me, and no one particularly seemed to want to. There was a feeling of collective embarrassment in the ship, a magnified version of the not-meeting-eyes phenomena. This was fine by me since there was nothing they could give me anyway. I had all I needed. I was alive. Alive, and healthy, and I could see and smell and touch. I had nothing to see or smell or touch at that point of time, but I knew now that unusual things did happen. Who could say behind which corner cheetahs lay hid?

There were times in that week though where I wished desperately that I could draw better. That I could make the things I wanted to make, or wanted to see, or wanted so badly to exist in my world. Like dancing flamingoes, and chairs on clouds. And castles and women whose eyes you could lose yourself in.

And, every once in a while, it would occur to me that I had prevailed. I had been victorious. The feeling was one I have ever had so infrequently, so very seldomly, that I had convinced myself it was unnecessary. And yet I cannot deny it. It was amazing. Exhilarating. As if you could do anything, as if nothing would ever go wrong. It was like standing tall and looking over the edge of the world, like a musician in a concert...like a god.

I would have been content with that much. It would have been enough for me for a long time to come. There are always more things to want of course, but those wants are a part of our life and personality. I would have been comfortable with my wants for a while longer.

On the tenth day, however, I was roused from my slumber by a frantic Toshi.

“Ro!” came her urgent voice, piercing bluntly into my sleep.

“Yes, Tosh!” replied I, dreamily. “Do you like that?”

“Ro! Ro! It's happening again!”

“I'm rather talented, no?”

“We're being ordered to stop! Ro!”

“Forbidden passi –“

I woke up at this point, sitting up dramatically and parts of my brain feeling unaccountably guilty. “What happened? What was I saying?”

“Nothing, sir. There are American fighter drones in our sensors. They say they will fire at us if we don't stop.”

“What?” I blinked rapidly. Cobwebs of dream melted away. Softness, fragrance, warmth.

“They say they'll fire! Please wake up quickly!”

“I am! I am!” croaked I. I rolled off the bed and scrambled to my feet. “Did you tell them we don't have fuel?”

“Yes, sir. They're not responding.”

I swore and ran to the elevator, barefooted and in pajamas. My head throbbed.

You couldn't bribe a drone. Besides, there was nothing left.

When I reached the control room, I found a tense silence. Everyone was standing crowded around the sensory panel.

“Something's happening,” said Toshi turning.

I stared at her, for a bit too long perhaps, and then shouldered into the crowd.

“These two,” said Toshi, pointing at two dots, “were the ones that ordered us to stop. They're Callistan. But now there's a third one, and this one has marking of the Ganymedan American force.”

“Well, contact them. All of them.”

“We tried. They’re not responding.”

Suddenly there was a flicker in the power. The lights dimmed, the panel froze, and then returned to normal.

There was an incoming message.

It was a video channel, and to our collective surprise it was the man who’d stood with Escalon during the declaration of independence. The same stubby figure, a slightly pudgy face, and a look of great self-satisfaction. He laughed heartily, and pre-jowls jiggled.

“Well, well! You look like a scared lot!” He paused to laugh some more. “Thought we were going to abandon our heroes, eh?”

I listened in bewilderment. He looked like he would love to give elbow jabs, and I had a feeling that he was one of those people who seldom ended their sentences with full stops.

“Oh don’t look so lost!” he continued. “Welcome home, boys and girls! Welcome home! You’ve done a fine job!”

“What happened to the drones?” asked I.

“Why, we sent our own of course! SD760! Only three of them in operation out here! We scrambled their electronics real good! They won’t be doing any firing for a while!” He guffawed, and then looked at me. “You’re Captain Moniker?”

“Ro Moniker, yes,” said I, wearily.

“Well done, Captain! You brought your crew back home!”

I took a deep breath. “To be fair, it was more like they brought me back home.”

He laughed, looking pleased, and conveyed the impression of having patted my shoulder across a thousand miles. “We’re sending you approach vectors, Captain! Choose any of them that suit you, and give us a call, alright? Let’s bring you in!”

I nodded. At least there was no danger of me being a political prisoner.

“Alright then, Captain! We’ll catch up when you get here!”

He flashed a wide grin. I smiled like a toothache.

“That was General Pacho,” said someone in an awed whisper once he signed off.

I didn’t say anything, but walked away, my legs feeling heavy, and my mind feeling like it does on Tuesday mornings. “Toshi,” said I, at the door.

“I’ll see to it, sir,” said she, with just the right trace of sympathy in her voice.

“How’s Gustav doing?”

“He says his nose got set wrong, sir.”

“I guess, that’s something at least.”

I trudged back to my room and I’d hardly got there before Toshi called again.

“Sir,” said she. “We got the vectors.”

“So?” said I irritably.

“We’ll be at the space dock in an hour. The general sent another message. He said to be prepared for a crowd.”

“A crowd?” said I.

“Yes, sir. To welcome us. We broke through the embargo, sir. They think we’re heroes.”

“Well, some of us are,” I grunted.

There was a pause. “Everybody’s very grateful, Ro. We all know you saved us.”

I sighed and traced my finger along a window. It was set to show a highland sky, and the clouds darkened on contact. “I hate crowds,” said I.

“I thought you liked places with people,” said she.

“That’s when I can observe them, not when they are looking at me.”

She gave a soft chuckle. “It might not be so bad, Ro. There’ll be lots of women, just waiting for a glimpse of the courageous captain who defied the evil oppressors.”

“Yeah, right,” snorted I, and hung up.

Another part of my brain however, one that had been mostly dormant since the age of fifteen when the initial surges of testosterone had begun losing their flavor, thought to itself - why not? I had staved off missiles after all. I had saved a hundred and fifty lives.

I walked to the mirror and looked at myself. It wasn’t all bad. Good eyebrows for example, if smoothed down properly. A decent jaw line, if I set my mouth right, and sucked in my cheeks a little and the light was favorable. But what light could be better than the shine of glory? I decided I would take a bath. I looked for a suit to wear.

Forty minutes later I took my place amongst my senior crew in the control room, resplendent in black and dashes of crimson, with her Majesty tucked into my arms. Everyone seemed to have gotten the idea. Even Porridge was in a suit, looking like a most formal and disconcertingly large pudding. Gustav wore a bandage on his nose to match his clothes. Many of the women were in evening dresses. Men were thinking of women. Women were thinking of holovision. My collar felt sweaty.

Soon the ship swung in, following the vector arrangements. It entered Jupiter's field of moons and they could be seen in the distance, circling past. The Great Jove itself was a big, bloated blob hanging amongst the stars, red and glowering.

The ship neared Ganymede, the greyest and dullest of all of Jupiter's moons, and slowly its discoloring filled our windows. Two thin silver strands left its surface, the two space tunnels, one at New Chicago and the other at the European post, Jericho . We veered towards the closer one, the effect much like watching the globe roll. At the end of the strand sat a large, squat construction, with arms sticking out, the whole effect like a spider seen upside down. It was the New Chicago space dock, and we fell towards it graciously, synchronizing with the docking arm, slowing and locking.

We made our way down to the exit gateways, all lined up, and found ourselves at the tail of a queue consisting of the rest of the crew. Even IT was decked up and groomed, and Compliance looked like she was attending a marriage.

The doors swung open. A cheer came from the opposite side, and then a babble of questions. We at the back craned our necks and prodded people in front of us. Information filtered through that there were reporters. There was tittering, some agitated and some pleased, but there were enough people who would want to talk. I could see it was going to be a long wait and got Nguyen to get me a chair with wheels. I was their savior after all.

It was more than an hour and half later that I stepped onto the space dock. A host of reporters surrounded me. Cameras hovered. Most of them had questions for Captain Moniker. I, however, had been smart enough to keep Porridge near me and he helped me clear a way through. There were some female reporters who caught my eye, but this was no way to hold interviews, not without sofas and coffee.

There was a man waiting for me, a skinny, kiddish looking person, who grinned at me as if we had been best friends forever and then took a long puff on a cigar.

“Hello, Mr. Moniker. I’m JK.” He shook hands enthusiastically, and carefully blew smoke away from my immediate face. “I’m Mr. CJ’s first aide. He sends me to patch things up.”

He laughed at his own joke, and so did I when I got it.

“Nice cat,” said he.

Her Majesty remained unconcerned. “Thank you,” answered I, on her behalf.

He led me away and waved away the reporters while waving to them at the same time. I followed him, since he was likable enough and there seemed nothing else to do.

“So what’s there to patch up here?” asked I, over the din of the reporters.

He laughed again. “I’m to show you to your suite, Mr. Moniker. You’re quite a celebrity, as you can see. I’m charged with setting you up in style.”

“Really?” said I skeptically. “I don’t need to be ‘set up’. I have my own apartment.”

He shook his head. “Won’t do. You’ll be mobbed. Besides there is going to be a big reception for all of you tonight, a gala in your honor, at the Grand Galleria Ganymede, so we’re putting you up there.”

“All of us?” The GGG, as it didn’t like to be known, had rates measured in movie stars.

He shrugged and let out a puff and grinned evilly. “The Galeria wanted to do it. We would’ve given you the presidential suite, but it’s taken.”

“By Mr. CJ?” asked I, not being at my most attentive and looking around for impressionable women.

“No, Mr. Moniker,” said he, and called over one of those floating seats that spaceport officials used. We got on and he nodded to Porridge in a friendly and dismissive manner. “It’s taken by his boss.”

The seat bobbed up and started to move. I clutched Her Majesty close when she began to whimper, and realized who he was talking about.

“Sorry,” said I, a wary nervousness taking hold of me. “but what does Mr. CJ do exactly?”

“Oh you don’t know?” His glance was frank and honest. “He’s Escalon’s political advisor. I thought you’d know.”

“I probably should,” I conceded.

The seat took a turn before reaching the space tunnel.

“Gold class,” said JK, with a smirk. “We’ll beat all the reporters.”

“Good thing that,” said I, quietly. Perhaps it was.

There were more people in front of the entrance to the elevator. Most of them smiled, and when I got off there were a few handshakes and introductions. Then I was led to the elevator.

“This is nice,” said I, vaguely. It was very plush, with large soft seats and state-of-the-art dispensers. Another man had joined us, though he didn’t sit.

“Just security, Mr. Moniker,” said JK, noting my glance. “Nothing to get alarmed of. It’s just routine. You’re a state guest now.”

“But I live here,” said I.

“Yes, of course.” He smiled encouragingly. “We have all been so eager to meet you. It was quite a thing you did, breaking the embargo. A wonderful symbol.”

“Thank you. That’s what was on my mind too,” said I, dryly. “I’m just a very symbol guy.”

He chuckled and took out another cigar. “Smokeless,” said he.

I nodded. “So how are things going? We’ve been out of net connectivity.”

“Oh it’s going great. We’re working on some things. The constitution is being kept as before, of course. It’s wonderful, the DMAA constitution. Just a bit of fine-tuning, that’s all.”

“And what are they saying? First they place an embargo, then today they send drones from Callisto.”

“Oh it’s nothing. Just a bit of hot blood. You know how they are.”

I smiled weakly. “That’s why I’m worried.”

“It’s a very complicated political situation, Mr. Moniker. There are a lot of interests at stake. We’re holding talks with the Europeans and the Chinese even now.”

“I see. So we’re not going to get blown up?”

He grinned. “Not without due process.”

“Your drone fired upon the Callistan fighters,” I pointed out. “Isn’t that an act of war?”

“Fire?” said he, with a deep drag of the cigar. “No, Mr. Moniker, we just did what we could to save innocent lives. Their drones are quite undamaged.”

“I see,” said I, frowning. From what I knew, both sides could make excuses.

The elevator began to slow. JK leant forward. “By the way, Mr. Moniker, I’m really curious. How did you get them to pull back the missile?”

I looked at him. “We unloaded the cargo.”

“That was it?” He was smiling. “Just like a mugging?”

“All the accounts are with us,” said I.

He looked at me for a second, and then laughed and sat back. “That’s exactly the spirit we’re looking for, Mr. Moniker.”

The elevator stopped, and we stepped out. Her Majesty relaxed slightly in my arms. There were more people waiting, and another hovering seat.

“Get ready to wave, Mr. Moniker,” said JK. The seat whizzed forward.

“Should I say anything in particular?” asked I, nonchalantly, and watched him.

The cigar trailed circles in the air as he spoke. “You needn’t say anything at all, unless you want to. People who have to deal with crowds often usually find it best to just wave and smile, except when they want to especially make a point. Every sentence is a statement, you see.”

“I see.” The seat turned a corner then stopped. “I’m not much in a mood to make statements.”

He nodded genially, and we made our way out to the open.

There was a crowd, and it roared.

I stood still a few moments, eyes widened, staring at the scene. Cardigan Square was packed, bulging with people, shouting, cheering, their eyes fixed on me. A few policemen stood by barrier tapes to stop them spilling onto the road.

In front of me was a large, black vehicle. A classic Icelandic Reykjavik, the preferred mode of transport for important people everywhere.

“Smile and wave, Mr. Moniker,” said JK, doing the same himself.

“Oh yes, sorry.” said I, and smiled uncomfortably. I waved.

“Shall we get in the car?” asked JK.

“Sure, yes.” My eyes scanned the crowd once more and then turned skywards. The dull grey of a distant ceiling greeted me. “Yes, let’s get into the car.”

The inside of the car was a paradise of upholstery. I didn’t say much, and looked out of the window. Everything seemed normal. Traffic was a bit lesser than before, but generally people seemed to be doing what people seem to be doing. I wondered if Gustav was disappointed. Probably not yet though. There had been the crowd after all.

There was another one in front of the GGG. This time I was ready, and I smiled and waved with the best of them and strode into the building. Gilded floor welcomed me, and towers of veined marbled stood respectably to the side. Every city goes through a phase of creating something like the GGG, the motivation perhaps, of creating a lineage. A monstrous beauty is built, according to architectural principles three centuries older - when things were better and velvet was common. I personally love it.

He led me up to my suite and then shook my hand. “Have some rest, Mr. Moniker. I’m sure the last few days have been harrying for you.”

I smiled. “Room service?”

“Anything you want,” said he, generously. “I suggest a 2108 Algerian Sauvignon.”

“They were still growing wine there in 2108?”

“The last days of Earthern agro-protection policies.”

“You must be a symbol person too,” said I.

He laughed. “A valet will come later to help you prepare for the gala. You may get other visitors too, Mr. Moniker. Usually we advise candidates to be vague and pleasant until they are firmly in hold of the situation.”

“Sounds like good advice. I am not a candidate, of course.”

“You may still find it useful, Mr. Moniker. CJ will meet you later. Have a good day.”

“You too,” said I.

He left, and I closed the door to my suite, and then opened it once more and looked around. The corridor was deserted. I tip-toed out and peeked around the corner. There was no one except JK walking away jauntily. I couldn’t see any guards, for security or otherwise.

I returned to the suite and sighed and plopped onto the bed. Her Majesty was busy shredding the settee. I let her continue. Traveling builds up stress in cats.

After a while I called Toshi. The phone rang for a long time before it was picked up.

“Tosh,” began I.

“Takano here,” came a deep and friendly voice. “Toshi’s just looking around the suite. I’ll call her.”

“Oh right,” said I, and a nauseous, bitter feeling informed me that I was, in fact, back in Ganymede.

“How are you doing?” continued he, cheerfully.

“Oh,” said I. “Alright. Alright, I suppose.” Why shouldn’t he be cheerful, after all? “How are you doing?” I asked.

“Great! Seeing Toshi after so long! I was afraid the embargo would really complicate things y’know? I thought I might not see her again.”

“Yes, yes well. Things turn out for the best. You too must be...bound together by fate, etc... I-I’ll call later, thanks.”

“No, no wait. She’s here now.”

“Ro! How’s it going?” squealed Toshi. There was a sound of a kiss.

“It’s going fine. I just wanted to check if everyone was alright. I’ll be going now.”

“Did you get any women?” she chimed, and then giggled. I feared it was not caused by my mordant wit.

“No, Tosh. I didn’t get any women. I didn’t get anywhere near any women. I can’t even see how this ever works.”

She made a thoughtful sound. “Gustav was talking to some,” said she, helpfully.

I ended the call.

Her Majesty dawdled towards me on soft feline feet. I smiled. “A lonely man he was, the companion of queens. Sad in heart, a most bitter bard. The sky his joy, the sea his reward.”

I lay back on the bed. The roof had a fresco depicting a beautiful nymph in a crystal garden. Around the edges crept nimbly dressed satyrs. I found the remote and flipped through the pictures till I found one depicting a grinning, drumming band of skeletons.

My thoughts drifted through unpleasant plains of desertion to the unexpected mountainsides of historical reflection. I thought of America's colonial history. It's a strangely constricted topic, a clash of the concepts of the land of freedom and of manifest destiny. Even when there had been what some infidels may term colonizing, whether it be the Spanish-American war, or the beginning of the division of Africa or the skirmishes for space territory, there was always the call of freedom and opportunity and succour. And now the cry for independence was raised against them. I wondered if anybody actually knew what they were doing.

My thoughts softened into slumber soon enough though, drained as I was from the excitement of the day, not to mention that it was afternoon and the bed was massive and magnificently soft.

A while later, I was awakened by the sound of the door chime. I raised my head. "Yes?"

"Mr. Moniker?" It was a wonderful voice, sweet yet husky, like thick marmalade or oozing honey.

I sat up. "Yes?" A part of me wondered if I'd woken up at all.

"This is the *Ganymeda Tribune*," said the voice.

"Oh," said I, running my hand through my hair. It was the first of the reporters. Maybe Toshi had been correct. She so often is, after all.

"Just one sec," said I. "One second, just." I scampered across to one of the many enormous mirrors decorating the suite. My hair, never the most faithful of appendages, looked like a dying pineapple. My face looked puffy and haggard, and my eyes like an old dog's. "Right," said I. "Just hold on."

"Sure, Mr. Moniker," said she.

"So, how come you're the only reporter here? Don't you all hunt in packs?" said I lightly, rummaging through the desks for some complimentary cosmetics.

"I wanted to see you alone," said she, with the indication of a sultry smile in her voice.

"Oh! Very...uhmm...dedicated of you."

Why couldn't I find those cosmetics? This was a luxury hotel, wasn't it? Ahh, finally. A facemaker sachet. I poured out its entire contents into my palm and considered it. It was the red queen effect really, when you thought about it - people having to strain themselves to look better and better just to remain competitively attractive. It could of course be regarded instead as higher living standards. Splat went the liquid onto my face, followed by hairdo on the top like icing on a cake. Within seconds it solidified, skin upon

skin, fresh and healthy, and the hairdo whirred into action, nano-particles lining up in pre-defined styles.

I hurried to the door, delicately rubbing my eyes during the way. I opened it.

In the doorway stood the reporter, a vision, neatly dressed in long coat and white shirt, with perhaps just a bit more cleavage showing than necessary during the course of normal office hours. Her hair was the brown of soft earth, falling in a shimmering cascade. Her eyes were bright, her lips curled in a smile.

“Hello,” said I, and tried, instantly and despite all the previous years of my life, to spontaneously morph into something cool.

She held out her hand. “Hello, Mr. Moniker.”

I smiled, and took her hand. “Captain Moniker.”

She smiled back, knowingly and yet so attractively, and gave a slight nod. “Captain.”

I shook her hand slowly, and gazed into hazel eyes. “And you are?”

“Tarah,” said she softly, her pretty chin tilted up.

“Charmed,” said I, and wondered how women like her never have names like Bertha or Damayanti. Perhaps those poor girls never get over their names and grow up in such despair that they almost always end up doing justice to their name. No one, really, should be allowed to name another.

“May I come in?” said she, after a few moments.

“Oh yes. Yes. Please.” I stood back helpfully. She sashayed inside. “I hadn’t heard of the *Ganymeda Tribune*. Hadn’t even heard of Ganymeda, actually.”

She smiled over her shoulder. “It’s new.”

“Yes. So it is. Please have a seat.” She did, and I followed. “Well,” said I, “what does the *Ganymeda Tribune* want from me?”

“Oh, we just want our readers to get to know you, Captain. The people are eager.”

“They tend to be.” Thoughts of various ripe fruit tumbled through my head. I steeped my fingers defensively, and sat back. “I am at your service, Tarah. What would you like to know?”

“Tell us what happened out there, Captain. Tell us how you broke the embargo. Did they actually fire a missile at you?”

“Oh yes, they did. I jumped out in a spacesuit and kicked it away at the last moment.”

She laughed, her shoulders shaking charmingly as she did, though I was, admittedly, looking elsewhere. “Witty as well as brave,” said she.

I smiled graciously. “Not to mention my long eyelashes.”

Further tittering was cut off by the chime ringing again. I started. The rather optimistic thought fluttered into my head that perhaps it was another similarly gifted and able female journalist. Hope flew. I dreamt of cat-fights.

“Yes, come in,” said I, without even checking and immediately regretted it as a man strode in, dressed in the white toga of the Church of Jove. His arms were spread and he advanced upon me.

“Uhhh hell-“ I managed before he enfolded me in an embrace. “-o.”

“Good brother. Our Father is proud of you!”

“Oh.” I glanced at Monique and gave a suffering smile. “He told you, did He?”

The man’s embrace was emphatic and I tried to pull away in vain. The Church of Jove was really not on my huggable list. Not only did they have no women in their clergy, they didn’t seem overly enthusiastic about sterilizing their body odor either.

He looked confused. “Our Father speaks to all His children. He is the voice in our heart, the echo in our mind.”

“Gives the punch-line for the jokes...”

Now the man frowned.

“Mr. Moniker,” came Monique’s voice. She was smiling primly. “You do not believe in the Church of Jove?”

It suddenly occurred to me that I might have got myself into a bit of a situation. I’ll admit quite frankly that I’m not a big fan of the Jovian Church. They’ve always seemed to me to be a theme park of the worst kind, where the rides aren’t worth the money, and the theme has gotten old. But I had a female journalist to be a hero for, the holy grail so to speak, and the Church’s interrelation with Jovian nationalism, whether in Ganymede or Callisto is undeniable.

“I do not believe much in general,” said I, trying to skip around the issue.

“You’re an atheist?”

“No, atheists believe God doesn’t exist. I’m an unbeliever. I don’t believe in anything too easily.”

The man gaped at me. “How do you live like that?” He wore the triple lightning pendant of a bishop.

I shrugged, feeling conscious of Tarah’s attentive gaze.

Suddenly, the door rang again. “Who is it?” I called out, half wary and half thankful for the interruption.

“Mr. Moniker,” came a busy and thin voice. “It’s I, CJ. I believe you have heard of me?”

“Oh yes. CJ. Of course. Come in please.” I couldn’t help feeling that anyone connected to JK would be helpful at this point.

The man entered, and it was the same thin, old man who I had noticed on the HV. Those fox-like eyes ran over the room, and the same self-confident smirk curled his mouth.

“Well, well. I see you have already met Johann. Good afternoon, Johann.”

“Good afternoon, CJ,” said Johann, without much enthusiasm.

“I’m afraid I have to speak with Mr. Moniker privately for a while, Johann. Can I ask you to excuse us, if possible?”

“Well,” said Johann uncertainly. “I suppose so.” He gave me a cold look. “Mr. Moniker doesn’t seem to hold faith with our Father in any case.”

“Neither did those who founded this colony, Johann. I’m sure Mr. Moniker is a true Ganymedan where it counts.”

I smiled in a way that I hoped indicated the same.

CJ’s eyes turned to Tarah. “And the beautiful lady is?”

She rose and offered her hand. “Tarah. Of the *Ganymeda Tribune*.”

“Ahh. Our pioneering news agency. First in the fray already, I see.”

She smiled in what I thought was a very ingratiating fashion. It was not so pleasing when it wasn’t directed towards me.

“Tarah, rest assured the story of the S76-IB7 shall be first presented to none other than your paper. But right now I have some important business with Mr. Moniker. Would you be so kind?”

“Oh yes, CJ. Anything for you,” said she with what was clearly a fake expression of intimacy.

He smiled and waited for them to leave. Then he closed the door.

“Well, Mr. Moniker,” said he, putting his hands in his pockets. “How do you like the new Ganymeda?”

“It suits me better than the old one,” said I, my eyes still on the door.

“Ahh, of course it does.” He slowly walked around the room. “But that is quite the point, isn’t it? A new world is created so that it may suit its creators.” His eyes roamed over everything in the room, and as he walked his hands made small adjustments to the positions of ornaments and frames, straightening some, making some face a certain way.

He glanced at me. “Oh, you don’t need to look so concerned, Mr. Moniker. Ganymeda likes you. We like you. We have been trying to understand your personality, and what happened during the crisis. We’ve been asking around, studying your files, so on, and we like what we find. We do think you will like us in turn.”

“That’s nice to know,” said I, feeling oddly jittery, as if in the presence of a predator. “What did you find out exactly?”

“Oh, many things. People are so complicated, aren’t they? Psychoanalysis is really like putting a jigsaw together when all the pieces are fluid.”

A small china vase got shifted to the left. An apple got placed to fit against a banana’s curve.

“I’m sorry to come so straight to the point, Mr. Moniker. It’s just that I am so busy nowadays. I’m sure you can understand.”

“Of course,” said I. “Start-ups are always tricky.”

He didn’t smile, but gave the impression that a lesser man might have. A Buddhist monkey got redirected. “One of your subordinates complained that you respect nothing.”

“Oh yes, I’m a universal Dadaist,” said I, with a forced grin. “Besides, anybody who has been in space respects nothing.”

Fingers paused along the polished mahogany. “Do they?”

“Sailors respect the sea,” said I.

“Ahh, a pun.” He turned towards me and leaned back against the desk. “You have a talent with words, Mr. Moniker. I do not even know what a Dadaist is.”

“Most Dadaists would insist that the name is inapplicable, so I don’t think you’ve lost much.”

“I see. Mr. Moniker, educational though this thread of conversation may prove to be, I am afraid I must get back to the issue. What I hope to make you understand is that we could use you. You are really quite perfect to be in politics. I am surprised you haven’t thought of it yourself.”

“Never got round to it, really.”

“No? This is your opportunity then. I promise you that you can find us very useful. A new nation has to be defined. People need symbols. You, currently, and completely out of the blue, happen to be one. That is alright with us, its free press. This will be quite profitable for you, Mr. Moniker, to put it bluntly. You hold a healthy view towards profit, I understand.”

“I’m known for it.”

“Then perhaps you should give us a try, Mr. Moniker. That is why I am here. You are clever, and you are pragmatic. But you are also a cynic. No doubt you do not like this business, and I can tell you now that you will meet people, like our good brother Johann, who will make you like it less. I want you to understand that they are necessary. Whether you like it or not, people put faith in things. We need them to put faith in us. So we have to include those things within us. You are, in fact, one of those things too, as it stands.”

“I understand,” said I, and leant back against a quite unnecessary mantelpiece. “But you’re avoiding the central point, aren’t you? If I may be blunt as well...”

“The central point, Mr. Moniker?” He had the good grace to look knowing.

“Yes. The main issue. The big problem...”

He fixed his eyes on me. “Do tell,” said he.

I shrugged. “This revolution will fail. Cities don’t just secede from their state. That’s not how it works. No one gives up land.”

“Ahh yes. That is a valid point. You are right. Ordinarily, this would be suicidal. But there are arguments in our favor as well. The DSAA is no longer the power it used to be, you see. They are more than equally matched by at least the Europeans and the Chinese. And for everyone except the DSAA, whether large or small, an independent city in the

Jovian magnetic field is very, very favorable. The Russians and Indians love the idea obviously, and the Chinese are practically slaving. All of them lack a presence in Jove. All of them would like an assured, apolitical access to the magnetic field. As for the Europeans and the Japanese, they still prefer an independent, smaller partner rather than compete against the paranoid and unstable DSAA.”

"But will that be enough?" said I. "Will they move? Will they risk a war?"

"They are already moving, Mr. Moniker. They were always moving. I have been told you have an interest in history. You will understand that the situation has an illustrious series of precedents. This is how maps are redrawn."

"Maps are redrawn by blood, CJ, and frankly, I'm not the donator."

"Actually, I have reliable information that you donate blood regularly."

"That's just the company's annual drive. Toshi, my second-in-command, insists that I set a good example."

"Well, I don't mean to insist at all, Mr. Moniker. But I do want to point out that bloodshed isn't always necessary. There have been a number of strategic, diplomatically resolved secessions in history. There is a good chance this will be one of those. You see, most of the spacecraft that can operate in the Jovian field were stationed either here or at Callisto, and far more here than there. General Pacho has under his control quite a formidable force. Inconsequential compared to the weaponry present on or around Earth, but it will take them at least a few months to enable a significant force with Jovian capabilities. By that time, international pressure may have already resolved the issue.”

It was my turn to scrutinize him. “You seem quite sure,” said I, slowly.

“Quite is a strong word,” replied he.

He was a diplomat. I nodded.

“Think about it, Mr. Moniker. You have a decent job, but I think you have talent for much more. This is the opportunity of your lifetime.”

“Probably,” said I. “Besides, I don’t think I can help thinking about it.”

“That’s good.” He got up. “I shall give you some time alone. Your valet will arrive soon. Please do allow him to help you dress. The gala will have a lot of press coverage. And later of course Mr. Escalon wishes to speak with you.”

“He does?” asked I, my eyebrows rising.

“Why do you think I’m talking to you now?” said he as he walked to the door.

“Makes sense,” I conceded, and followed him. “Can I ask you something before you leave?”

He stopped and then turned. “Please...”

I regarded him carefully. “Why did you do it? This insurrection?”

He gave his smirk. “Why, Mr. Moniker? Don’t we deserve to be free?”

“That was not my question. And you know it wasn’t.” said I. “The old Ganymede wasn’t so unsuitable to the JNP. You would definitely have won the next election.”

His smirk vanished and for a moment he was silent. “Yes, you’re right. To be very honest, this wasn’t my idea. But I am only an advisor. I can only advise.”

“Oh,” said I. “I see.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Moniker. It should all be fine.” He gave a tilt of his head. “Goodbye.”

“Wait. Please. Why did Escalon do it then? Can you tell me?”

He stopped again, and this time there was a shadow of a smile on his face. “What can I say, Mr. Moniker? I cannot see inside his head.” He paused, looking at me, and then added. “But perhaps you know what the American President said when they sent the first man to the moon...”

“We do these things not because they are easy...but because they are hard...” Skeleton fingers danced on my skin.

“Yes,” said he. “I always thought it was an unnecessarily insightful to be said in a political speech. Take care, Mr. Moniker. I shall see you in the evening.”

I stared at him, a chill running through me. He turned to leave and then paused again.

"One last thing. You may get visits from...other parties. I think it'll be in your best interests to make no promises to them. And I don't mean that as a threat..."

I trudged back inside the room that and slumped onto the bed, and was left there in what looked like a post- renaissance virgin queen’s conception of hell, waiting for a valet. It was not a situation I was conversant with, but so great was the distraction of the man's words that I didn't even notice the minutes pass by.

He’d said it was an opportunity. It was true enough. It made sense. They needed heroes. I, in the particular circumstance, happened to be one. That this was in complete opposition to all personal probability, and the fact that I'd always thought it more likely

for me to be a mongoose than an ideal of bravery was irrelevant. I was a hero. Heroes could live off being what they were.

If Escalon asked me to be their vanguard against an enemy armada, I would have to find a way to run away speedily, and that was the risk. But I didn't think they would do that. CJ had shown a good understanding, indeed appreciation, of what I was. It was far more likely that they would ask me to play it up for the crowd. I could think of no objection to this, except for CJ's explanations of the political situation being overly sanguine. If the DSAA were to send their soldiers lumbering in, the waving and smiling beacon that the enemy had been rallying to was not likely to get an especially friendly reunion.

The other choice was to try and politely back out of whatever Escalon would suggest, and keep my head low, hoping for things to settle down without my skin getting burnt. But which was a better course? It so completely depended on how accurate they were. One obviously had a far greater profit than the other, but how comparable were the risks? Who could tell? If it came to war then I could be dead whether I was a mascot or not.

At some point Her Majesty hopped into my lap, and looked so blasé that I felt protective, and told her that she shouldn't worry, since I would convey her to an abandoned pet shelter if anything happened. Everyone knows that abandoned pets are the safest creatures during a war, except in the small chance of the soldiers starving.

After a while, when I'd had begun checking news reports on the net terminal provided, there was another chime from the door-bell. I remembered CJ's warnings and really hoped that it was the valet, since I felt in no mood for another politically nuanced, decision heavy conversation. I had a glimpse into how popular girls and guys might have felt in college. Apparently my disdain for their tribulations had been misplaced.

My hopes though turned out to be idle and I knew it the moment I saw my visitor's face on the door-cam. The man was heavy-set, with a generous stomach, and a scrumpy mustache. He was obviously of Indian origin. I wondered if it would be best to ignore his presence, but he kept hitting the chime repeatedly and by the third time my frayed nerves and limited patience were worn out.

"Enter," said I, my voice weary, and turned to face the door.

The man entered and gave a pleased smile. "Mr. Manekar - that would be the correct pronunciation, am I right?"

"That is the historical version, yes. But I think it's time people accept that language changes."

His smile became less pleased. "We are all bound to our pasts, Mr. Manekar, and to our blood."

Obviously his research had been less thorough than CJ's, or perhaps less useful. The queasiness that had gripped me for the past few days returned stronger than ever. "May I know who you are, and what you wish to see me for?" I asked coldly.

"My name is Aurishto Banerjee, Mr. Manekar. I work with the Indian embassy here."

"Please feel free to take a seat." I reached out for her Majesty and brought her comforting weight to myself. "You are a diplomat?"

"When it is so required..." said he, with more significance than he probably needed to.

I wondered if all diplomats liked word games so much, and whether it was really that necessary or just a self-selection bias. After all, I had a fondness for word-play myself and a career in the foreign services had always been on one of my lists, along with 17th century Persian courtier, and 21st century young women's fictional vampire. At this moment though, I felt only tedium towards them all.

"Mr. Banerjee, I don't know why you're here, but I have a strong feeling that you're wasting your time."

He sat himself heavily, and wriggled till he felt comfortable. He looked across at me. "Mr. Manekar, I'm only going to take a moment here. I merely wish to assure you that your country stands with you."

My eyebrows rose involuntarily. "My country?"

"You still hold the passport, Mr. Manekar. You've lived abroad for a while, but we think of you as one of us."

I didn't know what to say. I find offerings of nationalism distasteful, but this wasn't equivalent to standing up during the anthem, this was real.

"Look," said I, "that is a wonderful message, and I'm grateful...but really, I have nothing to give, or take, from you. I mean, what does it even mean? Standing with you?"

"You have our support," said he. "It was a brave thing you did."

I stared at him. He obviously didn't know what'd happened at all. "What do you mean by support?" said I, with a trace of anger seeping in. "Is there anything on offer? Am I getting a big house back home? A state pension?"

He looked taken aback. His fingers tapped on his armrest. "You...want something like that? I thought you wanted to take part in the rebellion. Just like Mr. Khan."

"Khan Ali Khan?" It was my turn for surprise. "But he's...he's just of Indian origin, not a citizen...I didn't think that he..."

"Please, don't get me wrong," he cut in, "He's not working for us. It is his personal grievance. Just like yours, right? You acted on your own as well."

"Yes," said I, slowly. "Just like mine." I took a deep breath. "So there's no chance you'll extradite me?"

"Extradite, Mr. Manekar? But why? You are a hero here! After this is resolved, and Ganymeda is free, you shall be a hero all over the world. Your country shall host you with honors!"

I nodded. "But only then? Not before? Not right now?"

"That would be rushing our position, Mr. Manekar. Diplomacy takes time."

"And in the meanwhile, I am left with nothing but your...support, as you put it?"

He frowned. "Is something wrong? You're the hero of the hour. What more could you want?"

I put her Majesty on the table and got up. It was apparent he wouldn't understand. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Banerjee."

His frown deepened, but he did get up as well. "I'm sorry if I offended you in any way..."

"No, no, it's fine," said I. "Goodbye."

He left, and I slumped back on the bed once again.

Five minutes later, my valet appeared, and though I would never have expected it, his presence managed to cheer me up somewhat. He was a dapper, plump guy, very polite and deferential, and carrying a beautiful tuxedo. He managed to give an aura that his corpulence had actually freed him, liberated him from the need of machismo, imbued him with dignity and efficiency. I have to admit that I was quite awed, especially with his explanation of the socio-economic causes for the evolution of the tie. I had always been curious about that.

A little more than half an hour later, I was ready. The tux hugged my shoulder, black and white and slashed with emerald green silk. It was the kind of costume that would give a leper confidence and I was nearly walking on air. Antoine, the valet, and I had gotten to be good friends by then, though his respect for me was somewhat lesser than mine for him, especially after my goof up with the cuff-links. Nonetheless we were getting along very well, and my mood had brightened considerably. He reminded me of actual people. On the way down to the hall, I asked him if he had any family.

"Oh yes," said he.

“Small kids?” said I. He seemed like the guy who would have a whole brood of pesky yet adorable little children.

He shook his head. “My wife doesn’t want children, sir. She says it will ruin her figure.”

“Oh? She has a good figure, huh?” I pictured a sweet but slightly vain girl. Rosy cheeks, cute love handles. Cuddly, in fact.

“She’s a model, sir,” said he. “She has to have a good figure. She’s very career-oriented, sir.”

“Oh,” said I, taken aback, and narrowly avoiding tripping over. “A model?”

“Yes, sir. Lingerie mostly, but for the shows, so she has to look especially attractive.”

“Ahh, yes. Must be a pain.” I glanced at him again. He stood primly, and examined his perfectly polished shoes as the elevator descended.

We reached our floor. “So...uhmm...how did you get together with a lingerie model?”

His look was immediate and icy-cold. “What do you mean...sir...?” said he stiffly. This time, exiting the elevator, I did trip.

“I mean...you know...how did you...” His eyes narrowed. “Well...meet her...and everything...”

“That is none of your business,” said he, and lifted up his chin.

“No...I mean...Antoine, sorry. I didn’t mean to imply...”

“I know very well what you meant, sir. I do not wish to speak to you further.”

“Oh...but...but I...you taught me about ties, Antoine. I thought this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“We have arrived, sir,” said he coldly.

I looked about and noticed that I had indeed reached the great hall that was the trademark of the GGG. People filled the place, and they glittered. There was a press of reporters around the entrance and they all started gibbering at me. A dozen camera bots hovered around me, trying to get enough information to construct holograms.

I smiled. There wasn’t much room for waving. Through the noise I noticed the flag-balls lining both walls. The new Ganymedan flag-ball, a black sphere of space, filled in a corner with the looming curve of Jupiter, and set in the centre with the sparkling and haloed orb of Ganymede. Some stars twinkled in deferment in the background.

I was being asked questions whose answers I hadn't decided on. I thought it would perhaps be best to walk through. Questions could be answered later, for now my presence would have to do. Smiling and swatting away cameras, I shouldered into the room.

People I didn't know smiled at me and greeted me. Men thrust out their hands for shaking. Women beamed, and looked as if they were ready to simper. I knew I should say something, or do something. But for the life of me I couldn't think of what to do. What could I say? I'd never met them before, and they were packed in with a horde of their metaphorical sisters, not to mention brothers and aunts.

I've never been good with crowds. On a one to one I maintain my claim to being a wonderful conversationalist. I can address a crowd as well, if absolutely necessary. But if I have to speak with more than one person at a time, who I don't know, then I am curiously incapable. Perhaps it is because I have never really gotten comfortable with small talk. Unless I am talking about something, I don't know what to say. I can make jokes and it is usually what I do but when I am faced with two or more people, who may be quite different from each other it's difficult to do so.

Thankfully, at that point I saw Porridge's head, a beacon shining above the sea of people, and I blindly waded my way towards it.

There was a circle of emptiness around him, and I could see why as soon as I entered it.

"Attack me," said he, to a nervous looking Basher. Reporters and guests alike looked on in considerable interest.

Basher sighed. "I don't wanna," said he. "You'll just do that thing again."

"But you have a fork, lad. You can get him," said a military looking man, patting him on the back.

"No, no. He'll just..."

"Yay... go on Basher. Attack him. Show them what you're all about." This was me, ever the encouraging, friendly manager.

Basher gave me a pained look. "Good evening, Cap'n."

"Go on, attack him Basher," said I, nodding. "Take him by surprise."

He let out another sigh and then turned and lunged. Porridge caught his arm neatly, sidestepping the thrust of the fork, and then twisted his wrist to magically make him do a somersault and fall on his back.

Basher groaned. People clapped.

“Hurrah,” said I. “Encore. Encore.”

“Is that karate, Mr. Jones?” asked a wide-eyed, blue-haired girl.

“No, kid,” said Porridge. “It’s aikido.” Some people clapped again.

Before he was engulfed by questions, I pulled him aside. “What’s happening? Where’s everyone?”

“Oh everything’s great, Ro. Seems like things turned out well after all, huh?”

“I don’t know, Jones. I hope so. Where’s Toshi?”

“I think she’s somewhere over there,” said he, pointing in a vague direction, before getting distracted. “Yes I’m actually six seven, honey. Oh yes, I’m a Buddhist. I worship Buddha every day.”

I left to search for Toshi at that point. The press of people seemed to be getting denser. A lot of them greeted me, but they seemed to be preoccupied. A voice called my name and I realized why.

“Captain! It’s Captain Moniker! Get over here, Captain! Let’s have a look at the hero of the hour!”

“General Pacho.” I wondered how he’d spotted me, since I couldn’t see him at all.

“Over here, Captain. Where are you going?” Some people moved aside, and I spotted him waving imperiously.

“How are you doing, General?” said I, feeling much like a fly being invited by the spider.

“Oh, I’m doing well, lad. I was just telling Major Tagoda here about Mrs. Rumichai.”

I looked at the Major. The poor man seemed pale. “She’s from my city, apparently,” said he, with a desperate smile.

“Yes! Lovely little piece! A real tart! She says to me...” He prodded my shoulder. “Oh general! I’m married! Don’t look at me that way. It’s not proper.” He let out a guffaw. “Well, I knew what she was about! Oh yes!” He winked and punched my chest. “And next day, she brings over her sister. General, she says, Chichi here would like to serve under you too.” He burst out laughing. Some of the others, almost all military, gave their best shot at mirthful expressions.

He clapped my shoulder. “Anything like that ever happen to you, Cap’n? Women really dig you naval types.”

“That’s...that’s what they say...” I gave a weak laugh. Everyone seemed to be looking at me.

“What about that First Officer of yours?” continued the General, helpfully. “She seems like a sweet, little piece of...”

“Yes, her! Yes, I have to go find her right now, actually. I’m really sorry. I’d love to stay and chat, but it’s very important.” I hurried away, feeling irritated at the world.

“Mr. Moniker,” said a reporter appearing suddenly, his cam bot at the ready. “A few words for the Lunar Net News?”

“Never trust anchovies,” muttered I, and sidestepped him, and bumped into Takano. I gaped. “Oh, you’re here too.”

“Ro!” He really had a disgustingly deep voice. “How are you? You’re the hero of the hour.” He shook my hand enthusiastically and I grimaced both at the recurring expression and the unnecessarily strong grip.

“Yes, it feels like it,” said I. “Where’s Toshi?”

“Mr. Moniker, would you smile for the camera? A picture with your friend?” continued the reporter.

“Oh yes!” exclaimed Takano, and put an arm around my shoulder. He raised his fingers in a V. “Victory! Ganymeda!”

“Freedom! Pizza!” said I, and my sarcasm broke against the forts of their self-belief like so much surf.

“That’s wonderful,” said the reporter as the cam bot returned to him. “So spirited.”

“Yes I know. By the way, General Pacho’s over there. He was looking for someone to talk to.”

The man's face lit up. “Really?”

“Hurry, man. It’s your lucky day.” When I turned back, Toshi was approaching, balancing two drinks, and wearing a shoulder-less slinky black gown.

“Hey!” said Takano, scooping up a drink, grinning like an idiot. “A reporter just took a photo of me and Ro. It’s going to come on the Lunar Net News.”

Toshi laughed. “That's so great, honey!”

It occurred to me that I really had no reason to have been searching for Toshi, and now that I had found her, I didn't know what to do.

She looked at me, and smiled. "You're looking great."

"Thank you." She had such beautiful shoulders, so silken and smooth, leading to soft, round arms. "You're looking great too," said I, trying to keep my voice level.

"How're things?" said she, looking pleased.

"Good," said I. "How're things with you?"

"Great," said she. Takano beamed and gave her shoulders a light squeeze. I felt a tightening in my guts.

"How's everyone else doing? Everything alright?"

She gave a curious look. "You seem strangely concerned about that these days."

I shrugged. "Haven't you heard, I'm a hero now."

She laughed. "Yeah, that you are. I think everyone's fine. Gustav and Robin are officially together."

"Really?" I suppose it was to be expected. That woman had a strong thigh grip.

She pointed over to the bar. Gustav was there, one hand tracing his nose while he spoke to three women, and Robin hung on his other arm, looking furious.

Suddenly, I heard my name being called again and turning, I saw CJ advancing towards me.

"Mr. Moniker," said he. "Enjoying the party?"

"I need a drink," said I, heavily.

He quirked a brow, and gave a quick glance to Toshi, and then looked back at me. The smirk returned. "That's no problem. Alcohol is the life blood of politics and diplomacy. Walk with me."

So I did. After a few steps I glanced back once. Toshi was laughing, and clinking her glass with Takano's. He was laughing too.

"I need you to meet some people Mr. Moniker. Nothing special. Just so everyone knows your face."

“That is important?”

“Very important. Don't worry, just be yourself.”

I grunted. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. No one listens anyway. They will hear what they like to hear. You have been cast.”

“Like dice.”

“Not the meaning I was going for, but yes, very clever,” He stopped a waiter-bot and corrected the configuration of the glasses it carried. I picked one up, and he had to move the rest again.

“First we meet Khan,” said he. “Don't pick another, Mr. Moniker.”

“These glasses are tiny,” said I, and picked out the central one.

“That's very childish,” said he coldly, and stiffly moved on. “Khan's in the lounge, with his friends, most of who are crucial to Ganymeda's economy.”

“Right,” said I. My eyes caught hold of something. “Listen,” said I urgently, sidling behind him, “that woman, there, don't draw her attention please.”

“Her? Why, who is she?”

“Compliance.”

He stole a glance. “As you wish...”

We sneaked past the Compliance Lady, so close as to hear her words.

“Compliance,” she was saying eagerly, “is responsible for ensuring that Macauley-Yang adheres to the financial regulations that are prescribed by a variety of sources including regulators, exchanges, central banks, governments and supra-national institutions.”

It was a kid, the poor reporter. His eyes looked right and left. There was a hunted expression on his face.

“The Compliance function,” she continued, “not only assists business units and their supervisors to comply with the rules and regulations that govern our industry, but also provides expert advice on where ‘the line’ may be drawn in future.”

She made the quotes with her fingers. I could watch no more.

“I see what you mean,” said CJ, after we passed her. “By the way, you’ve already met the General, right?”

“Yes,” said I carefully.

“Each has his place, Mr. Moniker. Each job requires a certain type of person.”

“I understand that. May I ask something though? What actually happened? We got news of Escalon getting arrested, the army being called in, and the next thing we knew there was the declaration of independence.”

“Ahh, yes. Well, the General declared that the best way to keep peace would be to free Escalon. And so he did.”

“Neat.”

“Thank you.”

We passed a gateway and I found myself in a darkly lit brooding chamber, with large, leather sofas covered with somber suited old men, and one somber suited old lady.

Solomon Khan stopped peering into the whiskey in his glass and looked at me.

“Mr. Moniker,” introduced CJ.

This however led to the glingly situation developing, a name that I give to the collective of those circumstances where etiquette is sabotaged by spatial and social conditions. For example, in the present state, were they to rise to shake my hand, or was I to make a round with bent back to do the needful. It could be argued both ways really, much like euthanasia.

I tried doing what I could to resolve the situation by performing a little-boy wave, but since there was only one old woman there was hardly any appreciation for my efforts.

The lady spoke up though. “You’ve done us proud, Mr. Moniker,” said she, with a suitably gratified smile.

Some of the others echoed her, and raised their glasses. It was quite flattering, except that what they were cheering was probably a misrepresentation. That should of course only have made it more enjoyable.

“Thank you,” said I. “Thank you all. I really just did what I could. I don’t deserve all this.”

There were cries of “No, no” and “It’s people like you that we need.” CJ, thought I, could have no cause to complain.

Khan, however, had returned to gazing at his glass.

“*Mohtaram janab* Ali Khan,” said I, on a sudden whim. “I have to say, I’m honored to meet you.” I approached him with an outstretched hand. If that’s what they wanted, that’s what I would give them.

Khan though, didn’t look pleased. His eyes were worried, and he rose very slowly. “Thank you, son. I only wish you could have brought the cargo through as well. It would have been very useful.”

That dampened the room completely. They all grew quiet. I glanced around quickly. It was as if they had all been working hard to forget that, and now found themselves feeling guilty and troubled. Apparently, things weren’t as rosy as CJ had been portraying.

He hurried forward now and came to my side. “I’m sorry, I have to get him to meet many more people, so we will get going. Perhaps we’ll meet again later in the evening.”

He made me take my leave quickly and hastened me away.

“They seem vexed,” said I, frowning, once we left.

“Oh, it’s nothing. They’re businessmen. You know how they are.”

“You seem vexed as well.” He didn’t answer. “Everything alright?”

“Alright? What does that mean, Mr. Moniker? Shall we all die tomorrow? Most probably not. Shall some money be lost? It’s possible. Can profit be made sooner or later? I would say so. People need to have a little more faith.”

“Or a lot less faith, in my observation.” He gave me a dour look. “I did my part,” I pointed out.

He let out a sigh. “Now we shall meet Wors Gom. He is the leader of the union of workers in the gravitron industry. He is very important, though he may not seem like it.”

“Always so troublesome that. Important people, I’ve always felt, should have the decency to look important.”

“He looks like what his people would like him to look. Here he is now.” He motioned towards a red-faced, sturdy looking man. He resembled Escalon slightly, similar build and jaw, but with a further receded hairline. “Wors Gom,” said CJ. “I’d like you to meet Mr. Moniker.”

“Aahh,” said he, turning towards me with a supremely pleased expression. “Mistah Moniker! Finally! I am so pleased to meet yuh!” He pumped my arm furiously. “Hey,

Waldy, Mack, look heuh, it's the Cap'n! Mistah Moniker, I can't say I evah liked your Macauley-Yang, but aftah yuh did what yuh did, I'm beginning to change my mind."

I laughed genially, since it seemed called for. Waldy and Mack shook my hand in turn. I began to appreciate how much effort those ten-minute handshakes between diplomats took. It seemed no wonder that not many agreements get reached.

"What is their stand now?" continued Wors. "Macauley-Yang? What are they saying? Are they standing by yuh?"

That took me aback. I hadn't considered that. I hadn't tried to report back, or find out what view Macauley-Yang had taken of the situation. I'd just been so emotionally absorbed in not being dead.

"Wh' happened?" asked Wors. "Are yuh ar'right, Cap'n?"

"I haven't found out," said I, unsavory prospects drifting through my head.

He frowned. "CJ? Do yuh know?"

CJ raised a brow. "I've been very busy, Wors."

"Course," said Wors with a laugh. He looked at me and clasped my hand. "Don't worry, Mistah. We won't let'em do anythin to yuh. Oh no, not if they evah want to operate round heah again. Yuh did what was right, Cap'n, and they bettah know wheah to stand!"

"Really? Thank you!" said I, with genuine feeling. He looked like he could keep his promise too, with his stout face and fixed gaze.

Perhaps, thought I, Porridge and Toshi were right after all, and everything had turned out fine. Of course, this would have been a very different book if that was true.

CJ led me away soon after. "There is one last person you should meet. Otherwise she will irritate me later, if it comes to her mind."

I looked at him curiously. He allowed himself a half-smile. "Zoomer."

"Oh," said I, and watched his smile get smug. "Don't worry, I'm not one of her worshippers."

"Are you not?" He gave a sly look. "But you haven't even met her yet."

"I'm a grown man," said I, with some pride. It was pure bluff, of course, and the moment I saw her it melted away, and I was left empty and defenseless.

How do I explain it? There are beautiful women, most of us have seen many such, but there is more to it than that. People have, for lack of a better word, auras. We all know it, and all of us have it, for good or worse. It can make us attractive, or despicable, or amicable, or boisterous, or just invisible, and people will form this expression before they have even spoken to us and will never let it go. Mine, I think, is like that of a three-legged old cat. Hers was that of a goddess.

Her eyes were languid, soft yet piercing, darkened with kohl. Her hair was slicked back, close to her skull. She wasn't exceptionally pretty, never had been, but her face was striking. She laughed loudly, brashly, and her slender body swayed as she talked to a court of reporters and fans. Her gown was white luminescence.

Then she saw me, and her lips curled upwards, and she raised her slim arm, and her head tilted to the side. I took her hand in half a daze, and held it limply.

"The brave captain," said she, and her voice was mesmerizing, liquid yet edged with gravel. "I know who you are. I see these things." She broke out into a laugh.

I smiled uncertainly, still holding her hand in mine. There were bruises on her knuckles.

CJ leant into me. "We have encouraged her to remain... chemically invigorated... for the purposes of this evening," he whispered.

She closed her eyes peacefully. Some cam bots were looking busy. I let go of her hand hurriedly.

"I like you, Ro," said she dreamily, opening her eyes again. "We shall be friends."

"I'm...I'm sure we will." I glanced at CJ. He shrugged unhelpfully.

"You are a romantic, aren't you?" continued she. "I can see it in your eyes. They are brown. Like a heart."

"Made of chocolate?" said I, smiling weakly.

"No," said she, her voice ghost-like. "Made of dead flesh. Crusted blood. It all becomes brown. Or crimson. Or grey." She paused. "Yes."

CJ silently handed me a drink. I gulped it down and handed it back.

She began walking, and I had no choice but to accompany her. The reporters followed, and their cam bots kept pace. I couldn't see CJ though. That alarmed me a bit.

"You don't like it, Ro?" said she softly. "You don't like what I said? That's sweet, you know. You seem very sweet." She took my hand in hers again, idly, like a child would.

“I...I like hearing you say it,” said I nervously. I didn’t know what to do. Here she was, the most famous woman in the solar system for the past couple of months, basking in the glow of a dozen cameras and whispering what would conventionally be termed as flirtations.

She squeezed my arm. “Good. Then we can be friends. I like having friends. But I have none. No friends at all.” She stopped and twirled and smiled at the reporters. “Are you my friends?”

They laughed and shouted that they were, and that they loved her. She laughed as well, the loud, brash laugh of hers. “No! No, you are not! Not at all! You wish you were!” Then she let out another laugh, and turned back to me. “They don’t want to be my friend,” she hissed. “They just wish it.” Her eyes were dark, and wide. Her pupils were dilated. “Then why should I care?”

“You shouldn’t,” said I, gazing at her. Her eyes were larger than perfect, her jaw a bit too wide, her mouth too large. I couldn’t look away. Her face was so close to mine. Her perfume was spiraling up my nose, misting my brain.

“Tell me what you like, Ro,” said she, lips parting, moving. “Tell me what you like more than anything else.”

Suddenly CJ re-appeared at my elbow, and tapped me on the shoulder. “One moment, please.”

“I...huh...what?” said I, suffering as I was, from some amount of proximity related disorientation.

He neatly pulled me aside, and handed me another two drinks.

“Why thank you, but I’m doing quite well as it is.”

He grunted. “Give this drink to her. Not the other one. Say your most favorite thing is music. Do not, I repeat, do not, under any circumstances, allow her to kiss you. Not for a few weeks anyway. People are watching.”

“You mean, after a few weeks...”

“Go back now. Concentrate.”

I went back. I concentrated. After only a few moments of uncertainty, I gave her the right drink. “Music,” said I, with a flourish. “I live for music. Runs through my veins.”

She smiled sweetly, and then gurgled down the drink like a drainpipe. Some splashed onto her...well her...the area between her face and her cleavage, that half a foot of womanhood that is curiously unnamed.

“I love yours, especially,” continued I. “Your music.” Trickle started rolling downwards, their paths curved.

“You do? Really?” She seemed flattered, her eyes upward crescents, a beaming grin on her face. “Which one? Which one do you like most? More than anything...”

“Which one? Well. Yes. Why...why...the latest one of course. You get better by the day.”

“‘Rise Up to the Occasion?’ You like that?”

“Yes. Yes I love it.”

“I don’t like it much. I think it’s horrible.” She grimaced. I noticed she was steering me towards the raised stage at one end of the hall.

“Yes. No. I think it’s wonderful. Divine.”

“Really? Really, really?”

“Oh yes. It’s very...”

“Patriotic?”

“Exactly, yes.”

She stopped and laughed and turned to the reporters. “It’s your lucky day, fellas!” she shouted. “The Captain and I are going to sing for you!”

I stiffened, hardly believing I heard that right. They, of course, let out a huge cheer, and she whooped and clapped her hands and guffawed.

“No! No, No,” said I, hurriedly. “No, I’m no singer. Couldn’t sing to save my life. No please.” But everyone was already ready and waiting, expectation alight on their faces. I groaned. Where was CJ?

“C’mon, Captain,” said Zoomer with a giggle. She swung herself up onto the stage and jumped and waved. “C’mon up, Ro. C’mon, c’mon.”

I suddenly spotted JK in the crowd. I signaled him frantically but he merely grinned and cheered. I felt slender fingers grasp my arm.

There was no choice then. Once a woman grabs you, all courses of action vanish. You can merely subject yourself to acceptance, or the strongest of remonstrance. When the woman is one adored by many millions, this choice is further reduced. I climbed onto the

stage, my knees shaky, my jaw tight. I waved weakly. Her eyes glinted as she looked at me and thrust upon me a microphone.

She grinned like a boxer's dream, and took up her own mike. "Hellooo, Ganymeda!"

She raised an arm. People turned. They stopped, and pointed and looked. The ones who had already been looking cheered - a loud, hungry cheer, which rattled my bones and made my limbs quiver.

Her arm dropped. Behind her a speaker trembled, and the air in the room seemed to ripple. The mesoviolsins started.

I sang, eventually. For a while I muttered into the mike, swaying awkwardly by her side. I watched as she bounded across the stage, lost in the song, head banging to the rhythm. It got to me. It had to. Whatever she might have been, whatever she might do or have done, up on the stage with her, at the height of her glory, there was only one thing to do. So I dunked down a drink, and then another one, and though I didn't know the words, I sang.

It is a feeling I cannot describe. Language was not made to cope with this sort of thing. It is other worldly. Lava stars are gods.

By the time we finished, an hour later, I was exhausted, sweating from every pore, my suit a mess, my head reeling with intoxication, and if it wasn't for all those people carrying me around when I jumped off the stage, I would have lain collapsed on the floor somewhere. As it was, I found myself, almost miraculously and without any thought or realization, in Escalon's presence. Apparently I had walked there, somehow or the other.

After the mild surprise, I sat down, and blinked at the world with ambivalence. I made out a vague outline of ordered energy, and said "Hey CJ. Howya doing? Did ya hear me sing?"

"We all heard you sing, Mr. Moniker," said he, matter of factly. "It was quite inescapable."

"Was it awful?" asked I.

"Yes, it was. But it's so difficult to say nowadays. They loved you anyway, so it's all good."

"Of course they did," said I, in a magnificently slurred voice. It dimly crossed my mind that when I let her pour drinks my mouth after an encore of 'You Are Not My Cherry Pie,' I might have done well not to rely on her moderation.

CJ came over to my side. "Now, like I'd said, I'd like you to meet Cado Escalon. Sir, this is Ro Moniker."

“Hallo, Mr. Cado Escalon,” said I, most graciously.

He laughed, and held out his hand. I shook it duly. “I did not want to meet you when you are inebriated, Captain,” said he, “but you can hardly be blamed for that. I am so busy nowadays that it’s difficult to re-schedule, and Zoomer, I know, can prove quite insistent.”

“Yes, she can,” said I with a chuckle, and then with the clarity of thought that sometimes accompanies alcohol, added, “But she can afford to, can’t she? She can, because she is the revolution. She is what it’s all about.” I laughed like a moron. “A revolution, for a song. Good bargain that.”

Escalon paused, and frowned, and looked at CJ, who shrugged. “He’s right, in a way. We need all types, sir.”

“So we do,” said Escalon, with a sigh. He leaned forward. “Pragmatism is valued now, Captain, as CJ says. And so are heroes. You seem to be both, cynic and savior. That is rare, but I know, better than most people, how crucial such people are.”

He was the modest type, as you could see. I didn’t mind, being only partially sentient as I was. Humility is overrated anyway.

He leant back, and smiled in a genteel fashion. “People should only be given responsibility when they know why they do what they do.”

“That’s not enough,” said I, “People do what they like. They should know why they like what they like.” I smiled peaceably, and felt clever.

He stiffened and tapped his fingers on his knee. Then, slowly, he nodded and smiled. “Quite so, yes. That would be nice. Are you, then, such a man, Mr. Moniker?”

This was the big moment, I suppose. I sat up. “I am such a man, Mr. Escalon.” It is possible that then I burped.

“Good,” said he smoothly. “The question only remains then, what would you wish for your services? We can help you, Captain. Tell me, what is it you want?”

I suppose the man was being magnanimous, or thought he was being so, or was pretending likewise. You never know with the kind of people who declare independences. It was all lost on me anyway. I missed both context and delivery and heard only his interested inquiry on what was my heart’s desire. And it all came welling up.

“There’s this town,” said I, my voice dreamy. “It’s called Mytilene. It’s in the Mediterranean. The houses are white, the roofs are made of red tiles. The streets are cobbled. The sky is blue and uncovered. Sea breeze blows. Farmlands surround it. The

mountains cover the west and the north and make half the horizon. There are schools and lyceums and gymnasia and beaches. It hosts the University of the Aegean.”

“Oh,” said Escalon, and exchanged glances with CJ. “Sounds wonderful,” he said finally. “It’s Italian? Greek?”

“Greek,” said I. “It is the capital of Lesbos Island.”

“Oh. I see. Yes, I think I’ve heard of that.”

“It’s very famous. For its petrified woods.”

“I can imagine. So you would like a house there, yes?”

“Yes!” I gulped. “A big one. White. With red roofs. On the beach.”

“Well, Captain,” said he, with a smirk, “the Europeans might just be supporting our cause, so who knows, it might happen. You might get your house.”

“Really?” I cried out. “Really? Are you serious?”

He laughed. “When a man is free, the possibilities are endless.” He gave me a look. “Now here’s what you have to do.”

Diplomacy. He wanted me to be a diplomat. Just like Banerjee. Just like my nerdy, pre-teen dreams. Who would've thought?

He wanted me to accompany a team on a mission of tactful persuasion. There would be no direct danger at all. I would be protected by diplomatic immunity. In the meanwhile, their own efforts would continue. Zoomer would be in the team with me. Wors would speak for the Gravitron industry's workers. And as far as I could remember, everyone seemed to be convinced that there would be no problems.

It should also be mentioned, as I found out much later, that the alcohol I had been drowned in was the new Korean type that causes anti-hangovers.

It was perhaps not surprising then, that I woke up with an uncharacteristic bout of energy and positive feeling. Sunlight didn't wash into my chambers, and no birds sweetly tittered as they recklessly entered through the window, yet a feeling of newness, of vitality, seemed to surge through everything I saw. Her Majesty of course was not part of this, but then cats must be allowed their indulgence.

I bounded out of the massive four-poster bed where I'd been deposited and gazed out of the window. The grey looked like silver. The city ceiling seemed like a marvelous achievement. Some people were still gathered downstairs, and I, heroic captain and newly assigned ambassador, blew to them manly kisses.

I felt space surround me, the weight of Jupiter. The full burden of the realization, of what it meant to be there, to be one of the humans who stood on a moon of Jupiter, washed through me like warm custard pudding. I felt important and happy. I ordered breakfast.

Reclining on a giant couch, feeling it gently knead my back and shoulders in the morning yoga setting, and waiting for the three courses of my wake-up meal to arrive, I felt inclined to finally agree with those who I was coming to think of as my officers. Perhaps, said my timid mind, long beaten and cowed into pessimism, this indeed was the Promised Land. Perhaps everything was actually going to be all right forever more. Perhaps reality might even be so satisfactory from now on that many other parts of myself might venture out into it more often, get a tan and grow some legs.

As I dug into bacon, kebabs and cinnamon cream, I did what many men have done during the same. I hoped.

After I had completed the rather generous portions, I decided to go for a walk. It was my home after all, and I had been away for a long time, and whatever feelings I may have previously held for it, I was currently suffused with sweet affection. The people were so nice, for one.

I put on some casuals, wore dark glasses that completely and absolutely disguised me, and then took the back exit of the hotel. You might ask why I would do such a thing, why I would put any effort to avoid adulation, and possible female admiration, and it would be a good question. The only answer I can give is that at this point all I wanted was a quiet walk, a stroll around the old town. I thought there would be plenty of time to enjoy fandom later. Besides, I am at times quite stupid, and I can only hope it adds to the flavor of the book, since it doesn't help much in any other way.

Anyway, there I was, walking down the boulevard, sauntering, head held high, shoulders swinging. I gazed upon the populace through my shades, the pleasant locales, the merry streets. No one recognized me, which was slightly irksome, since as a camouflaged celebrity I wanted some degree of recognition. But I couldn't blame anyone. That's how we are. It's biological. I myself had taken twenty minutes once to realize that there was pineapple in my soup.

Eventually I found a park, not a very hospitable one, since New Chicago as a rule doesn't do parks, but there were a few benches, and I had become unused to long distance walking, so I sat down. A few trees stooped over, and leaves cluttered the ground. I was reminded of Earth once again, of leaves tugging along the road in spirals, driven by gusts of wind. There was, of course, no wind on Ganymede.

Still, my buoyancy remained unyielding. I thought of Mytilene, and the Petrified Forest. Soon, perhaps... It could happen.

I smiled to myself. There was a man sitting on the next bench, slumped over, and I called out on a whim. "Good morning," said I. I hadn't spoken to New Chicagoans in New Chicago in so long.

The man looked up and grunted. "Is it? This seems like a good morning to you?"

"Oh," said I, getting up, and looking at him in concern. He was an old, thin man. Wrinkles covered his face, and hands and neck. "Are you alright?" asked I. "Is anything wrong?"

He looked up at me again, his face betraying slight confusion. I walked to him and leaned over. "What do you want?" said he, with a glare.

Poor old man, thought I. Probably bitter about his age, about being in the evening of his life. Perhaps he has nobody to talk to. Perhaps he feels nobody cares.

"I want to talk to you, sir," said I, earnestly. "I care."

He snorted and glared. "What the hell are you blabbering about, you punk? Get out of here. Go away."

“Now, sir, there’s no need to be hostile,” said I, feeling he wasn’t quite cooperating. “I want to help. Talk to me. Tell me what’s making you angry?”

He swore and held up a stump of his hand. “You see that? If I had fingers guess what I’d be showing you?”

Realization dawned on me. Pity flooded. I fell to my knees. “Oh my god! Your hand! Is that... is that the reason? Is that why? Oh but don’t let it hold you back, sir. You’re better than that. I know it. I can feel that in you. Don’t be bitter. There are opportunities, there always are. You just have to grasp them... I mean, be... be aware of them.”

He glared at me. He was muttering something under his breath, but I couldn’t catch the words.

“Where do you stay?” asked I. A sudden thought struck me. “Family? Where do they stay?” Could it be that the declaration of independence had separated him from his near and dear ones?

“They kicked me out,” said he with a growl. “What’s it to you, anyway?”

“What is it to me?” said I gravely, and stood up. “I want to help you, sir. I want to help open your eyes. To see how beautiful life is. How wonderful are the trees, the... the buildings, the road. Do you realize that you are on Ganymede? A moon of Jupiter? Have hope, sir! Think! What king of old wouldn’t give his arm to be in your position! Wait! Listen, sorry! I didn’t mean to say arm. Listen...”

He didn’t listen. Thankfully, he fell over wheezing after about a block or so, and I could get away. I shook my head, between pants, and thought how some people just didn’t want to be happy.

It was getting close to the time of my departure for Callisto, so I hurried back to the hotel. I’d had enough of the populace for now anyway.

The delegation for Callisto was supposed to consist of JK, Wors Gom, Johann, Zoomer and I, along with any underlings we might bring along, since people as important as us would surely need our minions. I had thought of asking Toshi to come along, but I didn’t. It wouldn’t do. Besides, an increasing part of my mind was insisting that I no longer needed her. I asked Porridge instead. His low EQ did not bother me overmuch.

An hour before zero hour however, while another valet, who was not a patch on Antoine, was preparing my luggage, I got a call.

“Toshi?” said I, picking up.

“It’s me, Gustav.”

“Gustav?” That was a surprise.

“Yes,” came a slightly breathless answer, followed quickly by more. “I’m so sorry, Ro. I’m so sorry. I need your help, please.”

“You do?” said I slowly, and then became thoughtful. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“She loves me, Ro. She loves me.”

Realization trickled. I let out a chuckle. “She’s very concerned with social service. Did you know that?”

“She’s very strong, Ro.” His voice was palpating.

“I know,” said I. “Comes from having a large heart.”

“I need to get away,” said he, almost breaking down. “Please! Let me come with you!”

I thought about things. “You must be quite desperate to ask me.”

There was silence.

“What did you do?” I asked.

He sighed. “If I tell you, you won’t let me come.”

He was getting smarter, if you've noticed.

“You were great on stage yesterday,” he continued.

“I thought so too.”

“Zoomer seemed to really like you.”

I snorted. “You can come. We’re leaving soon though.”

There was nervous laughter. “I’m already at the space dock.”

Now you may find this an uncharacteristic gesture. You might be confused and skeptical about the entire integrity of my personality from this single act. What can I say? I was happy. We are not the same person when we are happy.

Besides, I thought Zoomer had really liked me too.

The completely insufficient valet, as I referred to him, now reported the completion of his duties.

“Great,” said I. “All packed?”

“Yes, sir. I hope you’re satisfied with the wardrobe that was provided.”

Hope? Why such insecurity? Why could he not be sure of himself?

“It was alright,” said I. “Tell me though, I have a curiosity. Why the back pocket?”

“The back pocket, sir?”

“Yes. What sense does that make? You’d be sitting on whatever you put there, wouldn’t you? Why would you put a pocket there?”

“But people do put things in the back pocket, sir.”

“That’s only because the pocket exists. People are like that.”

“I wouldn’t know, sir.”

Of course he wouldn’t. He was no Antoine. “Is Her Majesty set up?” I asked with a sniff.

“Sir?”

“The cat, my man. Try to extrapolate, will you?”

“Yes sir. She seems comfortable, sir.” He showed me the floating inertia conserving container that he had installed Her Majesty in. She did seem pleased enough, lounging on the red satin cushioned interiors, and pawing the various soft balls lying around.

“Good. Thank you.” I sat down and waited for time to pass.

Soon I was whisked away in the same Reykjavik as before, pausing only to pack away a triple truffle from the GGG confectionary. The box had a bow on it, and sickle moons on the dark blue cover. It felt nice to look at.

I was led to the same elevator that I had taken a day back. Gustav was pacing outside, and a few others with looks ranging from bureaucrat to guard were waiting with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

“Ro!” said Gustav and hurried to me with hand outstretched. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“Do mention it,” said I coolly, motioning towards the package in my right hand. “I can’t shake hands. Truffle gets preference.”

“Of course, of course.” He gave a leaky laugh. “Is it for someone?”

“Yes. For me.” I looked around needlessly. “I’m the first one?”

“The Bishop was here, but he went to get some mints.”

“The breath of God is not enough?”

Gustav made a show of holding back his indignation and shaking his head, and then resumed his pacing. I leaned back against the wall and regarded the truffles. After a few minutes Porridge appeared from around the corner, dressed in combat fatigues.

I raised my eyebrows and gestured to the grey patterned costume. “Was that necessary?”

He paused and looked down and then back up. “I have a suit as well. I could change if you want.” His face brightened. “It’ll be subtler.”

“I doubt it,” said I, having seen him in a suit. “No, leave it on. You can be the captain’s guard, eh?”

He grinned. “Aye, aye,” said he and then came and leaned against the wall right beside me. “What’s he doing here?” He nodded towards Gustav.

I gave him a long look. “No, the question is, what are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you leaning against the wall?”

“Why not? You’re leaning against the wall.”

“Well, yes, but I was already leaning against the wall. One person leaning against the wall is nonchalant. Two side by side is just stupid.”

“You have a point there,” he conceded, and cast off.

I eased my muscles into further nonchalance and awaited Zoomer.

She arrived with Wors and a chattering, tittering troupe of twenty. She was wearing what looked like a tarpaulin. Her hair stuck out like a pointed amoeba and her eyes were lined with crimson. She smiled when she saw me.

“Mon Capitan,” said she, her voice like a desert night, and came and hugged me. My nonchalance withered.

“H-how are you doing?” said I.

She shrugged. “Who needs to do?”

The damned old man had been right to smirk. There was no escaping her.

She held up my hand. “What’s this?”

“It’s a truffle.”

Her eyes gazed at me, sparkling golden wolf eyes. “For me?”

There was no escape at all. “Sure,” said I feebly.

She laughed and clapped her hands and plucked the package out of my hands. “You’re wonderful,” said she. “Have you met Wors? Here he is. Wors is wonderful too.”

“I have. Hello again, Wors.”

“Is absolutely great to have yuh join us, Mistah Moniker!” said he beaming, and seemed wonderful in no way at all. “We’ll win those Callistans ovah, Cap’n. We’ll give ‘em no choice.”

“I’m all for that, Mr. Gom.” I looked at his consistently reddish face and wondered what his profit was, or what Escalon had promised him. Probably nothing. Wors Gom would do this because he would want to, because he could, because that’s who he was. This was his Mytilene, he didn’t need to be bribed with another.

“Why’re we standing around?” piped Zoomer suddenly and peeked around. “Why aren’t we moving? I don’t like standing around.” She looked at us. “It’s against my nature,” said she earnestly.

“Mine too,” said I. “I’m a walker.”

“I like to dance,” put in Wors.

“I’m going to call JK,” said Zoomer. “Mandy, call JK.”

Mandy materialized and did, and within a few minutes JK appeared, leading the good Bishop and some acolytes wearing heavy yellow. The Bishop seemed happy. “JK had mints,” said he to existence in general.

“That’s why I’m here,” said JK with a grin. “Alright then, let’s go.”

Thus it was that our merry band, our party of saviors and heroes set off for Callisto on a noble mission of freedom.

Of course what history doesn't mention, what it conveniently forgets, is that heroism is often an idle and distracted business. For example most of the time in the space elevator, Zoomer was quite occupied with my truffle, and though this was insignificant to future generations of soul-seekers, like perhaps yourself, it was of the most utmost importance to me.

"What is this?" said she, as she opened the package and saw a small smoking lump.

I peered over. "Dry ice."

"Dry ice? Why did they give dry ice?"

"I don't know. To keep it cold?"

"The world is a strange place, Ro. A very strange place."

"I know, Zoom. Can I call you Zoom? What's your real name?"

"Look Ro, look at the surface of the cube. It was smooth before. Now it's perforated."

"It's because of sublimation," said I, remembering my physics and gazing at her slender hands.

"Is that what it's called?" She sniffed at the fumes. "Perhaps because it's so sublime."

"Perhaps. That would be nice."

She smiled. "Yes, it would. Is that your cat?"

"I am that cat's provider, yes."

"It's beautiful."

My chest swelled a bit. "I know," said I.

She gave a sigh. "I hate cats. They make me anxious."

"Oh," said I, deflating. "Why?"

She ignored my question. "What's its name?"

Ahh. Here was the test. I looked at her. I could still see the bruises on her knuckles. "Her full title is her Majesty Orene Nightfall Indigo, King Elect of the Realm."

She frowned and then slowly a smile flooded across her face. Somehow it accentuated her crimson eye shadow. "I had a fire-lizard once," said she. "It was red and yellow in

color. I like lizards. You know where you are with lizards.” She leaned forward, and her perfume snaked inside me. “I’d named him Volcanic Deathlord Laavo.”

It was my turn to smile, but I could hardly manage it. I felt strange. As if a thousand pin pricks played piano on my skin. As if my flesh was frosted with dew drops, yet crackling with electricity. I felt like jumping. I don’t think I could have moved. “Wh-what happened to him?” asked I finally, my voice a broken relic.

Her eyes were unfocused, vague and faraway. “A cat ate him,” said she.

Before I could even react there was a movement beside me. The next thing I knew Porridge was sitting forward from his seat behind us, his elbow blocking my view of Zoomer.

“Did you know,” said he, his voice coming to me as if from some other distant world. “Fire lizards are really just a name for a type of salamander.”

The rest of the journey to the space-dock they chatted incessantly and animatedly. I don’t know why but I didn’t mind. Instead I occupied myself with studying her, her expressions, motions, eyes and mouth as she dug into the truffle. I wondered why her knuckles were bruised, and about the steps that made the girl who named her lizard Laavo into the biggest lava star in the solar system. Something told me they were far more twisted than a first glance would suggest.

Waiting for us at the space dock was a spacecraft unlike any I’d ever been on. I’d seen pictures of it of course. It was that kind of thing, one you see pictures of. None of the upturned water bottle business here. Its body was gleaming silver, molded in elegant dangerous lines, somewhat resembling a terrestrial fighting aircraft for the simple reason that people felt better when it did. Just like the fact that more expensive cars look sleeker; be not fooled, it’s not to increase fuel efficiency. A Tulieppe 307, JK told me. The equivalent of an interplanetary limousine. I tried not to look more impressed than an important person should.

I was though, if not impressed, then at least definitely excited. The insides were marvelous, soft and cushiony and carpety, and though it still had a vague car-upholstery feel to it, it managed to pull it off. We each had a separate suite, us important ones that is, and our underlings had individual rooms. There was a central lounge, so discreet that it was dominated by the coffee table book kept fashionably askew on the coffee table at the centre.

I expressed my approval and since Zoomer had already disappeared into her suite, I decided to take a nap to pass the two-hour passage. The bedroom was arranged subtly as well, with a large soft bed, perfectly square and looking like a well made cake, and half of a wall molded into a curving window. I let Her Majesty out and then flopped down and sank in. Gazing at the ceiling, I somewhat missed the star view I used to have.

I woke up after less than an hour later, due to a persistent pressing of the buzzer. Half naps are hideous things to come out of, and I staggered to the door like a drunken zombie.

It opened to reveal a perturbed Gustav. He was wringing his hands. “What does it mean, Ro? Love? What is it actually?”

I slammed the door close, lurched back to the bed and slept again. I dreamt of butterflies that shone in the dark, their wings etching trails of light - green, blue, violet, as they fluttered through dark caves.

I was woken the second time by the intercom stating our arrival at Callisto’s space dock. It was owned by the Japanese, who in an agreement with the DSAA and the Europeans had agreed not to build any cities on Callisto as long as they had sole rights to construct the space dock. The DSAA had thought they had the better end of the deal, till they saw the bottomline of the Japanese accounts after a few years. The space dock made more money than the GDP of the two Callistan cities combined. The Japanese named it Haiku.

As I joined the others, it occurred to me that I still did not know Zoomer’s actual name. I wondered if anyone did. How would it be if no one knew your actual name? Enough to bruise your knuckles?

I glanced at her. She was deep in conversation with some of her people, discussing something on a compu-pad. Gustav was skulking along the edge of the room, hands in pockets, face sulky. Wors and Johann were chatting. Porridge was explaining to JK how aikido was really a very defensive martial art. You practically couldn’t move unless the other guy attacked you. That’s where, he concluded, knives came helpful.

I walked alone as we were led along the corridors of Haiku, strangely pleasant for something so sparse, so functional. You could sense a conceit in its make, a carefulness of design that could only come from self-congratulation. I liked the place. It made me feel peaceful.

At the elevator, we were met by the DSAA’s version of JK. More official, since he was government, while JK was politics, but with much the same characteristic and function. I didn’t have to do much, except shake his hand and say a few words of greeting. Wors did most of the talking, he was good at it, inserting phrases underlining his importance into a complicated web of semi-serious small talk. I could see what he was all about. I could also see that this operation might not exactly prove hectic for me. I doubted I’d have to do anything in any way.

I could see one more thing, from the attitude of Mr. Qangy, Aide to the Secretary of the Governor of Frontier, Callisto, DSAA. Though he was perfectly amicable, very polite, it was absolutely clear that this could never work. Convincing the DSAA government of Callisto to declare independence was, when you thought about it, quite preposterous. I

should really have considered this much sooner, and probably would have if not for the alcohol. This wasn't how things worked.

The pessimistic, cynical, and somewhat paranoid parts of my mind, which had gone hiding in the hills or converted their faith in the past few days, bunched together and made a brief return, and for a moment I wondered if there was something going on that I did not know, if I had been given only a part of the picture. Then Zoomer shuffled over and said that the just-woken-up look suited me, and that I had dopey eyes, and in trying to figure out which parts of that was meant as a compliment, I forgot everything else.

On the way down in the space elevator, in the back seat, in school-boy whispers, I told her about R'le, and the exile of its royal family, and the book I'd never written. In turn, she told me about the many lovers she had had in her teenage years, and paper airplanes. I perspired immensely. Danger lurked unheeded.

For once, dock to planet went too quickly. I felt like a child tortured with a small yet extremely delicious piece of candy. It's possible of course that that's how all candy feels to children. There's no way to know. These things are washed away by puberty.

Once we reached Frontier, I could see I had a long wait before I could get any chance of a *tete-a-tete*. We immediately got swept away into a diplomatic entourage of people who looked as if we were their in-laws. Johann was treated with some deference though, and Zoomer had her admirers. I was mostly ignored. That suited me fine. As it was, I was feeling, how shall I put it... upturned. Yes, that's it. If you can't understand it, consider yourself lucky.

We were driven through the twisting, turning byways of Frontier, Callisto; the city that Escalon had named Callista. It is a very different city from New Chicago, perhaps because it was not originally made by the Americans, nor by any other government. As a result its roads are small, narrow, quaint, its buildings more elaborate than necessary, and its lanes dotted with a far larger number of playgrounds than any bureaucratic administration would ever propose. The JNP was not strong here, it's appeal not greatest for the middle aged, children-in-school demographic. The Jovian church though had a large following. Perhaps that was the plan. But as we were ushered into an ornate and charming house, with a high ceiling and miniscule rooms, I still couldn't see how it would work. Mytilene seemed infinitely farther away than it had yesterday.

I sat in the dining room, sprawled out on a beautiful and uncomfortable couch, with a bag of peanuts so thoughtfully provided. I tried the old throw-them-up-and-catch-them-in-the-mouth routine and survived without blinding myself. After a while, Gustav sauntered in.

"That's meant to be had with whiskey," said he.

"I couldn't find any," said I, and popped one straight onto my forehead.

"It's in the cupboard," said he and extracted it.

“How did you know that?” asked I, unhappily impressed. How could he? What special intuition did everyone else have?

He just shrugged and took a seat opposite me and poured us both a glass. I duly placed my peanut packet on the table between. This I felt, was high diplomacy already. He took a sip of his whiskey and then effortlessly popped three peanuts into his mouth. I regarded him gloomily.

“Tell me something,” said I, “can you do those things with the pens around the fingers? You know? The stuff people do in school?”

“You mean this?” He retrieved a pen and showed me one of the thousand such that I could never do.

“Yes,” said I, with a sigh. “That’s pretty cool. And anything with ears? Or with the bone joints?”

“I can fold my tongue like this.”

“Of course you can.”

He took another sip. He hadn’t shaven in a few days. “Why do you ask?”

I took a big swig. It tasted like oak. It was nice. “See, in school, there are these people, who can do these things, these completely useless things, talents which can be of no use whatsoever in any walk of life. And yet at that point of time, those are the coolest things anyone can do. Writing a poem, doing math, these have no value whatsoever. Being able to rotate a compu-pad on your finger-tip, that’s what counts.”

He raised a brow. “And you never could?”

“Nothing. Not a single one. Nothing with the nose. Nothing with the eyes or the ears. I couldn’t get a single joint to make a noise.”

“Compu-pad on fingertip?”

“Not a chance.” I took another draught. “I think that’s where my pessimism started.”

He didn’t say anything. For a while we drank silently, reflectively.

“What’s the issue?” asked he after a while. “Now?”

I spread my arms. “I can’t see how it’ll work – this mission. There’s no way a government can be talked into leaving.”

He looked at me thoughtfully. "I presume you had some payment coming if it did."

He was quite clever really, when he wasn't being stupid. "How's the nose?" asked I.

He gave a cold look. "It isn't my biggest problem."

"Ahh yes." I leaned back. "I have no idea what love is, if that's what you want to know. If it helps, I think the word suffers from poetry."

"Like glory and the rest?" said he, his voice carrying less sarcasm than I expected.

I shrugged somewhat, too lazy to really put my shoulder into it. "The poets have a lot to account for."

"They should all be lined and shot?"

"Or sternly criticized. So that they live, but are never whole again."

He laughed. "There's no hope for you, Captain Moniker."

I finished the rest of the drink.

Suddenly Johann burst out of the washroom with such intense unobtrusiveness that anyone within a mile would have noticed. I remembered the room had been occupied ever since I'd been here, more than an hour.

"Are you alright, Bishop?" asked I, with a frown.

"Why yes! Yes of course!" said he, nearly jumping back. "Everything's fine! Just fine."

"Right," said I.

"Right," said he. For a moment we looked at each other, and then he was off like a shot.

"Interesting," said I.

Gustav shook his head and got up and left. "Wait till you have kids," said I, after him. "You'll find out what love is."

Nothing more happened that day. It was late and people were tired from the journey. There's something about traveling that tires people, even if they haven't actually put any physical effort.

Sometime around nightfall, Zoomer's room started shaking with drumming, but the door was locked and I couldn't shout over the noise to ask her to stop. Nobody else tried. Porridge and I played marbles with peanuts till it stopped and then I went to my room to

sleep. Her Majesty had found a large china vase and was curled up inside it. I didn't dream, but perhaps she did since she managed to topple and smash it at some point in the night. Not surprisingly, she was unhurt. If a cat was human, it would surely be popular in school.

I woke late, and felt strange when I did. Changing planetary bodies is not kind on the old biological clock. It's the story of humanity really. We have outrun evolution and the prize isn't all it was thought out to be.

I went down to breakfast in the common room. Mandy was there, talking to four of the acolytes who were looking keen and having poached eggs and growing pimples with great felicity. Porridge had made his way to the kitchen, and Gustav was standing by the door, trying, I hoped, to talk him out of it. No one else was to be seen.

I got myself some breakfast and asked about where the others were. Wors supposedly was in the study, meeting with someone. Zoomer had gone out. Johann was somewhere in the house. JK was missing. It all seemed quite innocent and normal, but I didn't like it. I couldn't help feeling that I was missing pieces of the puzzle, and that nobody else was.

I ate my breakfast while walking around the house, on the excuse of exploration, and paused a while outside the study trying to listen in through the door. It didn't work, but while I was so engaged Johann slunk out of a room opposite. We both started, and stared at each other.

"This is a good door," said I finally, running my fingers over it. "Old."

"Yes," said he, nodding. "Looks like real wood."

"I think it is," said I, nodding back.

"Good old real wood," said he.

"Yes," said I.

"Just like the room. I was just examining it. Lot of good..." His hands moved in waves. "...furniture. Decorations."

"It's a nice house."

"Yes."

We both nodded for a while. "There's breakfast downstairs," said I. "Porridge is cooking."

"Your guard? He cooks?"

“He’s uniquely talented.”

Thus we went down again, both of us not quite looking at the other. My curiosity was piqued. It would be quite clear to him what I had been doing. If anything, my motives might be unclear, but they were unclear even to me, so good luck to him trying to figure that out. I, on the other hand, had no idea what he was doing in that room, or in the restroom yesterday. Or when, and if, he had gone to find mints before. Our shepherd had a habit of disappearing every now and then, and everything was starting to stink.

Soon JK returned, along with a middle aged, stately woman, who was the pre-existing envoy of Ganymeda here, having been a high ranking member of the JNP in Frontier when independence was declared. She had a shrewd yet regal air about her, and her hair looked as if it was carved of bronze, swept up and back and completely unmoving. Her eyes were grey.

JK introduced her around, Ms Zaccharia, and then asked about Zoomer and Wors.

“Wors is upstairs, in the study,” said I quickly. “I’ll go call him.”

“That’s alright. We’ll go up,” replied JK, and swept away with her before I could do anything.

After a good twenty minutes they returned, now with Wors and another darkish, lanky man in tow.

“Everyone, I’d like you to meet my old friend, Alberto,” said Wors, and Alberto gave a sickly grin and shook people’s hands. Then he asked to be excused, since he had to be somewhere urgently, and left.

I watched him go thoughtfully. No sooner had he crossed the door than Zoomer skipped in.

“Hello everyone,” said she. “Meet my old friend Skin. He’s wonderful.”

Skin appeared. He was much decorated. Trinkets hung from his skin like they’d been nailed to it, since they had. I began to dislike the wonderfulness with which the woman regarded the world, and the many old friends my new friends seemed to have.

“Yo,” said Skin.

After introductions were over and Skin was disposed of somehow, Ms. Zaccharia told us of a meeting she had scheduled with the governor of Frontier.

“I hope you are all well briefed on the situation,” said she, her voice brisk and efficient. “Nothing much can come from this meeting, but it’s important that the government

knows they are dealing with confident, powerful people. They are wary. We want them to be wary. A tightrope must be walked. I hope you all understand.”

I didn't of course. I had no clue. In my defense I must say I wasn't the only one. Zoomer looked like her wonderful old friend had supplied her with substances that if diplomats consumed more regularly might result in the UN having a more welcoming image. Johann looked fidgety. Zaccharia looked around at our assembly, and though she wasn't the kind to show it, I saw she shared my observations.

“Right,” said she. “The meeting is in about two hours...”

“12 o' clock,” put in JK. He alone seemed happy and excited.

“Yes. So I hope I will see you all there. Please be ready for a long meeting. I understand most of you are new to this. Wors, we're counting on you to be the anchor. I hope you are well rested. Do avoid any intoxicating or sleep inducing substances just yet,” said she.

A bit late for that, thought I, glancing at Zoomer.

Zaccharia laughed gently. “I assure you, his Excellency is quite potent by himself.”

We got ready and dressed, no doubt with varying degrees of insouciance, and I at least felt a bit like I had met a very sophisticated version of a school mistress. It was liberating, in a disturbing way. You felt taken care of, but you didn't quite wish to be. At least, thought I, I would get some idea of the situation now. Though I might be unaware of what tightrope might exist at present, surely I would form some understanding once I saw it being walked. That was somewhat cheering, at least till the car neared the Governor's office.

There were people there to welcome us, but not really. They stood crowded around the building, holding placards. JNP supporters mostly, with some expressing religious sentiments. I watched them through the window, the car slowing as we got surrounded. They shouted for us, and raised and shook their signs. ‘Jove for Jovians’ said one. ‘Go back Earthies’. ‘Go back Bluiies’. Their inclinations somehow bade them to mob our vehicles, as if their support needed to be shown in a giant bear hug. There were armed police pushing them back. I saw their faces, and those of the picketers and I couldn't help feeling cold. They weren't there for me, you see, they were there for the cause. There was nothing wrong in that of course. What else could be expected? It was good. It was my ticket to Mytilene, these faceless people, these living declarations. But I suppose I am no hero, and so they alarmed me.

As soon as we entered a line of police cordoned off the entrance. Glass doors slid close and people closed in against them. I turned back and saw one weedish-looking youth reach the door and beat his sign against the glass before getting shoved back hard and falling into the crowd. It was spooky. What had he hoped to achieve?

We were led into a spacious conference room. I walked beside Zoomer. She was wearing what looked like a toffee wrap. I thought it suited her.

“There were so many people,” said I, needing to talk. “Outside. They were pushing.”

She laughed languorously. “That was nothing,” said she. “Wait till I sing.” Immediately after that she nearly toppled, and reached out and in desperation clutched my ear to steady herself. I am proud to say I hardly screamed out loud.

“Stepped on my foot,” said I with superhuman ingenuity, when people looked around. For some reason that felt more respectable. “High heels,” I explained. Zoomer giggled. I sat myself far away from her once in the room.

The Governor of Frontier, Mr. Wayne, the highest representative of the American colonial government left spaceward of Mars, was, as history well remembers, a good man. This is true, I can attest to it. I knew little of his private life, but when I read that he was a prize student, a debating captain, a swimming champion, the head choir boy, I was not surprised. Such people exist, people who are good, no, best, at everything they attempt, and they attempt a lot. You know them when you see them. They are usually good people. You can recognize them by the fact that if they like vanilla ice cream and you don't, there ensues a discussion that can only have one ending. Moreover, you cannot finish your ice cream faster than them. This can be tried at home.

If you are such a person, I mean no offence. It is a fine thing to finish the ice-cream first.

The circumstances of my moment put me at somewhat of a disadvantage. My ear burnt, the entire area embarrassingly red, and it fragmented my attention. I couldn't help but think that fascinating though Zoomer was, intriguing though her life must be, enchanting though her presence, a person who reaches for the ear instead of the shoulder if and when the need arises, is not always suitable company.

As such, my initial observations of Wayne were muted and incoherent. For the benefit of the reader though I shall fill in the narrative with hindsight and introduce him in an appropriate fashion.

Wayne was, as can be found easily from the internet, a large man with a square jaw and a square frame, but the most striking feature of his, one that might not be gleaned so simply without personal contact, was his smile. This was because it wasn't one, not really. Any criminal negotiator would kill for it of course, but you wouldn't want him in your comedy club.

As we entered, he shook each of our hands with a strong grip and a lock of the eyes, and bowed over Zoomer's. In a way, he was old school.

“How do you like our fair, little city?” asked he, once we were seated.

“Wonderful,” said JK, enthusiastically. “Reminds me of my childhood. I was born here.”

Well, wasn't he a regular little trooper? We all smiled indulgently at him, as if we were thinking about our childhoods too. Zoomer was swaying uncertainly.

“The industreh seems to be doing well,” said Wors. “Was just speaking to mah friend, Alberto.”

“Well, yes, what can I say? Supplies have been consistent. I believe we've been pushing up the quality of our infrastructure.”

“Yuh have good people working for yuh too, sah!” said Wors smiling widely. “Onnest people, working hard. That is what makes it all work. Like a big famaleh.”

Wayne smiled back. His heavy fingers rested over each other. “Ahh, but they are not really a family, are they Mr. Wors. They each have their own families. They work together for gain, not duty. I am very concerned with the equitable running of the enterprises in my city. I would be anxious if they were running on belief rather than profit.”

“There is more to people than profit, Mr. Wayne. Surely you know this,” said Zaccharia. “Your father represented the very values that Mr. Wors is talking about. He built this city like it was his family.”

“In that case I can only try do all I can, Ms Zaccharia, to keep that family together. Frontier has been my home, and my father's home, as you said. I intend to look after it.”

He did too. I could see it on his face. I looked around at the others, wondering if this was how it was to be throughout. Double meanings and hints. How did that matter? This man wasn't going to be budged by innuendo. I could see that at first glance.

They continued like that for a while though, thrust and counter thrust, but with no more meaning than a middle-school debate. Thankfully, after a while Zaccharia guided the conversation to less lofty and noble terms. Freedom and family made way for taxes.

“Mr. Wayne, the unions in the gravitronic industry have expressed a strong interest in Cado Escalon's endeavor. You must see that these new taxes hurt them badly. What right does the Earthern government have of raising taxes on our industries?”

“Every government has a right to raise finances for its operations from its people,” replied Wayne. “The measures are hardly excessive.”

“These measures hurt us, and enrich them, Mistuh Wayne. They are unacceptable!” said Wors.

“That’s the point, isn’t it,” put in JK. “We don’t want these taxes. If the government will not represent us, then it cannot be our government.”

Wayne smiled. “But the government does represent you. You voted it in. You voted for your governor. You could change your votes next time.”

“Our votes don’t count for anything!” howled Johann. “We have one seat in the house. Our vote has never counted. The representation is a sham.”

“Any more representation would be over-representation, Bishop,” said Wayne, coolly. “Democracy is normalized by population. One man, one vote.”

I felt I should say something, show some participation. I said the only thing I could think of, the one observation that knocked repetitively on my skull. “Tell me something, Mr. Wayne” said I, my voice more collected than I’d expected. “Did America not break away from Britain under very similar circumstances? Are we not, in our actions, embodying the very spirit of the country that now seeks to constrict us?”

Wayne didn’t frown, but his smile got just a trace more carved. His fingers tapped the knuckles of his other hand. “Mr. Moniker, if American history teaches us anything, it is that federal rights do not extend to secession, in any country, at any time.”

“Then we’ll take that right, by Jove! Just like people always have!” said Wors, passion suffusing his voice and face. “Who are they to tell us what we are or are not allowed? They have never cared for us. Yuh know that! Ask yur people. Ask yur own people what they think about yur masters.”

“My people may suffer from delusions that I do not share. We are one city in a large country spanning several planets. We are given the attention we need. We are a small people, Mr. Gom. You have to see that.”

This was too much for our valiant friends. Johann stood up, slamming his fist upon the table with greater vehemence than, I’m sure, he wanted to. “How can you say that?” he demanded, his voice high pitched from pain. “How can you say that when you stand here under the very shadow of our Father Jove? We are not small. We are chosen. Our destiny is manifest in the stars.”

Mr. Wayne leaned forward. “Bishop, just because something suits our sense of self-worth doesn’t make it true, or clever. Spirituality is fine and well, and self-indulgence is every man’s pleasure, but it shouldn’t make us lose sight of what is advantageous for us - for our families and our children, as you brought up before.”

“Advantageous!” cried Johann, his voice getting even shriller. He swung his arms in speechless emotion. “What is advantageous about the Eartheners? What do they know about us? What do they care about our beliefs, our culture, our lives? They have their damned blue planet! Why should they rule us?”

Wayne grunted. “You don’t seem to understand the situation, good Bishop. Even if having the Eartheners over you is not advantageous, is it profitable to try and break away? Do you have more to gain from that than they have to lose? What is the point of comparing the cost and benefit of a theoretical scenario? The question is not why they should rule us. The question is that taking into account they do, why should they not, and how badly do we need that.”

He was right, of course. He was so sensible it was scary. I couldn’t help admiring the man, conflicting though he was to my purposes, but it did chill me to the bone. My suspicions were now confirmed. I could now see no hope of success. Why couldn’t men like him offer me large, white houses in the Aegean?

My associates though, were not suffering from such irresolution. “They put Mistuh Khan in jail, sah!” said Wors, now rising as well.

“And Zoomer!” added Johann, his voice even shriller now that he had company. “Does she look like she should be jailed?” he cried, carried away.

Everyone stared at him, even the Ganymedans, and then shifted their gaze to Zoomer. She had been absolutely quiet, her shoulders hunched up, her gaze upon the hair-band she was stretching between her hands, her mouth chewing something. She looked a bit startled herself, the headband paused in mid-stretch. The room had fallen silent. She slowly straightened her posture. The hair-band snapped and flew off.

Wayne looked at her with amusement. “You tell me,” said he, with a hint of a smirk.

Zoomer gave him a sweet smile. “I probably should be jailed darling, but not for my songs,” said she. She then took out the chewie and stuck it onto the polished mahogany surface of the table of Frontier’s diplomatic conference room.

As I’d said, she was the revolution.

Shortly after that we broke for lunch.

I walked with her, and she took my hand in hers once again, gripping it hard every time she missed a step. “That stuff was strong,” whispered she, and broke out into clinking giggles.

Lunch tasted like food your mom might cook if you happen to be six feet four and shaped like a garage door.

I was faced with Wayne over the pork ribs. This wasn’t my intention. I would have avoided him completely if it’d been up to me. Perhaps he’d sought me out. More probably it was coincidence. Supposedly, in diplomatic circles, it is not encouraged to continue the conference during such luncheon encounters. Instead, a demonstration of

small talk is urged. I sincerely hoped he would just pick up his ribs and be on his way, but he wasn't that type of person.

"Mr. Moniker," said he, beaming like a warhorse. "I hope you're enjoying the lunch."

"Yes, yes I am," said I. "Builds up appetite, all this talking."

"That's good, that's good. What you have on your plate is our specialty - Frontier Ribs."

"Looks like it," said I, nodding. "Looks special."

We nodded in unison. The ribs were safe on our plates. It was now that a crucial decision faced me. Should I walk away? Should I talk some more? If so, about what? Wars have been fought over less in the past golden ages of man.

"So, how are the children doing?" was what I came up with. "Two girls, right? Growing up well?"

His eyes narrowed slightly. It occurred to me that what I said might have sounded to those saturated with detective movies and comics like the more stylish kind of threat. My nerves jittered. Wayne was not a man who you wanted to threaten, even involuntarily, especially not when you were within gripping range.

"N-not that I care, really," said I, with terrified magnanimity. "As in, I meant nothing by it. If they're fine, that's good... if they're not doing so great... having trouble in school or so... well who am I to judge. I never interfere. I'm inert. Like a noble gas."

That was a good testimonial. He immediately relaxed into disdainful amusement.

"They're doing fine, Mr. Moniker. They're growing up to be real beauties."

"Ahh...that's great, that's great. I'm sure they'll make you proud." There that wasn't so bad. Now, thought I, to slink away before I did any real damage. "I'll just go get some fruit punch. Goes with the ribs. You take care of your princesses, sir. Keep them safe." I smiled, and then stilled. Enough comics and anything might be considered a prelude to violence. "If you want to, that is," I added quickly. "I mean, generally. Maybe buy them stuff sometimes. Good family atmosphere. Not that I don't think you'll be a great dad." I laughed heartily, like duck droppings. Then I hurried away for the punch.

The rest of the lunch passed in a slow blur, like what might perhaps be expected in an overlap of the feeling of watching a moving train and watching your death come nearer. I thanked the commonly believed, improbably convenient, metaphysical super-intelligence when it was over.

In the hallway between the dining hall and the conference room hung a giant painting. JK stopped in front of it, and gestured to me when I walked past. We both stood staring at it for a few minutes. A representation is given below.



“It’s like we thought,” said JK softly.

I glanced at him. “What?”

“Wayne must be a pacifist,” said he, nodding.

I looked back at the painting, and then at him, and then at the painting again. “I’m aware that I’m missing something.”

He gave me a look. “Oh, I’m sorry,” said he. “I thought you’d know.” He waved his arm in a sweep across the painting, wonder on his face. “This is the original ‘Zero-Sum’, by Tre Romano. It’s the most famous anti-war Blatantist painting in existence.”

My ears pricked. I turned towards the painting as if in a daze. He’d come to haunt me, after all this time, after all I’d been through.

Tre Romano.

I closed my eyes for a few moments, calming myself, relaxing, counting, and then let out a deep breath, exhaling a world away. “It’s not nearly blatant enough,” said I, and walked away.

Outside, the crowd had grown. Their clamor was even louder, their press heavier. The police looked anxious, and you could hear them shouting and threatening. Somehow the people would hear of Zoomer’s little antic. Someone would talk. It would happen. And they would laugh at corners, and feel bold and proud and rebellious. More of them would defy the police to smack their hands onto car windows or beat their placards on doors. Perhaps some would do more.

They were a dragon. A fire-beast. Just waiting, aching, for a spark. I couldn't take my eyes off them as the car drew away.

All the way to the hotel, these thoughts assaulted me. Images flashed past, repetitively. The dragon. The knight. The beast, and its rider. And I in the midst of it, chased, lost in a dead forest, with trees made of bones, and grass made of skin. Far, far away, an artist in a court, leaning back, yawning, laughing.

When I returned to the hotel, needing something to do and feeling alone, I checked my mail. I hadn't done so in days. Many important messages had accumulated, like great offers on specific physical enhancements I might otherwise have missed out on, or amazing opportunities for finding my perfect woman, who could only be approached by clicking on the thoughtfully provided link.

Amongst these was a message from my parents, anxious about my whereabouts and well-being. They had heard about what had happened to the S76-IB7. I assured them that I was alright but didn't add any details since it occurred to me that it would probably bother them more if they knew the exact situation I was tangled up in. It was a terrifying realization considering how happy I'd been only two days earlier. Suddenly I was reminded of the old man in the park. I couldn't help thinking how it would be to live without an arm.

Toshi had sent a message too but I didn't open it.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that when Zoomer asked me if I wanted to accompany her to a party Skin was throwing that night, I agreed without hesitation.

"Is there a dress code?" asked I.

She nodded. "Funky," said she.

That bore some consideration. I searched through my meager wardrobe, and through its additions provided to me by the successive valets I'd encountered, but discovered nothing that might apply. Diplomats are not known for their funkiness, and Procurement and Contracting has no four letter words staring with 'f' at all in its corporate dictionary.

So beleaguered did I grow as the search progressed in vain that I approached both Porridge and Gustav for any clothes they may have that might be suitable. Gustav informed me, with more disdain than I thought necessary, that he didn't do funk, and though Porridge did offer me a troubadour costume he just happened to be carrying along, it was too large for me to pull off.

In the end I presented myself to Zoomer in the stain yellow toga of one of the acolytes along with the oldest pair of trousers I possessed.

She looked skeptical. “I’m not so sure, Ro,” said she. “It’s definitely weird, but I don’t know if it’s funky.”

“I’ll tell you what’s not funky,” cried I, with a passion born out of hours of intense clothing, “Strict, judgmental people who seek to control the funk according to their own preconceptions! That’s what’s not funky. This, on the other hand,” I pointed towards my conflagration, “is pure funk! It’s as funky as it gets! If this is not funk, in fact, I don’t know what funk is.”

“Okay, okay,” she conceded. “You’re right. Everyone should have the freedom to funk as they will.”

“Yes,” said I, with vigor. “There should be no stopping it.”

“Right,” said she. She looked at me, her eyes gazing into mine, purple, that evening, to match her hair band. “Let’s go then.”

And so we went. I sat in the car next to her, alternately looking at her and the streets, which were getting narrower and darker by the minute, as we were driven deeper and deeper into the city’s belly where presumably Skin’s gang liked to skulk. She’d put on music through her ear-embeds, and remained lost with that, humming to herself in a throaty undertone, and rocking her head to and fro.

By the time we arrived, the party looked like it’d already started. Zoomer was agitated. “Skin likes punctuality,” she explained.

“Oh,” said I.

Sure enough, there was a trace of reticence visible in Skin’s manner as he showed us the secret handshake and marked our foreheads with the florescent pink cross that was both a sign of inclusion and a beacon to help people not bump into each other in the near darkness of the house. Thankfully, the visibility was too low, the music too loud and the air too thick with sweet and uncertain substances for emotions to have any staying power.

Zoomer introduced me around for a bit, but I soon lost her to the murk and mist and lurched around half-blindly, trying not to trip over people engaged in any degree of horizontal activity. I made my way over to the bar and after a while got the attention of the bar-tender, a teenage girl with around seven nose-rings.

“So,” said I, affably. “Got anything to drink around here?” That, culture had assured me, was the sort of thing people said in such situations.

She looked me over once, and seemed confused. “You have an invitation?”

That was somewhat insulting. I threw back my shoulders in indignation. “I’m with Zoomer. I’m Ro Moniker.”

“Alright,” said she, in a slow, skeptical fashion. I didn’t know if she didn’t believe me or didn’t know of me.

“I have the pink cross,” I pointed out, and realized I’d never imagined I’d ever say these words.

She considered my forehead with some suspicion. “Well, you do,” she granted, finally. With an air of condescension she retrieved a mug fuming with orange-green liquid. “You might want to sit down first.”

I sat down. I took a swig. And I saw the darkness.

I don’t know what was in the drink, or what it was called. Perhaps my reader keeps more up to date on these matters. What I know is what I saw. It hadn’t turned bright, but I could see everything, I could see inside the darkness. I could see where there were edges, shapes, blackness clear. I could see people. They burned like flames, towers of white smoke, spirals of vapor. Their hearts, brains, livers afire. Bright shining blobs, concentrations, bobbing along. I stared and stared, and I drank again and again, till even the darkness melted away, and memory ended.

The next morning I felt many, many years younger and hardly sentient.

When I came to the common room, Johann was busy on the phone, religiously loud, his voice walking over the grave of my head.

I sat down with a groan and slid to a near recumbent position. Parts of my life flashed past me, strange irrelevant, unconnected parts. Sitting in a restaurant, waiting for chicken. On a swing, too high, looking down. My mother waking me up, a cold winter morning, my father tying my tie, my brother eating my sugar-flakes. My gullet felt heavy. My heart felt like it was being smashed by ice.

I lay there, barely moving, my eyes sometimes closing, sometimes not, till Johann finished his call and dropped down on the couch beside me. He made a sound of satisfaction. My mouth wouldn’t put in the effort to protest.

“That was the Grand Cardinal,” said he, and looked around beaming.

That got people’s attention. They crowded around, and I felt obliged to upright myself and prevent saliva from actually trickling down the sides of my mouth.

“Well? What did he say?” asked JK.

Johann took a few seconds to exult. “The Bishop of Frontier will hold a special welcoming ceremony for us. Today. I shall present him with the Toga of Preference.”

“Your preference or his?” I muttered, shifting to get more of the seat.

“It’s symbolic,” said he, ignoring me. “Shows that the Church of Jove holds the Bishop in high regard, and commemorates his important contribution to the Faith. It’s a great honor.”

“It’s perfect,” said Wors.

“It’s a big honor for the presenter too,” continued Johann, but everyone had started talking among themselves by then.

“That’s great, Jo. That’s great.” I patted his shoulder fraternally, since he looked like he wanted attention. I dragged myself up. “I suppose I should go get ready.”

“Yes. The ceremony is at noon.” I checked my watch. “The Toga of Preference,” sighed he dreamily.

“Imagine that.” It was 10.30. “Where’s Zoomer?” I asked, glancing around. Her room was open and seemed empty.

Johann didn’t answer. I turned back to see him wearing an evasive look. “What?”

“I have to go,” said he, and hurriedly rose.

“What? Is she alright?” He didn’t answer. I looked around and caught hold of JK. “What happened to Zoomer? Is she alright?”

“I’m sure she is,” said JK, with a laugh. “She’s a big girl.”

“Well, where is she?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t come back last night.”

“What?” Emotion punched me in the face. I tried to block desperately. “How did I come back then?” I asked. “How am I here?”

“The chauffeur brought you back.”

“The chauffeur!” I felt bile rise. I reeled. “Has she called? Have you called her?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t want to... you know... disturb her...”

I felt diseased, as if fever had suddenly enveloped me. I couldn’t bring myself to speak. I walked to my room, trying to move as normally as possible. I closed the door softly and then I collapsed on the bed. Despair galloped through my head, trampling all other thoughts, all other feelings. A chariot of burning, metal wheels. A deluge of absinthe.

What was there to do? What reason was there to do anything? Why couldn't I learn?

Her Majesty hopped onto the bed and climbed onto my chest. Her whiskers brushed my cheek. I scratched behind her ears softly.

"I'm sorry I haven't been paying attention to you, your Highness. I thought we were going home. I thought it would be alright."

She mewed and then wandered away.

I couldn't stay still. I decided to take a shower, the hottest I could bear. Leaning back against the fogged glass, water and vapor assaulting me, remaking my flesh, I thought about how it would be to be alone. Completely alone. Sitting in a park, with no one to talk to, no one you wanted to talk to.

After a while, I thought about freedom. It's a good word, I concluded.

I got ready for the visit. Why not, after all? It would be worth something to curiosity if nothing else. Wayne would never give up Frontier. Zoomer hadn't come back for the night. At least I would've seen the ceremony for the Toga of Preference. Perhaps I could talk about it someday, if I would have anyone to talk to.

The ceremony was to take place in the Cathedral of Callisto, the second largest Jovian church in existence and perhaps the most symbolic. Built of stone and metal and Callistan soil by the exiles of the radical secular movement in the last century, it is one of the most symbolic buildings constructed in recent history. A gargantuan vertical jigsaw, with more triangles and plinths than half of old Athens put together.

It's surrounded by a metal square, a plaza, about a kilometer on each side, with columns scattered around, and statues of bears and nymphs, and some very angry scantily clad huntresses. You wouldn't have been able to see any of them if you were there that day. The square was full, packed with people. I had never seen so many people in one place with my own eyes. Row upon row of crowding, cheering, jeering persons, many of whom looked like aunts you try to avoid, or cousins who don't do well at school. Even being aware of Frontier's pious demography I was amazed, and somewhat appalled, at their number.

Large projectors hovered over the square, around easily ten-fifteen of them, all showing a view of the cathedral's interior. Around them buzzed many hundred cameras, all taking pictures of the crowd.

There were police cordons around the edges of the square, blue light-tape waving over bear paw, nymph hip, and huntress thigh alike. There were more people outside it, pushing inwards and outwards and in every other direction. As we arrived, they started

pushing towards us, while the police valiantly tried to clear a path. There were cries and shouts, with ripples buffeting back and across the assembly.

Then Johann made his appearance, dressed in purple, and if I'd written that the crowd in Ganymeda had roared for me, then I have no words to describe what I heard now. It was a sea of noise. Like thunder rolling along layers and layers of atmosphere. Like a Jovian storm. The sound went straight to my bones, and I was shivering, trembling as I walked behind Johann and Wors. The acolytes followed me, a line of wavering yellow, looking like it would disintegrate at any second.

And suddenly, amidst all my wretchedness, and all my awe, I understood. As surely and as suddenly as lightning.

I'd been had.

We hadn't been sent here for negotiation, or diplomacy. We hadn't been sent here to talk Wayne into joining Escalon's plans. That was stupid, impossible.

We'd been sent to start a revolution. And that, it seemed, was very possible. That's why Zoomer was in the delegation. That's why Johann and the Church were having this ceremony. The Toga of Preference being given to the Frontier Bishop, a reminder of the brotherhood of the Jovian colonies, of their shared culture and religion. A reminder of how far away Earth was.

We passed inside, through a doorway three stories high, its edges overlapping plates of smooth, gleaming, silver, and carved with distastefully large zig-zagging thunderbolts. Inside was the hall, a giant cavernous space, awash with light and togas.

There was a long pathway before us, carpeted with black silk, at the other end of which was a flight of stairs, leading to a raised platform containing the crackling pillar of trapped electricity that lies at the heart of every Jovian church. On either side of the path were galleries, rising up to thirty, thirty five stepped rows. The yellow of the acolytes filled the bottom ones, while white and purple brocaded the upper lines. The ceiling was a million pin-pricks of light. Here and there, harmless threads of electricity snaked down.

As we walked down the path, the galleries clapped and chanted 'Sky and Storm', one of their hymns. Drums started playing, a subtle yet military beat. Jovian hymns are written for drums. The hall had an eerie reverberation, and the beat entered you, and throbbed in your skull and heart.

We started ascending the stairs. The chanting was replaced by cheering, and the drums rolled faster, continuously. I could hear the sizzle of the Pillar of Thunder even before we reached the top, and I could feel its hiss in the air, on my skin, even through the protection fields. The hairs on my arm stood up.

At the top stood a half circle of purple robed old men, on either side of a slightly younger and thinner one. Behind them the Pillar rose, white edged with purple, hypnotizing and hurtful to look at. You could feel the heat on your cheek.

The drums rose higher till the oldest of the circle raised his hand. Then the church fell silent. Slowly, in steps that each seemed to suck the life from him, he moved towards us. Reaching Johann he stretched up and pressed his fingers to his temple. He closed his eyes, and so did Johann, and the choir assembled by the stairs intoned a prayer. Then he moved to Wors and repeated the process. For five-six aching minutes I stood still like the rest. Finally he moved to me. His eyes were liquid. Even his eyelids were wrinkled. His fingers had almost no pressure. He closed his eyes. I didn't, and looked at the lines criss-crossing his face and then at the others there.

My awe had run its course, and I was now awash with a fierce concentration. My eyes couldn't stop moving, looking. Smell, color, sound, jolted through my senses and fired into my brain. My mind felt focused, unnaturally so, a knife's edge. The Pillar burnt into my eyes. I began to feel rage.

The old man shuffled back, and called for the preliminary orison, a hail to Jove that precedes all their ceremonies and sermons. Thus followed another few minutes of silence and reflection. Tiresome at the best of times, and especially annoying when your reflections are violent, churning thoughts. This was followed by more prayers for blessing on Frontier, on the preferred bishop, on Johann, and long praising descriptions of each. I stood with teeth clenched, eyes taking in the hall, the lights, the heat from the Pillar on my shoulders, cursing my foolishness, and cursing Escalon and CJ and Zoomer and, once again, Romano.

How could I have been so blind? It was obvious. It was the only possibility. I'd been drunk. On the one day that I'd needed sane, cautious judgment, I'd been more intoxicated than I've ever been, three-fourths smitten, and four-fifths sloshed.

Maybe it had all been planned. Maybe Zoomer had been told to play up for me. It wouldn't be difficult for CJ to arrange something like that. And now it was done. I'd come here, on my own volition, smiling and waving the whole damn way. What could I do now? My presence was enough, it was really all I had. What could I do if a revolution started? If I was shot, I'd be a martyr. If I escaped, I'd be a hero.

Around me, they finished the adulations and called, finally, for the Toga itself. Choir boys scattered. A train of acolytes, wearing shimmering gold instead of their usual yellow, carried forth a velvet cushion supported on which it rested. It was purple like the rest but glimmered with silver and gold and looked absolutely hideous.

Johann's face wore an expression of utmost jubilation, while the receiver, the Preferred Bishop looked like he'd stolen the holy cookies. As the Toga exchanged hands, to the quiet chanting of yet another incantation, there arose a noise from outside, only vaguely,

indistinctly heard, but to be heard at all through those thick walls and large spaces it must have been a fearsome clamor.

Some of the priests looked around uncertainly. Johann never even noticed. His eyes shone. His hands trembled. For a few moments the Toga remained between both their grips, till the other Bishop gave it a bit of a tug. Johann reddened and let it go.

The noise grew outside. The Bishop turned to the hall and raised the folded cloth above his head. Suddenly there was a crash from outside, and some screaming, and the sound of air exploding. I didn't know it at the time, but that was the sound of a thermo-sonar. Someone had fired a shot. It was much louder than in the movies.

Now the galleries grew alarmed, chattering and shifting in a huge bee-like rustle. For some reason people started looking around at the edges of the ceiling. Wors took a step forward. I heard a prayer from one of the old cardinals.

Suddenly the side-door opened and a couple of policemen rushed in. People jumped to their feet, unsure of what to feel or do, staring at the two policemen, too surprised even to ask questions.

Wors was the first to call out. "What's going on?" Then the room exploded into jabber. Wors swore. "Tell 'em to be silent," said he, to the cardinals.

"Yes. Yes," said one of them and raised his hands. "Silence. Silence. Let them speak." His voice was a quaver, I could barely hear it standing next to him.

Outside there could plainly be heard shouts and yells now, and more shots. Fear squeezed my throat, and made my blood boil. "Silence!" I roared, my voice rising more shrilly than I'd hoped, but strangely enough it worked. The hall grew quieter.

"What's happening?" asked Wors again.

The policemen had been staring around, flustered. Now they concentrated. "The crowd is giving trouble. We're trying to get the situation under control. Everyone just stay inside."

"The crowd created trouble? We heard shots!" said Wors angrily, and the galleries bubbled up once more.

"The people are rising!" some fool screamed. "The people of Jove are rising!"

"Couldn't they wait till we left?" muttered one of the cardinals beside me.

"Just stay inside for a little while," repeated the policemen loudly. "We'll let you know when it's under control." They ran out again and closed the door behind them.

The people inside now, priest and acolyte alike, started moving around, talking urgently, looking at the walls and the door, and, as before, at the ceiling. I sat down by the side on the first step comfortably. It was quite obvious to me that we were only in trouble if the police were against us, which it seemed they were not, at least yet. I leant forward with my chin in my hand and my elbow on my knee, a position I call chinnee, and contemplated the confusion.

After a few minutes, the cardinal who'd spoke earlier came and sat beside me.

"Look at them," he muttered, creaking himself slowly to his seat. "Pathetic."

I glanced at him, surprised. His face was like a shriveled orange. He squinted down disapprovingly. "Nice pillar though," said I, with a smile.

He grunted. "Thanks." The remnants of one eyebrow swiveled as he looked at me. "I see you're not of the faithful."

"I'm not. Sorry."

He nodded. "Gum?" He retrieved a packet and held it to me.

"No thanks," said I. "I'm having some emotional issues."

"With gum?"

"It was somewhat involved, yes."

Some chairs got knocked over. Someone punched someone on the nose. There were further shots heard outside. The plan had worked. The people had somehow been inspired to riot by the gathering of their priests, by the honoring of their bishop. It was inexplicable to me. I wondered who had foreseen this, who had the insight to bet this would happen. I wondered if it was CJ.

The cardinal chewed loudly for a few moments. "It wasn't always like this," he said quietly.

I gave him a skeptical look. "Are you sure?"

There was more thoughtful chewing. "Well, perhaps it was. Felt different though." He coughed and made phlegm-based sounds, and then chewed some more. "When you're young things feel like you want them to feel."

I said nothing. This was, right now, a touchy topic for me.

"And when you're young you care about what happens. You have such interest. Everything's so important."

I grunted. "I must be old then. I don't care at all..."

He gave me a look, one pale eye fixed upon me. "You misunderstand. I mean, care about yourself. That you do, I think."

"That I do, yes. But it doesn't seem to help me much. I barely survive."

He regarded me thoughtfully. "Perhaps you don't believe enough. To succeed in anything you have to believe in it. You have to feel it's important, because everyone else does. It's like... like... women and heels."

Suddenly there was an excitement from behind. Some people ran up the stairs. "If we could change the settings," came Wors voice, "we can get the fields to push the Pillar up through the ceiling, so that everyone will be able to see it."

I twisted back, alarmed. There were a couple of acolytes he was talking to. He looked very serious. I glanced at the cardinal. "You heard that?"

"Yeah, I did." He grunted again and turned and growled loudly. "You'll do nothing of the sort. No one's going to push anything through any ceiling today."

"But, your grace," said Wors, "the people, when they see the light, the light of Jove, it'll inspire them."

"They seem inspired enough already, goddammit! I have an appointment with the dentist!" A skeleton finger motioned the acolytes. "Get out of here! Go! Morons!"

They went. Wors looked frustrated. The cardinal turned back and slowly took out the gum and vaporized it. "God, this stuff's strong."

After a while the noise reduced outside and eventually stopped. Policemen entered and announced that it was now safe for us to leave. Then they exited quickly before they had another excited crowd on their hands.

The cardinals managed to restore enough order for them to get out first, and I made my way alongside.

As we got into the car I noticed that Johann looked pale. "Are you alright?" asked I, more out of curiosity than care.

"What?" he jumped. "Why yes! Yes, of course! Pretty... pretty tense, eh? All these people."

"I thought it was a good show," said I, nonchalantly.

So he was chicken. How surprising.

Once he reached the consulate he promptly vanished, and this time I was furious and uncaring enough to decide to get to the bottom of this. I waited for a few minutes after he disappeared upstairs, noted the room he went into, picked up the whiskey bottle and followed him. The door was locked of course, but I'd planned for that. I hefted the bottle and threw it against the window down the hallway. There was a tremendous crash. Immediately I thudded my fist on his door.

"Bishop! The mob's here! Get out!" I hissed.

People were stirring downstairs. This would take some explanation. Then again, let them think what they wanted. How did it matter now?

Johann didn't disappoint. He opened the door, looking scared out of his skin, his face beet-red. I pushed past him inside the room.

It didn't even take a second. Half-hidden below a cushion was the telltale silver plate of a DreamGo X11, the ultimate portable gaming device.

I stared at him. His eyes were wild, his face a puddle of apprehension as he realized what I'd seen.

"That's what you've been doing? You've been gaming?"

"I-I..." his mouth trembled, his words blubbering. "I can't help it. I can't stop."

I suppose it was not encouraged for Bishops to game. "Is it bad?" I asked.

He buried his face in his hands and sank to his knees. "I'm stuck in a level," cried he between sobs.

I started laughing hysterically.

That evening, sedated by the continuous and loud rerunning of 'O Fortuna,' I lay hung over the couch like a bad suit. It says something about the darkness that hung over me that no one thought of challenging this imposing rendition. After the first fifteen times or so even I was tired of it, and I continued only out of laziness and social experiment.

Io rose over the horizon and joined her lover and the upper levels of the city where our consulate lay were flooded in copper-whiteness as their lights joined. Zoomer returned, looking unusually staid, her hair only half-heartedly haphazard, and her face devoid of all shades. I stared at her, feeling foolish and angry and sad, and not being able to look away.

"It needs more violins. Heavy, base violins," said she, and plopped down on the couch opposite.

"You should know," said I, and slowly rearranged myself.

She looked older than she usually did, and yet younger in a way... more innocent... like a normal coffee-drinking, day-working woman. This she wasn't, of course. She was revolution, and night, and everything was absolutely impossible.

"You missed a lot of excitement," said I.

"So did you." She laughed. "You were out like a light."

"It's a strange phrase, that."

"We had a little mock play, some old comedy," she continued. "It was the stupidest thing ever! It made no sense at all! But it was so much fun. I dressed up as a fairy queen."

"We had a riot," said I.

That made her pause. She tapped her lip thoughtfully. "Well I suppose you win then."

I nodded. "That's me."

"Wait till I sing," said she, with a grin.

I groaned and slid into recumbence and rested my legs over the armrest. I rolled to my side and watched her. She sat there, her eyebrows slightly raised, neither of us speaking.

"May I ask you a question?" said I, finally.

She was silent for a few moments more, her eyes on me.

“Yes,” she replied. “If you want.”

“Why do you have bruised knuckles?”

She tilted her head slightly, her gaze never wavering. “Because I don’t like blood,” said she. “I can’t bear to cut.”

I took a deep breath. She smiled.

“Why?” I asked, softly.

She didn’t stop smiling. “Why what? Why I can’t bear to cut?”
“Why you...need to...”

She sighed and stretched and stared up at the ceiling, and then glanced at me. “Do you want the dramatic answer, or the boring one?”

“Either,” said I, trying to smile as well. “You don’t need to answer at all, if you don’t want to.”

She intertwined her fingers and studied them. “You know, there have been rumors about it in the magazines.”

“I’m sorry,” said I. “I’ve never really followed...magazines.”

She laughed. “Yeah, you’re not the type.”

She grew quiet then, and raised her slender arms, and traced the air with her long fingers. O fortuna reached the crescendo again, and then grew softer.

“When I was a child, I use to dream of being a lava star,” she said. “And I was prepared to work for it. I used to practice singing after school. I used to play the violin for hours.” She looked at me. “I used to be at it the whole day, ever since I was thirteen.”

I nodded and didn’t say anything.

“And then, one day it happened, when I was just sixteen. And it was quick, you know? It was sudden. Some producer’s kids were in the same school as me so he’d come to the school function, and my band was performing. Two days later, I got a call from the studio and I was set up for a record.”

“That’s cool,” said I.

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought! I thought that it was the coolest thing to ever happen to anyone in history!” She laughed again, and it was a strange, unhappy laugh. I

looked at her. I think that was the only time I saw her without colored lenses. Her eyes were brownish-black, and unspectacular.

“So what happened?” I asked.

She shrugged, and it looked odd since she was still lying down. “Nothing much, I guess. I don’t know...the record did well, not great, but pretty good. And I got lots of publicity, of course.”

“Of course.”

She began to idly hum along to the music for a few seconds. “It wasn’t like I’d thought it would be. It was just...how do I put it? It was just...”

“It just was?” said I quietly, gazing at her. She was a goddess, languid and mysterious. Her skin was alabaster, and her mind was lost. And yet she was easy to understand. That’s what life gives, I suppose - context.

She turned to me, her face showing some surprise. Then slowly, she smiled. “No one should have their dream fulfilled before it has been crushed.”

I nodded and wondered if she smiled while she bruised her knuckles. She began humming again.

After a while, she asked, “What did you want to be when you grew up?”

I thought about that, trying to remember. Childhood memories don’t come easy to me. “I think I didn’t want to grow up,” said I, finally.

She laughed. “So did you?”

“It’s a fight,” said I. “Sometime I jolt myself back, and sometimes days creep up around me.”

“The good fight,” said she, nodding.

“Yeah.”

She went quiet again, and I realized that I could stay there forever with her, just like that, lying on the couch. But then I got afraid that I’d run out of things to say.

“I should go sleep,” said I. “I’ve had a long day.”

She gave me a long look and then nodded. I switched off the music and got up.

“Wait,” said she. “Keep it on.”

“It’s on auto-repeat.”

“That’s alright.”

That night I slept badly and dreamt of storms in the sea.

The next morning, waking early, I met Gustav in the kitchen. He was in spandex.

“Don’t do this to me,” I groaned.

He gave a campaign-winning presidential grin. “Good morning!”

I collapsed into a chair and cursed the world. “I hadn’t seen you in so long I thought you might be gone forever.”

“I’ve been spending a lot of time in the gym. I’ve been exercising.”

“Maybe you’ll run away and become a super-hero yet.”

“It makes me feel better.”

“I’d heard of people like that.”

“You seem in a bad mood.”

“Nice of you to notice.” I peered at the breakfast-maker and tried to make sense of the buttons. “Do you know how this thing works?”

“You press the big red button to switch it on.”

“I know that,” I grunted, and pressed it for good measure. “And then? What’s this... this wavy line, circle thing? How do they expect anyone to understand that? And what’s this one? Triangles?”

He laughed irritatingly and came over. “What do you want?”

“Bacon and sausages and omelet with cheese, followed by cake and cream to finish.”

“It can make French-toast.”

“I’ll take it.” The world must be accepted as it is when the stomach is empty.

Chomping on this meager fare a little while later, and watching the news on the HV in the common room, I met Wors. He walked in looking important and happy. In the news they

showed scenes from yesterday's incident, and people in hospital. There had been at least forty people injured, two or three old women so seriously that they might not survive.

"It was horrible," said he, sounding pleased. "An atrociteh."

I shrugged.

"This won't go unheard," he continued. "People will see the government for what it really is."

"Like looking in a mirror on a bad hair day..." said I.

That quietened him a bit. The HV changed to show Wayne looking grave.

"The officers in charge have already been suspended," said he. "I assure you, action shall be taken. This government respects the freedom of all religions. I myself attend the Church regularly, as is well known."

He showed the lightning pendant he wore around his neck to the camera.

"Phoneh!" spat Wors.

I couldn't tell. Wayne looked like a man who could believe in anything, but it was difficult to say if he did.

Someone amongst the reporters spoke up. "Sir, do you think what happened yesterday will affect the credibility of the DSAA government?"

Wors sat up. Wayne faced the camera squarely, half glaring.

"A lot happened yesterday that every citizen of Frontier should be ashamed of, perhaps even afraid of. But I promise you, and mark my words, I promise you, we shall endure. Frontier shall not end. That is all."

Wors frowned thoughtfully. The news changed to show the channel's studio.

"The spokesperson for the Blue House too has denied the possibility of any instability caused by yesterday's disruption, while continuing to maintain the illegality and temporariness of Cado Escalon's position in neighboring Ganymede. The DSAA has still not made any recognition of New Chicago's change of power, even though Escalon's representatives are being hosted in Frontier currently."

There was a cut to a clip of the DSAA press conference, outside what had once been the White House but had been renamed, though not repainted, after the waves of self-congratulatory mercy colonization. A lanky man, who had probably reached the peak of his looks sometime in his pre-pubescence, stammered at the mike.

“It’s...It’s...we think that...thinking that there is any sort of long term effect of this matter is very...very naïve. There have been some...problems...in the Jovian colonies recently, but that’s what...that’s what our country is about.” A pause. “Self-expression.” Another pause. “We’re sure it won’t last.” Then the clamor started and he backed up.

“No more questions, please. Thank you. No I don’t ‘have to’ take any questions. There’s no contract here. Please, thank you.”

I stretched. “Well, at least he managed to say self-expression instead of freedom. Otherwise things would really have gotten complicated. It’d be freedom on both sides of the ring.”

Wors gave me a slow look. “Yuh know, Cap’n. Yuh’re not... like yuh would be expected to be.”

“That can’t be a good thing,” said I. “Can I change the channel? I usually watch Animal Planet.”

“Sure, Cap’n. I was leaving anyweh,” said he smiling, and rose.

“Wors.” I turned to him.

“Yes Cap’n?”

“How’s this going to work? It’s impossible.”

He paused. “I’m sorreh, Cap’n. I don’t understand.”

“One city is bad enough, Wors. Two is never going to happen.”

A frown swam across his face. “Cap’n,” said he heavily “the Jovian people cannot remain unner a government that doesn’t care for them and sits a hundred thousand miles aweh. It ain’t a game. It needs to happen.”

“Whether it’s a game or not Wors, I can’t see how you’ll win.”

“We have to win, Cap’n. There are lives at stake. Orrinary hard working people, who live and work in owa cities. They’re my people, Cap’n.”

“I think Wayne feels the same way.”

“Then he should join us.”

“He’s not going to join you, Wors. You’ve seen him. He treats this like his personal castle.”

“If he joins us, he will get to keep Callista. As an independent city if he wants.”

“He already has Callista! He’s not going to risk it. You see that, don’t you?”

“What the people want will happen,” said he, placably.

“How?” I cried, getting to my feet now. “How will it happen? How?”

His features became a strange mixture of stolidness and suspicion. “You will see, Cap’n,” said he.

He wasn’t going to tell me. I didn’t even know if he had anything to tell. I was about to scream at him, my mind boiling with anger, my ears fearsomely red. Just then Gustav sauntered in.

“Oh, the news,” said he. “Did anything happen? I still can’t believe I missed it yesterday.”

I froze. It was incredible.

I found myself unable to speak. I couldn’t think of anything to say, anything worth saying, anything that would convey what I felt. My state had passed beyond language. I had become a monkey. I collapsed onto the couch and changed the channel.

After a few minutes, in which a platypus made its despairing way across mud to painstakingly add to a mound of grass outside its burrow, I was the only one left in the room. It didn’t last long though. Before the fifth blade of grass, Porridge entered.

“Mating season,” declared he.

“What?” said I, half jumping in surprise.

“For the platypus,” he explained, as he came to stand by the HV, hands on his hip. “Females build nests during the mating season. That’s a lonely female right there.”

“Oh.” I duly looked at the lonely female and watched as she placed a leaf atop the grass with a careful yet pessimistic air. “You know about platypuses?” I asked Porridge.

“Sure,” said he. “I like platypuses.”

“I thought you liked salamanders.”

“I like them too. I like both.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I usually don’t tell people about the platypuses.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t either,” said I, though I think I would actually.

We both continued watching. I felt my anger retreating, though I was far from calm. The presenter explained how male platypuses have poisonous spurs behind their ankles. The poison sacs swell during mating season.

I felt psychoanalytical.

“Do you like these animals because they are strange and they don’t fit in with the rest and nobody else cares for them?” I asked him.

“What?” said he.

I observed him carefully but he showed no signs of Freudian considerations.

“No, nothing,” said I finally.

“Ok,” said he. “Do you want waffles?”

The female plopped down beside the nest. I said I did.

Apparently he had been wandering about the last few days, meeting friends and acquaintances, and in the process had discovered the ‘best waffle place in space.’ I was more impressed by the fact that he had other acquaintances.

“Who are these people?” I asked in wonder. “How do you know them? More importantly how come they continue to know you?”

He was as immune to sarcasm as he was, presumably, to bullets. “Us Intelligence people stick together,” said he.

“How unlike us intelligent people,” I mused.

For a while we munched on our waffles in thoughtful silence.

“I can’t believe it,” said I slowly. “I actually miss my old job.”

He nodded in agreement. His eyes narrowed in manly reminiscence.

“It was peaceful at least. And I had a lot of time to myself,” I continued. “I didn’t have to bother about other people.”

“Providing nourishment to all those hungry trusting mouths,” said he. “I felt like a mother.”

I felt that we were having somewhat parallel conversations, but what could be done, it was Porridge after all. Helpful and friendly he might feel, but words shall always be squirming trapezoids in the circle of his discussion.

In a way he too was epochally challenged, just like Gustav. In much of human history he would have been an important, respected man, which perhaps just goes to show what chaotic conditions of life we used to live in. But those ages were long past. He couldn't even be a special agent today. A foot soldier maybe, or a bad cook.

I missed Toshi.

“It's good being home though,” said Porridge.

I glanced at him. “You're from Frontier?”

He shook his head. “I worked here when I was in the government. I stayed here for a long time.”

“Ahh I see.” I finished my waffle and sat back. It hadn't excited me much, despite its obvious reputation. I've always felt a certain indifference towards the dish. Waffle, in my opinion, always tastes like waffle.

An idea struck me. “These friends of yours, do they still work for DSAA intelligence?”

“Some of them,” said he. “Paul plays fuzzbball now. And Osman is an insurance salesman.”

“Did they fail the EQ test too?”

“Paul did. Osman topped it.”

That made sense. “Do you think,” said I, “that there's any chance that you could find out from them what exactly is going on? Is that at all possible?”

I didn't expect much. It was a half-idle question. But Porridge twitched his jaw positively. “What do you want to know?”

“You can? Something about what the DSAA is planning to do? Or what Wayne is thinking? Could you find out?”

“Sure.”

“Really?” asked I, surprised. “Aren't you people sworn to keep these things secret?”

“We’re no doctors.”

“That’s true,” I reflected. “But does this kind of thing happen often? Classified gossip?”

“In the DSAA? Sure. Don’t you see all the movies? How do you think they find out about all the procedures and hierarchies?”

“I thought they were all made up.”

“You thought that they made up complicated secret procedures while having monosyllabic dialogues?”

That was a good point. I was impressed, and, I have to admit, slightly alarmed. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

He shrugged. “Policemen worry about finding out other people’s secrets, not keeping their own.”

“I didn’t know you made analogies.”

“What’s an analogy?”

“Nothing important. Now listen, can you find this out quickly? We have to know what we’re dealing with.”

“Sure,” said he. “I’ll call him as soon as we get back.”

“Couldn’t you call him now?”

“It’ll be free if I call from the consulate.”

“Free?” He gave a pleased nod. “Oh Jove,” I groaned and then switched on my phone. “Here, use mine.”

He frowned slowly. “But it’ll be free from the consulate.”

“That’s alright, I don’t mind. Use it.”

“I couldn’t do that.” He looked indignant. “That’d be cheap of me.”

“Look, I don’t want to call from the consulate. There might be people around. I don’t know who can be trusted.”

He blinked, and looked at me with his dull, squinty gaze. “But it’ll be free.”

“I don’t care, dammit! Just use my phone.”

He set his jaw, and crossed his arms. “I can’t do that,” said he, leaning back.

This, if my readers are wondering, is the inherent humanity writers love to show through their characters. I am lucky that I merely need to recollect from my acquaintances.

“Fine!” said I, slamming down the money and rising. “We’ll go back.”

When we did however, as I’d expected, there were people scattered about. It was not till a very slow and impatient hour later that he could make the call. Things moved quick enough when he did though. Within a minute he gave me a thumbs-up, and then continued talking for another fifteen minutes about mutual acquaintances since the call was, after all, free.

After he finished he told me that he’d set up a meeting for the next day morning. That left me with no choice but to take a nap, in the hope that I would at least shorten my experience of the time that lay between and for a while not experience the worry that was maddening me.

I woke early evening from an intense hunger, having missed lunchtime in my slumber. I made my way to the kitchen once again and found Zoomer’s troupe installed in the front room, looking busy and confused in a professional manner.

“What’s going on?” asked I.

Ami, a boyish looking girl, who appeared to handle Zoomer’s compu-pad carrying duties, stepped up to reply. “We’re going for the rehearsal.”

“Rehearsal? For what?”

“Don’t you know? She’s giving a concert tomorrow.”

I blinked stupidly. She, being one of those who wore glasses as a new fashion trend, adjusted them keenly.

“Where is she?” I asked. “Where’s Zoomer?”

“She’s with Mandy, getting ready.”

I couldn’t help myself. I had to go talk to her.

I went to her room, and rapped on the door, my hunger forgotten, my stomach cast aside.

“What is it?” came her voice. “I’m getting ready.”

“I need to speak to you,” said I.

“You’ll have to wait. I’ll be out in 10 minutes.”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t want to wait.”

She didn’t answer and the only sound was the soft whisper of brush through hair. I was about to leave but then she spoke. Her voice was quiet, secret.

“Come in then. Close the door behind you.”

The door creaked as I pulled it open. I slid inside and closed it as she’d asked. The room was strange, the old, dark wood lit only by a single, dim light. There were stands and chairs, all of them covered by her clothes and costumes, masks and silk and satin and glitter and wigs, all glowering darkly. A laboratory of pretence. There was a giant mirror across me, inset in a grand, old-fashioned dressing table, and there she sat with Mandy by her side, brushing her hair. She looked at me through the mirror. Her eyes were glowing slate-white, but her lips were surprisingly dull. Half her face was blanched. Her hair was straight and shimmering.

“I don’t usually let people see me like this, between makeup,” said she quietly, as if not just her face, even her voice was private.

I took a long look at her. “Always one skin or another.”

She smiled. “No one has seen me in twenty years.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re going to sing?” I said softly.

The brush strokes were gentle, caring. The reflection of her eyes were on me.

“Yes,” said she.

“Why?” I asked. I took a few steps forward and sat on a trunk. I waited till she swiveled to face me. She seemed amused. I had to will myself to be able to speak.

“There’ll be trouble.”

“That’s the whole point, isn’t it?” said she.

“But I don’t understand,” said I desperately. “You don’t need to do this. You’re talented, and you’re famous. There’s no need to do this.”

A smile flitted across her face. “Are you afraid I’ll get hurt?”

I could feel Mandy listening. The brushing got replaced by curling.

"I'm afraid a lot of people will get hurt," said I. "Johann's show already put eighty people in the hospital."

She laughed. "My brave captain. So gallant."

Had she seen though me? Did she know what I was? It didn't matter anyway.

"It'll be dangerous," said I. "It'll be more dangerous than the previous riot. It could really get out of hand."

She grinned and leaned forward. "Don't worry so much, Captain. It'll be alright," she whispered. "I'm precious."

Her face was inches from mine. The curlers whirred, shaping, molding her hair.

"That's why it's dangerous," said I, my voice a bare whisper. "You can make people go crazy. The crowd will go mad. Don't do it. There's no need to."

She stopped smiling. "Tell me, mon capitain, if you could move the world, if you had that power, for just one day...would you not? No matter what happened?"

There it was, that was the question. She had it exactly. I stared at her, and she looked back at me calmly. She was wearing color on her eyes again, pearl lenses, so that her eyeballs were invisible. I remembered what she had said earlier, the other day. I knew her answer to the question.

"I don't think I would," said I and willed myself to get up. I tore my eyes away from her, and took heavy steps towards the door.

She called out. "Do you want to come see the rehearsal?"

I would have liked to say no, and walked away. It would have been correct and fitting. I didn't, of course.

I didn't get to talk to her the rest of the night. I don't think I wanted to either. That's what emotions do. That's what they are. One part of the brain fooling, teasing, commanding another. And so you can feel as if you never ever want to talk to someone because you want to so badly, and you're afraid that if you do it'll only get worse.

The rehearsal was in a studio east of the city, and we were carried in a motorcade. I was in a car with three disillusioned looking youths, who were her writing team. One of them confided to me that she usually overrode anything they wrote, and that he really felt he shouldn't have left university for this. The others didn't speak.

The studio was a large building built of carbocloth and metal, like modern buildings aspire to be when they grow up.

I had never been inside a recording studio, with good reason, since it is far too full of buttons and other related technology. But then that was the whole point of the group of people that Zoomer kept herself surrounded by. Soon there was a man or woman manning every station, every bit of equipment was managed, every button taken care of, and the writers and I, mooching around as we were, could safely feel that the world, while imperfect, was at least busy.

Music, like all things, is more difficult to make than would be thought by the inexperienced. It was a good two hours before the actual singing started, and it didn't really improve the situation. I think this was the first time since meeting Zoomer that I was completely unimpressed by her music. That didn't mean I was unaffected though. The studio was well carpeted and I lay against a wall, staring at the glass ceiling, while all around me people worked hard, and made music that crawled into my senses and buffeted my ears and didn't let me sleep.

They fell asleep sometime in the morning. I fell asleep sometime before them but I have no idea when.

I was woken by the unchained melody of my phone ringing, and the muttered grumbles of those around me. I scrambled awake, and took the call. "Toshi?"

"It's me, Jones. Where are you?"

"Ohh... Porr-Jones! My god! What's the time? It completely slipped my mind..."

"He said to meet him in half an hour. We should try to be on time, Ro. Agents get jittery if their contacts don't appear on time. They've seen the movies."

"Right. Yes. Who hasn't? I'll... I'll try to be there, Jones. Where was it again?"

He gave me the address and I saved it. Then, standing up uncertainly and looking over the sleeping many around me, I did the needful.

"Is there a chauffeur in the house?"

There was, and since a consulate motorcade uses biological verification, the poor soul had to be dragged along. There was some sort of a fascinated, twisted joy to be had from being able to do this, to be able to treat him like a puppet. In a small way, I could feel why the Escalons did what they did.

We tore through the city as fast as speed laws, traffic and drowsiness would allow and made it with a few minutes to spare. Porridge was wearing a trench coat.

"Here I am!" said I, hopping out. "Thank you, Shastri. That'll be all."

“Remember,” said Shastri with a dark look, still angry at being woken and commandeered, “you meet the same people on the way down as you meet on the way up.” Then he drove off, and I never met him again. That proves little however, since I was hardly on my way up.

Porridge turned up his lapels, and I took a seat opposite him. We were seated at the outdoor tables of a restaurant named ‘Cornwall,’ a pleasant pun since it served mainly corn based dishes cooked in the English style – that is, hardly cooked at all.

“How much time left?” asked I, eyes glancing at the menu, foot tapping nervously.

“It’s time already. He must be observing us.”

“Observing us? Is that routine?”

“Agents have been known to observe their contacts for long periods of time.”

“That’s quite disturbing, Jones. They must have far too much free time.” I leafed through the menu, with the thought that the noble act of munching may calm me down. “Corn pop?”

“Sure.”

I looked around for a waiter and saw one skinny man, sporting a goatee and a menu. I signaled him, and he came over, moving in a curious sliding way.

“Could we have some corn pop?” said I.

He gave a hideous grin, his sallow, oily, bony face crinkling. “That will not be possible.”

“Eh?” I peered at him, taken aback. “Why?”

He threw aside the menu, and threw his head back. “Because I, am no waiter!”

“Joseph!” cried Porridge, turning to him and clasping his hands. “It’s you!”

“Yes. It is I,” said Joseph with consequence, and presented us with his profile.

“Joseph is a master of disguise,” Porridge told me enthusiastically, as they sat down.

Joseph gave a patronizing look. “It was nothing; I merely acted upon an observation that people classify waiters primarily by their action of standing around and holding menus. This allows for instant and convenient camouflage. I merely have to pick up a menu and voila — I have disappeared.”

“But the other waiters are robots,” I pointed out.

He flung me a scowl. “You got fooled, didn’t you?”

That was true. I conceded defeat. He motioned again for a waiter and this time a bona fide plastic service unit rolled to us.

“What did you folks want?”

“Corn pop.”

“Disgusting.” He turned to the bot. “Two corn pops for them, and one martini for me. Shaken, not stirred.”

“We don’t serve that, sir,” intoned the PSU.

“Then I’ll have beer.” He settled back and thumped down the menu. “So, what did you want to know?”

Porridge shrugged and glanced at me. I leaned forward. “I’m with the Ganymedan diplomatic mission.”

He gave me an arched look. “Yes, I know who you are. And about your ‘mission’”, said he, smiling toothily as he traced the quotes with his fingers.

I felt a bit disturbed. “Do you know what they’re trying to do? What their plan is?”

“Yes,” said he, matter-of-factly.

“I think,” I lowered my voice and glanced around unnecessarily. “I think that they, the diplomatic team, they’re trying to start a revolution.” I licked my lips nervously.

He frowned with a certain amount of impatience, and looked at Porridge. “Didn’t you want to meet because you needed some information? Because if you’re just trying to provide me with some, this stuff isn’t useful. There’s very little we don’t know right now.”

I stared at him, taken aback, and he noticed my expression. Suddenly, he barked out a laugh. “Oh, I see,” said he, turning towards me. “You ‘think’ they will do this...” He made the quotes again. “You don’t actually know...” He laughed again. “They didn’t tell you...”

My jaw tightened. “No, they didn’t. But I guessed,” said I, stiffly.

“Oh? You guessed?” said he, oozing amusement, but at least stopped short of making air quotes. He took a sip of his beer and regarded us. “Well, you guessed right,” said he, after a few seconds and looked at us both. “Anything else? Or is that it?”

Porridge shrugged, but I had something more to ask, and my guts clenched further. “Zoomer’s giving a concert tomorrow,” said I, slowly.

He took another, larger sip. “Yes?”

“So what’s going to happen? What’s Wayne going to do?” I took a deep breath. “I think they’re going to try to cause another riot at the concert.”

The waiter rolled in and brought the food. Joseph waved him away and gave a sly look.

“Careful eh? The corn have ears.”

I laughed nervously. He began to nibble at his piece with great care.

“Is Wayne going to stop them?” I asked, with a trace of impatience. I was strung up enough without anyone needing to put in extra effort to be infuriating.

Joseph smirked. “How can he? Zoomer has every right to give a concert. She’s a much loved performer.”

“But isn’t he going to do anything?” said I, my voice getting shriller with confusion. “Isn’t he going to try stopping the riot?”

“There will be heavy police cover,” said Joseph, his eyes glittering like a crow’s or a rat’s.

“That’s it?” I asked.

He shrugged, and went back to nibbling his corn. I sighed, and sat back, completely unsure of what to do, or even what to make of all this. Suddenly Porridge spoke.

“Joseph,” said he, quietly. “There is more, isn’t there?”

Joseph couldn’t stop a shadow of glee from crossing his face. He looked like a kid who knew some horrible secret and could barely keep his excitement under wraps. It occurred to me that I would hate to meet him when he was working.

“Well, that’s what Wayne plans are. His police cover,” said he.

Porridge set his featured into more granite-like viscosity. “Why don’t you tell us the whole thing?”

Joseph raised his eyebrows. “Why should I?”

He tapped his corn against the table lightly, and said softly, “Remember Isfahan, Joseph?”

That made him still. His face froze, and his eyes locked with Porridge and the smirk vanished. He looked completely stricken. The change was so sudden that I gave Porridge a curious look. Porridge was looking straight at him, with no expression at all. Had he been in Isfahan?

Joseph was still quiet. He seemed too shocked to answer. “You did look like you were waiting to tell someone about it. About what you know...” said I, trying to lighten the mood.

His eyed flitted to me, and then he relaxed somewhat. The smirk returned and he let out a laugh. “Yeah, it’s quite a situation that’s built up. It’s really funny in a way.”

I had the feeling that the way he found it funny was the same kind of humor that was most commonly found in school yards and involved broken noses among the defenseless.

“Please go on,” said I.

He took a swig of his beer, and grinned. “Well firstly, you have to understand that the DSAA is waiting to declare war. Wayne doesn’t want it, but it’s going to happen. The warframe was started more than a week ago.”

My breath stopped short and I stared at him. I don’t know what I had expected. What else could have possibly happened? But CJ had seemed so confident, and Escalon had seemed so collected, and more importantly I had been so stupid that perhaps I’d been entertaining some hopes simply out of shame.

Strangely enough, I don’t remember my exact emotion. I might not have had one as such. I know that I was silent but that’s all I can recall. It’s possible that I didn’t feel anything at all, just a voice in my head wondering what I should be feeling. That happens sometimes.

I remember though that Joseph was grinning like a pirate flag.

“Is that what you wanted to know?” said he, watching me.

“What are they waiting for?” asked I, slowly.

“For Wayne. He has to agree. Almost all the ships with magnetospheric capability are here.”

“I was told the DSAA could not hope to win.”

He shrugged. “The DSAA cannot expect to lose. But you’re right. It won’t be quick. Pacho retains all his units. No one left him. They will have superior forces for at least a year, unless we get international help.”

“Will that happen?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? That’s politics, not strategy.”

“And Wayne? What if he doesn’t agree? What if he joins Escalon?”

He leant forward, his face shining with excitement. “Ahh...now there is the real gem. You see, that’s what they’re hoping for, Escalon and his brigade. That’s why they instigated the riot in front of the Church. That’s what they’re going to try for in the concert. They know he loves this city, and they think if they can make its people rebel against the DSAA, he’ll join them.”

“Yes. Can’t that work? That seems like a good plan,” said I, out of sheer desperation.

He shook his head. “They don’t understand him. That’s not what he is like. He’s not a father, he’s a king. He won’t see rebellion as his people choosing to be free. He won’t see it as popular insurrection. To him, its trouble being created in his city. He won’t stand for that.”

“What about Escalon? Has he started his warframe too?”

“You better hope so.”

I didn’t know if I did. If he hadn’t or if he started it too late, then it wouldn’t be war at all. He would have to surrender. Perhaps that would be better. If lesser people die, lesser would be punished. That’s how justice works.

If this seems confusing to you, if you don’t know about warframes, then I’ll take a moment to explain it here, though to be frank, my vanity expects my admiring readers to be above such ignorance. Since space warfare is heartlessly unencumbered by such inconveniences as terrain, geography and most things that require any amount of human sensory perception, the whole thing can be treated as a purely mathematical problem. Combined with predictive behavioral game theory, and basic knowledge of the composition of the two forces, a computer can plan the entire war, and come up with solutions with respective probabilities of winning. Some of these, sometimes, may even exclude mass destruction. Either way, if your opponent has the math and you do not, you cannot hope to win. Unfortunately, knowing what I did of Escalon I’d have bet that he started the warframe the moment he got Pacho on his side.

A thought struck me and I looked up hastily. “So, the concert...”

“Yes?” Joseph gave a sly grin. “It’ll get a big crowd.”

I felt prickles all over my body. Fear surged through me now, plunging past all levees.

I got up uncertainly, hurried and graceless, and nearly toppled the ketchup. “It’ll be war then. It’ll cause the war.”

Joseph grinned now, his teeth flashing from cheek to cheek. “Oh, it gets even better. The final twist is the real killer.” He paused. “Like in terms of the humor...not in terms of actual killing...” he clarified.

We both gaped at him. “Do you want to know?” he asked, smiling.

“Yes,” said I.

“Wayne hopes the police cover will discourage your people from trying anything much. But your people have bribed the captain to make sure he retreats. They’re very clever.” He stopped to give a laugh that burrowed into my spine, and crawled into my bones.

I tried taking claming breaths. I tried counting but I couldn’t. “And?”

“Well, the DSAA would prefer Wayne to be angry, you see. To be enraged, in fact. They would like him to see some blood.”

I tried understanding what he meant, but my mind wasn’t working. His words were no more than a queenless horde of bees, buzzing madness inside my head.

“So they’ve out-bribed the police?” said Porridge softly. I turned to him and then to Joseph. Joseph smiled and nodded.

“Isn’t that cool?” he asked.

I took a step backwards, and my legs tangled with the chair. My limbs felt weak. I can’t think of a word for my state of mind, but it made me say something that would have made Gustav proud.

“We have to stop them!”

Porridge complied immediately. He rose like a whale coming up for air. “The car, Jo,” said he, holding out his hand for the keys.

“No way,” said Joseph. “I’ve helped you enough.”

Porridge glared at him. Joseph shook his head. “Not the car, Jones. I’m not giving the car.”

“Marianna,” said Porridge. “Remember Marianna, Jo?”

Joseph maintained a surly silence.

“You think we’re even?”

He gave a sigh. “No. We’ll never be even.” He fished out his keys and tossed them to Porridge who caught them like they were pizza dough.

“Let’s go!” said he, and we did.

Running across the plaza to the parking lot, panting and puffing to keep up with Porridge, I couldn’t help asking him. “You were in Isfahan?”

He nodded. “It was bad.”

That was an understatement. It was the biggest mess the DSAA had got into in this century. Till now, of course.

We reached the car. It was a convertible. I was suddenly overcome with a curiosity.

“Jones. Tell me something. Why are you doing this?”

He paused. “What?”

“All this. Why are you helping me? Why did you call in favors? Why are you coming with me now?”

He thought for a moment, and then shrugged. “Dunno. Why not?”

I stared at him blankly, but he seemed serious. At that moment, in a way, I felt as much wonder as I ever have. “I don’t know whether I should want to be you or anyone but you,” I said, slowly.

He gave a chuckle. We got into the car, and he revved up the maglev. I buckled in my safety.

“And Marianna?” asked I.

Inertia slammed me back as he accelerated in a tight loop out of the car-park. “Another day,” said he.

He switched on the music. I switched it off and tried to call Zoomer but her phone was turned off.

Porridge drove like he would be expected to. The car jumped and swerved, threading through the traffic like an overly large martial arts specialist through Japanese walls. Soon however, I could feel the car slowing. The traffic was getting too thick. People filled the pavements, and five blocks from the concert they were already spilling onto the streets. After a block more, we couldn't move forward at all. That, I suspect, is how car rescues go in real life.

Porridge sat back. "What now?"

"I don't know." I peered out of the window. The traffic was completely jammed, what might be called the reverse-domino effect. I got out and gazed around me. People were milling forward, the rearguard of the throng, the undecided edge of the wave. Some were wearing headbands with Zoomer's name. Some had banners.

I walked into their province, and elbowed my way through a line, and then another, and then another. But after that the crowd became dense and my advance got completely stymied.

"Excuse me," said I, to a tall, pretty girl next to me who was carrying a little Jovian flag listlessly.

She turned to me briskly. "Yes?"

"Does it get better further on? Can we get through?"

She shook her head. She had nice hair. "It's all blocked. I'm so gonna miss it."

I grunted. "Perhaps that's better."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

I really didn't want to get caught up in conversation with her, my sense of urgency was compelling at the moment, but I felt I had to give her some warning "There's going to be a riot," said I, trying to sound as believable as possible. "There could be police action."

Thankfully it wasn't the problem. Perhaps she had already been expecting something of the kind. She seemed surprised and her eyes widened, but if she really was surprised then I think she would have been far more skeptical.

"Really?" said she. "Why?" Her friend appeared at her elbow.

"For..." I tried to find a concise way to put it, a succinct reasoning, but it was difficult. "For freedom, perhaps," said I finally. "If you want to call it that. Zoomer is going to start a riot."

"How do you know?" asked the other girl, a shorter, graver version.

Time was pressing me now. I'd already dawdled for crucial minutes. "I know Zoomer," said I, and made to leave. "Please be careful. I have to go."

"Wait, wait," said one of them. "You know Zoomer?" I could hear their eyes shine.

I nodded, and gave them a half-wave. I heard the short one's voice as I walked away.

"She wants us to riot?"

I didn't answer.

I returned to the car and found Porridge, outside, leaning against the hood. "It's not going to move."

"What do we do?" said I, my voice a mumble, less a question than a supplication. "What do we do now?"

He had no ideas to offer though, and neither did I. We could not get to her. We could not call her. Perhaps we could get through to the others, but what use would that be? They wouldn't listen. They were what I was trying to stop. And yet, the information I had... would it convince them? I didn't think it was likely, but it was conceivable. It had to be tried.

I called JK. No one picked up. I called him again. After half a minute or so, he answered. Heavy, throbbing strains of music coursed through, and his voice sounded like a sinking man's.

"Ro! Where are you? You're missing the show."

"And the show is missing me?" said I. He laughed and I clenched my teeth. "Listen to me, JK. There's something you need to know."

"Yes?" said he and started video. I found him smiling. Behind him was the stage.

"The DSAA is planning for war. They've started their warframe. They just need Wayne to agree."

His expression changed, his smile faded. His face became amused, part curious. "You're a surprising man, Ro," said he slowly. "But we already know this."

"JK, if there is trouble now... if this concert..."

"Ro, I'm impressed that you found this out, though you could have just asked me of course, but really, you don't need to worry so much. We have things under control."

“JK. Listen to me,” said I, anxiety, fury pounding through me. “The police captain is not on your side. If there’s trouble, the police will take action. It will get out of hand! Do you see? People will die.”

He frowned and looked over his shoulder at the stage and then back. “What are you saying? How do you know this?”

“I met a guy from their secret service.”

“Who is he? Is he reliable? Did you know him from before?”

“I didn’t. But I think this is reliable. Besides...the risk, JK, the risk is too high. Think about it. Think of what could happen. There are two, three thousand people there?”

His frown deepened. His eyes skittered to and fro.

“More?” asked I, reading him. “Six? Seven?”

He took a deep breath. “Twelve.” His voice was brittle. He looked back at the stage again. “We can’t stop, Ro. We’ve planned this for too long. This is too important.”

“You have to!” I hissed. “You have to. You will be in danger. You will all be in danger!”

He took out a cigarette and shakily raised it to his lips. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“You’re willing to take? You?” Fury won out. I felt its march in my veins, its surge in my ears. I roared. “And the rest? The audience? Have you asked them?”

His voice rose in turn. “If the DSAA government,” said he fiercely, “will fire on its own people when their voice rises for freedom, then it’s on their head! The consequence is theirs! Not mine! It’s their decision! It’s their guns!”

“But you’re the target, you fool! You could die! And even if you don’t, if this happens, Wayne will decide, right now. He’ll agree to their plans. Tomorrow will be war.”

“You think he will do that? Even when his own people get killed for their freedom?”

“Yes, you idiot! Can’t you see it? Didn’t you talk to him?”

“Then he’s a traitor! He doesn’t deserve to govern!”

“But he does govern! That’s the point! He does already! And there will be war!”

His face scrunched up. I could see emotions, thoughts, chasing across. The cigarette glowed bright. Then his jaw set, and he squared his shoulders, and I knew I’d failed.

He ended the call.

According to history, the Spacer Uprising had already begun.

8.

It is now, as we come nearer to the conclusion of this account, that I, as the narrator, face both my greatest challenge and my dearest opportunity. The uprising, the final culmination of what some analysts claim decades of a widening chasm of misunderstanding and grievance between Earth and the farthest colonies of its nations, and that some others consider one of those moments when humanity declares itself to be, all said and done, imbecilic, is not an easy subject. On the other hand, I was unfortunate enough to be in a very favorable position to report it.

I don't know if it was Porridge's idea or mine, though there is a shamefully high chance that it was actually me, but we decided on getting to a vantage point to be able to see what was actually happening in the concert. You may as well call it bravery; I have a feeling that is what it usually is, an abrupt and bad idea.

It wasn't difficult. The buildings needed identification to be entered, or for their elevators to be used, but spacer cities usually have multiple levels and as the concert required a large area, it was being held in one of the largest plazas, and this had been given the benefit of a high ceiling. As such, surrounding the plaza continued the other levels, giving a natural amphitheatre for the spectacle. While we couldn't get near the concert itself, it was quite possible to line up against the edge of the highest road alongside, and get a clear view of the scene.

We were only one of very many who had this idea. The road was bordered entirely by spectators, a linear crowd. Most of them, however, didn't have the powerful eye enhancers that we found in the glove compartment of Joseph's car, and that allowed me to see even individual faces and actions of the people below.

The only one who I concentrated on was Zoomer.

She was wearing a half-mask of gold, and the rest half of her face was painted white as before. Her hair was a blue flame. She had a meso-violin. Faint notes carried to us, high and far though we were, and my chaotic, turbulent thoughts suddenly and intensely yearned to hear her.

I couldn't call JK again, and I didn't have ear-enhancers, so I called Gustav.

"Let me hear," said I, when he picked up.

He took a moment to recognize my voice and then chuckled. "What is love, really?" said he.

"Shut up," said I.

He did, and then increased the environmental sound input levels. The music poured through, the violin raging, harsh, quick, the notes like the coming of a storm, like dead

debris. It slid beneath my skin, and made me long for cold rain, and made me remember when I had sat on the roof and watched lightning flash around me for half the night. It made me want her, and wish that everyone else didn't and made me curse, like I have never cursed before or since, my absolute futility. It made me helpless.

She finished the piece, and threw her hands up and her head back. From behind her, on the stage, a projection of the DSAA flagball beamed up to the ceiling. The crowd grew quiet. Around me people craned their necks. For a moment, there was a hushed, surprised, expectant silence in the plaza.

"Gustav," said I softly. "Do you know what's going to happen?"

The projection changed. The flagball burst, shattering into a thousand virtual pieces, and uncovered was the new Jovian symbol.

The crowd exploded. The roar was deafening. Within moments there were other flares being fired from the crowd, other projections of the new flagball. And over and beneath the rumble and cry of the crowd began another sound — a chant that grew and swelled till it became the noise.

Callista.

"It's happening then?" came Gustav's voice, a mere whisper. "It's actually happening now?"

"Yes it is. Soon there'll be violence."

"You think so?"

I focused close, on her face, on her eyes. Did she wonder where I was? Did she feel afraid?

"There are agitators placed in the crowd, if I'm not mistaken," said I. "And the police haven't been bought over."

"That's it? So simply?" said Gustav.

She started singing again. It was one of the anthems of the Jovian church, the most military one. The drums started a rhythm.

"This time...yes," said I. An idea struck me. The buzz of the crowd grew. "Protect her," I told him, "if you want your revolution. She is the banner, she is the flame. Protect her when it starts."

It was pure inspiration, a moment of genius. He was the man for the job. For the first time in my life had I been able to give an order to Gustav that he wanted to obey as much I

wanted it to be obeyed. I also suspected that he was very ashamed of his previous behavior, his failure aboard our ship, so he was in a perfect psychological condition to over-commit.

It didn't take long after that. The anthem hadn't even finished before someone shoved a policeman.

I saw it clearly, a boy dressed in green with metal loops through his hair, and large spectacles. He looked fake, as if he'd been planted, but admittedly that may well be my own bias. I'd had the same feeling when I'd seen Escalon's courthouse march, and if I had to plan a revolution this is how I'd go about it, but there's no knowing either way. Zoomer was a goddess for many people. Goddesses attract sacrifice.

I will not say that it doesn't matter in the end, whether he acted out of his own volition and was led by passion and upsurge of emotion, or whether he had been hired. I think it does. It matters in the way people remember things, and people form their view of the world depending on their memories, and on their society's memory. It is like a mental courthouse, depending on precedent to determine decisions, on history to determine tradition and validity. Thus I cannot help but feel that it is of the utmost importance to determine why that man, that boy, did what he did. But I can do no further. I can provide no more evidence and so I must move on.

The policeman did not react at first. He stood still, disciplined, as he was pushed once, twice, thrice, before he ran the butt of his gun into the green boy's chest. The boy stumbled back, fell, and it began.

His friends lunged at the policeman, one tried a hook but was blocked, the other attacked from the opposite side, and got a blow on the side of the man's head. He was wearing a helmet, but the punch might have hurt his ear, since he flew into those momentary rages that sometimes occur with sudden unexpected pain. He fired.

The crack was louder than the music, it could be heard above the drums, the violins. Instantly, the scene dissolved. All order evaporated. There were screams, yells, people started pushing, moving, trying to run away, trying to defend themselves against unseen fears, and succumbing to the anarchy of that fear itself. Within the first minute, there were three more shots, within the next, seven more.

I think by then the first casualty had already earned his definition. The first martyr, the first crossfire, the first to have his ribs pierce into his lungs or to have his neck snap back.

That is what the uprising is remembered for in gun-making circles. For the demonstration that the thermo-sonar, a supposedly non-lethal device used by police forces everywhere, can cause a massacre.

There is no mistake in its technical making. As you might know it uses a concentrated heat ray to cause a sudden directional expansion of air, thus instantaneously generating a

large impulse while maintaining non-penetrative levels of pressure. It should do no more than knock you back and take the wind from your lungs. The principle is doubtless. However, when this is applied from several directions on a crowd of twelve thousand, jammed together foot to foot in a situation where space is a precious commodity, there arise other incidental factors. For instance, there are skulls around that can knock back and drive your nose up into your brain.

I do not know how many policemen suffered injuries that day. The records say a few did sustain bodily harm, including broken bones and one paralysis. I observed one policeman unable to stall the advance of the mob towards him, though the idea of an advance was a simplification in this case. It was more like a thrashing of the frightened, angry beast, lashing out its limbs without thought. He fired one shot, scattering six people, rippling the crowd like a violent domino, but then he held out his hands and tried to talk to them, perhaps affected by the sight of living bodies flung about like rag-dolls. I watched him get enveloped. I do not know what happened to him since my attention got diverted.

It was Zoomer. She stood center-stage, feet planted apart, gold mask gazing out over the chaos and cried out "FREEDOM".

She screamed it through the speakers, her voice a wail and a shriek and a challenge. I remember jarring back when I heard her. It brought to my mind the tale of women who accompanied the Germanic tribes to war and screeched curses upon their enemies, threats and premonitions and cruel obscenities, and if the enemy got too close, they took out their knives.

The crowd, bedraggled, torn and wounded as it was, heard her, and let out a roar. A volley of shots was fired.

She screamed again. They roared even louder. A troop of policemen clambered onto the stage.

She didn't have knives, I was fairly sure. I saw them issue orders to get her. She hurled a violin at them. Her drummer launched himself at one and caught the full blast of a thermo-sonar in mid air.

"Gustav!" I cried into the phone.

I heard vicious panting from the other end.

"T-tell Robin that I-I'm sorry. I... she should have... received the marmalade on her-her breasts...b-before...the other girl," said he, his voice breaking between intakes of breath. I heard a grunt, and I saw him bound onto the stage. "Tell her... I think women are as good at math as men. And I... I like her taste in clothes."

The police fired at Zoomer. She leapt sideways and avoided the blast and rolled behind one of the massive speakers. From the other end of the stage, Gustav charged.

The drummer hadn't lasted a single minute. Gustav Olaffson, beloved of women, six feet four in height, the mortal Apollo, lasted three. He got within a foot of them before three of them fired square in his chest, and he flew back and landed a quarter of the stage away. If Zoomer was a Vandal woman, Gustav was a proud Zulu at Rorke's Drift.

To be fair, he twitched most valiantly as he lay crumpled on the stage. It may also be said that he was successful. He distracted them long enough for a group of thugs, probably hired by JK for exactly this eventuality, to rush in from back stage and flank their line. Once they got in close the thermo-sonars were no longer effective and the whole party broke out into melee. Next I saw, Zoomer's spot was empty.

Then the police ordered the crowd to disperse, and started firing till they would. The stampede began.

I saw no more. Zoomer had vanished, presumably into safety, and it was becoming apparent to me that the radius of this disaster was increasing by the second. It didn't make sense to stay any longer, if it ever had in the first place.

Porridge agreed with me. "Sure," said he, when I told him we should leave.

"You're very calm," said I. "The training must help, eh?"

He shrugged. "There's no need to be anxious. We have more than a seventy percent chance of surviving."

"You calculated this?" asked I, impressed.

"No, it just felt like it," replied he.

I nodded. I didn't know whether that was comforting or not. Seventy percent may be considered high, but a thirty percent chance of death would be unacceptable in almost any situation I can think of.

"What were the chances in Isfahan?" I asked as we started moving.

"Twenty percent," said he.

"Let's not get complacent," said I grimly. "I have things to do."

We looked around us. The traffic was in complete deadlock. The highway was a sea of frozen cars and squirming crowd. We had no option but to abandon the car. It seemed that we were already late in the fray.

Let me present here a few thoughts that might interest you, on the seldom faced but important circumstance of running away from revolution. Three things, from my personal

experience, are paramount. Firstly, you must always bear in mind that rebellion spreads. There are two types of people in such a situation, ones that join, and ones that run. I shall only address the latter.

Secondly, you must not hesitate or commiserate. This is important. Suffer no delusion, there will be plenty of people around you who will do neither, and you have to compete with them.

Thirdly, you will have to compete with them. You will have to be faster than them. The mob is no place to be. If possible, find an advantage.

I was lucky. Porridge was with me, and he knew about these things.

“We’ll walk on the cars,” said he.

It was a brilliant idea. We scrambled onto the bonnet of the nearest white Honda. The man inside shouted, but morality and car dents are meaningless in such situations and he should have seen that.

The cars were so packed together that we could jump from one to the other quite easily. It was copied within moments though, and people started scrambling onto car tops behind us and on either side. At one point Porridge kicked away a large man who nearly toppled the car we were on as he tried to clamber on, and I did my part of stepping on fingers. At another point, I was caught by the movement of the traffic and slipped and fell and scraped my knee. Mostly though, we got through quickly and unscathed.

Three blocks away, the traffic started getting more fluid. The roads were emptier, and the pavements still boasted of space. The crowd was behind us in the race. We left the car-tops and pounded down the road, with Porridge running like he was jogging for chiseled abs, and I like I was drowning with each step. At the next junction, the traffic was normal enough for a car to be useful. I couldn’t run any further anyway. The crowd would catch up eventually.

“Jones,” I rasped. “We need a vehicle. Otherwise it’ll be useless.”

He stopped and sprinted on the spot till I caught up.

“I’m sorry,” said I, hoarsely. “I’m not much of a runner.”

He nodded. “We’ll have to steal one.”

I remembered him not wanting to use my phone, but this was no time for a moral discourse. “Can you?” asked I.

“Sure,” said he, and neatly stepped in front of a car, got it to brake suddenly, and the car behind it to crash into its rear.

The driver made a mistake. He shouldn't have gotten out of the car. He definitely shouldn't have tried to take a swing at Porridge. Aikido may be a completely defensive art, but it is very effective. The next moment the man was flat on his back and we were in his car. With two hundred horsepower and an electro-hydrogen engine, we began to outrun the advance of humanity.

For nearly fifteen twenty minutes we drove as fast as we could away from the area, and the going was so smooth I almost started to relax. But that turned out to be rudely optimistic. We took a cross by a lower level, Porridge assuring me that it was the quickest way forward, and found ourselves stumbling upon the beginnings of what would soon become a city-wide agitation, a state of resistance against curfew, an insurrection.

That's how these things are born. Neighborhood by neighborhood. That's why you can escape them, as I just explained. You can live two blocks away from the riot and only know of its horrors in the newspaper. Or you could die, depending on how the wind blew.

This area was part of the underbelly of the city. Not really a ghetto, but a poor neighborhood nonetheless, with a much higher proportion of families likely to yield criminals, and consequently more criminals, than almost all other parts of Frontier. It is perhaps a concept we especially dislike grasping. We make up lovely little concepts such as evil, and sin and vice to conveniently dismiss the other of the other side of the coin, to ignore the fact that the wretched have less to lose and more to gain.

This philosophical interlude though, neither occurred to me nor helped when we first found ourselves rolling into what had already become a war zone. I hadn't expected it. It was so early. I doubt curfew had even been declared. Perhaps there had been people from the neighborhood who had been in the concert. Perhaps they had used their phones. Whatever the reason, the result was an area taken over by the gang, cut off by home-made barriers that let cars in but prevented their exit.

We could see what happened to those cars, battered and charred burning shells, foul smoke rising from them as black pillars in the windless air. I don't know if their drivers survived. There were a few wounded, bleeding people lying around, men and women alike.

Small mobs were hunting the streets, shouting slogans, shouting for the fall of the government, yelling for their rights, while they stopped cars and set them to fire, and caught any unfortunate they could and practiced their liberty on him. By the corner was a police van, empty and smoldering.

They tried to stop us as well. As soon as we entered the area, few of them started running parallel to us, throwing brick-backs, and screaming for us to stop. At first we powered past them, but soon the debris on the road slowed us down. We circumnavigated pylons and light towers and benches and found ourselves suddenly faced with a line of them

right in front of us. Long haired, lanky youths and bearded, leathery bulk. Piercings glinted in the light. Bats were raised, and chains swung in malevolent circles.

It wasn't particularly smart of them. I may not believe in evil, but I'm hardly the kind to stop the car for concern of the bodily health of my attackers. They saw us speeding towards them and, after the initial surprise, tried to scatter. One of them got a swing of a golf club at us but hit nothing breakable. We hit someone's foot and that was far more fragile. I remember feeling a fierce excitement at hearing the crunching, snapping sound.

It occurred to me, as we took the turn and exited their territory, that I didn't even know how to set a car on fire, and would have probably been quite unsuccessful if I tried.

Twenty minutes later we reached the consulate and found it blockaded by the police. It was then that some degree of panic gripped me. I can hardly be blamed. I am not usually a nervous person, this I say without boast, but the circumstances were beginning to look dire.

I don't know why we had thought we would be safe in the consulate, perhaps it was because we still hadn't fully understood the scale of the thing, the idea of what was to come. Our plan hadn't been properly thought out, our surmise had most probably been naive. Yet, to finally make it back, after more than an hour of near-desperate flight, and then to find a police cordon around our goal, and armed guards crouched behind makeshift barricades ordering us to stop... the fear and anger that ran through me was overwhelming.

A voice rumbled through loudspeakers, clear throated and cold.

"Stop the car, please. Step out with your hands in the air. We have orders from the governor to restrain and interrogate you. If you try to resist, we will shoot."

Porridge halted the car. We stared at the barricade, eyes flickering from one gun to the next, one helmeted head then the other.

"What are our chances now?" I asked Porridge shakily.

"Not very high," he said, thoughtfully.

There were eight gun-points, all unwavering. I understood now how the deer felt, how the prey froze. "What guns are those?" I asked.

"Projectiles," said Porridge. "We're lucky. If they had any sense they'd be using sludge weapons. You can't escape those, even in a car."

"Why aren't they, then?"

The voice boomed out again. “Step out please, with your hands in the air. We shall count to ten and then we will shoot. If you try to resist or escape, we will shoot.”

Porridge shrugged. “They probably want to kill us. Can’t kill with sludge.”

I gaped at him, and then at them. The voice sank into my head. “Kill us? Why? Why would they? Why?”

“Ten,” said the voice. “Nine, eight...”

I swore incoherently. “You mean they’ll fire? They want to fire? We...we have to give in then. I don’t want to get shot.”

I started fumbling with the safety and door controls. Suddenly I felt his heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” said he, and gave what he might have considered a reassuring squeeze. “I’ll get us out.”

“You know someone in the police?” I asked hopefully.

He revved up the car.

“No!” screamed I.

“Duck,” said he.

What could I do? It was madness, stupidity, but there was no time to argue. Scarcely had he said it that there was a report of a shot, and a projectile slammed into my window, slicing straight through the plastic. I ducked like an ostrich under torture.

Another shot came whistling through and missed Porridge by a whisker. The car lurched back, turning in a teeth-gnashing arc. One more shot was fired and the radio became a gaping hole. We accelerated forward now, away from the blockade. I heard shouts and orders and another shot, and the thump of a bullet embedding in the car body, but we were away.

I huddled shivering in the seat, straining to hear the sirens of pursuit, my eyes boring into the rear camera screen, but I could see nothing. The car hissed as we speeded away, and silent minutes began to pass. I don’t know why they didn’t give chase. Maybe their orders were simply to barricade the consulate. Maybe they didn’t have men to spare.

After a while I sat up and leant back. Street-lamps floated by in an endless stream, light pools repeating forever. I felt strangely home-sick. Fear treats you unexpectedly. I couldn’t stop thinking about food, warm food, and my room, and the joy of sleep and afternoons.

Porridge stopped the car under the root of a flyway, under the support pylons, in the area in shadow and neglect before the flyway rises enough for the space beneath to be more usable and therefore better maintained.

I sat still and palpitated and imagined.

Around us, cars whizzed to and fro. The trouble hadn't reached here yet. Perhaps people had heard of it, and were hurrying home. Maybe they would run into districts like the one we'd come through. A part of me wondered, dispassionately, what would happen to them, whether the occupant of the car that just passed would be safe, and the previous, and the next.

I sat on the bonnet and gazed at nothing. Evening wore on. On Earth it would be sunset at this hour. The light would be golden or copper. The heat of the day would be softening.

The catastrophe now presented itself to me fully, crashing through my head and crushing my breath with its violence. It had happened. The worst possible outcome. The worst conclusion of the game. If the consulate was blockaded it could only mean that we no longer had the status of legitimate diplomats. We would not be allowed to return to our stronghold in a gentlemanly fashion.

If diplomatic relations had been severed, the rest couldn't be far away. There would be revolution...and war.

And what would happen to me then? The resistance hero, the fugitive diplomat? Imprisonment? Military execution, perhaps? They'd already shot to kill me.

I couldn't help feeling like laughing. Hoarse, cackling laughs. It was such an unreal thought, see. Me, the most prudent of men, the most sensible, the most cynical, shot dead on the charge of revolt and radical nationalism. Surely I didn't deserve to be the instrument of such cutting irony?

This again brought to mind the conditions that had led to this, the wonderful people I'd known, the sublime ideals they'd stood for. They at least had earned every right to the bullet coming their way. I didn't blame Wayne. I'd shoot them in the stomach myself if I had a chance, and wait for their innards to dissolve. Especially Gustav, when I thought about it. It was all his fault, that's what it came down to. Without his involvement my plan would've succeeded. I would've been in Lavender right now, either in asylum or in holiday. At this time of the day I'd be having hot, bitter-sweet, frothy coffee in a quaint little cafe.

A wave of hate and rage swept through me, towards him, towards all of them, and its intensity was overwhelming. For one of the few times in my life I actually slammed part of my body against a hurtful object voluntarily, and welcomed the pain.

Porridge noticed, and walked over. He was smoking a nicotine-free, mint cigarette and the sickeningly fresh smoke clouded across.

“Are you alright?” asked he.

I grunted. “That’s not cool - your cigarette.”

He shrugged. “It spreads mint. Builds karma.”

I looked at him with disbelief, and it was a few moments before I spoke. “I don't want to die,” said I softly.

He let out a smoke ring. “Not dead yet.”

“I don’t want to get imprisoned either. That’ll be even worse.”

“Yes,” said he. “It would.”

I rubbed my knuckles gingerly, swaying forward and back. “Can you imagine? Stuck in a room for your entire life. With no hope of ever doing anything again. Ever seeing any other place. Ever going roaming, walking...”

“There is courtyard-time,” said he, “in most prisons. You can walk then.”

“I doubt it’s the same.”

He nodded. “I have some pills, if you want. You can keep them lodged in your molars.”

I looked up.

“If we get captured, you know... if you... think it’ll be best.”

I got what he was saying and glared at him. “Goddammit!” I growled. “Shut up, you moron. Think of some way out.”

“Alright, alright,” said he. “I was just trying to help. I didn’t know where you were going with that.”

“I’m never going to suicide, I’ll tell you that! I’m not going down easy.”

“Good, good.” He smacked his hands together with relish. “Then how about this - we make it to the east of the city, break through the curfew, use the Prophet Sun Ki flyway, and if we speed up enough then maybe we can smash through the side and fly out into the military compound. Once we get there we can overpower the guards and take over one of the fighter shuttles. Then I’ll pilot and you man the guns, and if we can shake off the pursuit, we might make it to Haiku, and from there on we’ll see.”

He accompanied with hand gestures and shooming noises. Thankfully I wasn't listening.

"I know what we can do!" cried I, and I did. It would work. It had to. I'd been right the first time, so many weeks ago that it seemed like another lifetime right now. But this time it would work. It would. I just needed to contact Wayne.

My brain started working again. Fear was fuel, terror its wheels. I raised a hand to silence Porridge. This was the only way. This was the way to go.

But how would I get to him? There was no possibility of reaching him at the Governor's House or at his office. Even if he was present I could never get that far. I'd be arrested or shot long before that, and something told me that even though being arrested might well be the easiest way to meet him, that might not be to my advantage. I had to be at large. Only then could I hope to negotiate.

Perhaps I could get hold of his personal number. He was the only person in the Frontier government I'd spoken to; I strangely had a better chance of talking to him directly than through any subordinate. But I didn't have the number with me. Would someone else have it?. Wors, perhaps? Or JK?

My fingers trembled as I navigated the phone. Porridge looked at me expectantly. When I called though, all we heard was the ring tone, again and again, droning into our ears, as I kept trying for near twenty minutes. Finally I conceded defeat. Who knew what trouble they were in? They wouldn't be picking up.

"What are you doing?" asked Porridge.

"Wait," said I.

I tried calling Zoomer once, with no expectation whatsoever, either of reaching her or of getting Wayne's contact. I waited, hardly breathing, but it wasn't answered either.

Mint spiraled up my nose with the ragged, fierce, fearful breaths I took. The only number I had left was Gustav's.

It was impossible that he would know of course. It was highly unlikely he would even be in a position to answer, seeing how he had been the most visibly unfortunate when I'd last seen. But, if you've ever lost your keys and having searched everywhere begin to optimistically look inside the air-conditioner, you'll understand my position.

He answered at once. With video.

"Ro! Ro! Where are you?" came his voice, half broken and brittle. His face swam up, blood streaked, his eyes hunted.

“Somewhere,” said I. “Where are you?”

“In... in a washroom.” His eyes lit up suddenly. “We’re fighting back, Ro! We’re fighting back!”

“What? From a washroom?” asked I, taken aback. As usual he’d started using ‘we’.

“No, no. On the streets. We’re fighting them, Ro! They’re not going to get away with this.”

“Then what’re you doing in the washroom.”

“I was out there! I was out there too! But then they got reinforcements. So we had to take cover!”

“Oh I see.” I stared at him. A noise startled him and he stumbled sideways and peeked around the corner. “Is it alright?” I asked.

“Yes. Yes, I think so.” He returned. “They’ll never think of looking in here.”

“Unless they have to take a leak?”

That made him jittery again, and he had to go look once more.

“Good thing is, all this excitement makes you need to go quite often,” said he, gravely, when he was back once more. “It’s a tactical advantage.”

I nodded, but without too much encouragement. I didn’t want to discuss tactics with him right then. “Listen, Gus. What happened to the others? Do you know?”

“Huh? The others?”

“Wors, JK. Zoomer?”

“Ohh... they ran off. They’re hiding somewhere, I think. They had to, you see. If the leaders are caught... like you said — she’s the banner. They’re important.”

“Right, right. So you haven’t heard from them?”

“No. But I think they’re alright.”

“Good, good. I hope so. Listen, do you by any chance know how to contact Wayne? Any number? I want to try talking to him, and I can’t get through to any of the others.”

“What? What do you want to talk for, man? It’s time to fight! Wayne’s crossed the line. The time for talking is over!”

“Yes, yes I know. It was horrible! Really horrible! But I just want to try once more. You know me,” said I, desperately trying to sound like he what would want me to. “Besides I was successful the last time.”

That silenced him. I think it'll forever be his weak spot.

“I don't know,” said he, still not looking too pleased. “I suppose that lady, Zaccharaia — she might have it. You want her number?”

Why hadn't I thought of that? More importantly, how the hell did he have her number? She was twice his age, for god's sake. But it was no time to dwell upon such trivial things.

“Yes! Yes, please!”

He passed it to me, all the while looking out past the corner sideways.

“You're really gonna try this, Ro?”

“I have to, Gus.”

He set his jaw, and looked me in the eye. “Well, I'm going to fight, Ro. I'm going to go out there again.”

“Oh,” said I, at a loss for a situation like this.

“If I don't make it out of this, if-if you see Robin...”

“I can't promise anything, Gus.”

“No. I understand.” He took a deep breath and let out a heroic sigh. “Well... I'll be going then, Ro. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Gus. And good luck.”

I took one last look at his battered yet resolute face, and then ended the call. For a moment or so I couldn't help but dwell on him. It might actually have been the last time I would ever see him. He might actually have died.

I still couldn't help thinking then he was a moron.

My thoughtfulness soon reached its tether. It was only to be expected — my heart was in my mouth. Zaccharia had to know. She had to pick up. She had to tell me.

Porridge started strolling again. I listened to the ring tone, praying like only an agnostic in trouble can. And then, oh sweet fortune, glory of glories, she answered, and I swear no woman has ever sounded sweeter to my ears.

“Mr. Moniker. Are you alright?” Her face appeared, primly dressed, but obviously worried.

“Oh yes!” said I. “Yes. Barely, but yes. And you? The consulate was blockaded. We couldn’t get to it.”

“Yes, I know. I’m under house arrest too, but I’m alright.”

“Thank god!” cried I, quite genuinely. “Thank god!” For a second I panted in bliss. “Ms. Zaccharia,” I continued, “do you have any number I can contact Wayne on? It’s urgent.”

At this she frowned, and sweetness melted. “Why?” asked she.

I hadn’t been prepared for this, though, once again, I should have. I’d just had no time. I’d been so taken up by figuring a way to get to Wayne. But I wasn’t giving up now. I’d come too far. No nosy old biddy was stopping me. A vague sense of *déjà vu* caressed the borders of my mind, but I didn’t give it much attention.

“I was in contact with Escalon, Ma’am,” said I, thinking furiously. “I’m the only one they haven’t captured yet. Escalon’s given me terms to deliver to Wayne. He wants Wors and Zoomer back. I need to present his terms before Wayne declares war...” I hoped with all my heart that he hadn’t done so already. This had to work.

For a moment she seemed unconvinced. Her steel grey eyes looked at me from under carefully shaped eyebrows. Her mouth was pinched. But then, suddenly, she relented, letting out a small ladylike sigh. Her house arrest was probably having its toll. Helpless people are understandably suckers.

“Oh, thank god, Mr. Moniker,” said she. “The situation has crumbled. We need to get out quickly. We really do.” She stopped and looked me in the eye, as if trying to find the future there, to uncover hope. I gave the smallest of smiles. She took a deep breath. “I’ll pass you the number to the Governor’s Office and I hope, I pray, you’ll be able to convince him. He’s not an easy man.”

“Neither am I, Ma’am,” said I gallantly, trying to keep my breathing normal, my incredible, shivering excitement contained. “Neither am I.”

I ended the call and glanced at Porridge. He was still outside. I slowly got off the car. The air conditioning seemed faulty, wet and cold. There was no breeze of course, but continuous gusts of wind blew from the slipstream of the cars passing by. Little light reached here, and both of us were silhouettes in space-night. The car steamed silently.

He called out to me. "You can contact him?"

"I think so. I'm going to try now."

"I still don't understand," said he.

"Trust me," said I, having learnt some things about trust.

I set up the call to Wayne, my fingers and voice shaking, my chest compressed.

It was answered by his secretary. "Governor's office," said she. "May I know who's speaking please?"

This time I was ready. "Ro Moniker," I barked. "With a missive from Cado Escalon. Could you please get me through immediately?"

It worked like a charm. She obeyed in a fluster, and moments later I was past the secretary's defenses. Now began the hard part.

Wayne answered after a minute of holding. The call was redirected. Video was requested and I refused.

"Mr. Moniker, I would like to see if it is really you," came his voice, and I felt a chill run down my spine. I say this again and again and it's true. He was, and is, a very frightening person. You wouldn't be able to pin down why, he was after all perfectly respectable, highly intelligent and thoughtful, probably well-meaning in his own way, but there was a menace to him. Some sort of feeling that he was sizing you up, and that he would implement judgment.

"That will not be possible yet, Governor," said I. I was afraid of letting him see where I was. He was the kind who might well recognize every brick and corner of his city from a mere glance. "I can't see why anybody would want to impersonate me, though. Not right now."

"That's true," said he, dryly. "I'm not happy, Mr. Moniker."

"I gathered, Governor. I got nearly shot when I went to the consulate."

"I take it you escaped?"

"Yes, Governor," said I, trying to mould my voice into its coldest, harshest form, one that I'd use against survey-takers. "I am not put down so easily."

He grunted. "So what's Escalon saying?"

"Nothing. I lied."

“Ahh.” There was a pause. I continued.

“I wasn’t involved in what happened today, Governor. I tried to stop them.”

“Really? How hard did you try?”

I didn’t have an answer. His voice was edged.

“Not very?” he hissed. “Why would you? What incentive did you have?” He let out a chuckle. “But that’s changed now, hasn’t it?”

I felt my guts twist with apprehension. He wanted to kill us all so badly that I could feel it even through his politeness and the distance between us. But I couldn’t afford to falter. It was my life.

“Why has it changed, Governor? If it has, then only in favor of the revolution. If you want to shoot me, then what choice do I have but to join them, to lead their revolt?”

He let out a laugh that made me shudder. “You just escaped once, Mr. Moniker. Don’t think its fate…”

“Twice, Governor. I’ve escaped twice now. And if you don’t accept my proposal I will be compelled to engineer a third, no matter what the consequence.”

He said nothing for a moment. He was seething. I could sense his rage. “State what you want to say,” said he, finally, “and leave the threats alone. I do not respond well to them.”

“That was my idea from the beginning, Governor, and I’ll say it plainly. I wish to defect. That’s why I called you. I want to defect. Before the war starts. I don’t agree with what they’re doing. This is not my fight.”

He didn’t get any happier. I hadn’t expected him to. “Defect? Now? After what happened?” he roared. “You murdered my people!”

“I had nothing to do with it!” I screamed back. That at least he had to believe. That at least was the truth. I would not accept punishment for something I didn’t do, something whose detestation was perhaps one of my sole convictions.

“And whether you believe my part or not, it was your men who fired on the crowd!” I retaliated. “They weren’t bought by us. Zoomer might have started the rebellion, but it’s your people who committed the massacre. That’s why there is fighting on the streets. That’s why your own people are resisting you.”

“You will say no more!” came his snarl. “You will not accuse me!”

“You are disturbed by my words? What do you think the media will say? What do you think people are saying right now? Are you a fool sir? My god, I’m telling you, I’m tired of it all. I’m sick of the whole thing. Of you and Escalon and that stupid witch Zoomer and the goddamned DSAA. I am sick to the guts. I just want, for god’s sake, to be left alone!”

“That is no longer an option.”

“Yes it is!” I growled. “Yes it is! And if you have an ounce of sense in you, you’ll grant it to me. You are facing a revolution, do you understand? And you will be ordered to declare war. Against the very cause your people are rebelling for. They are dying on the streets resisting! I am giving you the only opportunity you seem to have. Let me defect. Let me publicly disown Escalon. Let me tell your people how they were played. If you kill me, if you kill all of us... can you imagine what will happen?”

“Nothing will happen.”

“Will you risk that? Will that be a sacrifice to your rage?”

That, finally, silenced him. I waited, my nervousness drowned out by intensity, my blood pounding in my ears.

“Alright. You’re right,” said he, after a while. He sounded weary, his voice came softly, reluctantly. “Give yourself up to the police. I’ll give orders to bring you to me.”

For a second the words alarmed me. What if it was a trick? What if he was drawing me in, simply to arrest me, or blow my head off? I wouldn’t put it past him at all.

But in the end what choice did I have? I had to trust that he was convinced. He had every right to be. What I’d said wasn’t untrue. After saying it even I was half-convinced. And of course, there was nothing else to do. If I hid or ran, I would be caught sooner or later. I’m no guerilla.

“I’ll see you soon, sir,” said I, graciously.

I found Porridge regarding me.

“That was your idea?” he said slowly.

I nodded. “Are you agreeable?”

He took in a breath and looked around. “Sure,” said he, with some satisfaction. “I like this place.”

We got into the car. He drove, of course.

The next hour, from that moment till when I actually saw Wayne, is a difficult period for me to write about. It is not one of any singular action, and my entire recollection of it is a feeling of emptiness, of shadow. A surreal passage, like the state of your mind and senses if you haven't slept for nights together. I imagine it was the continued tension of the evening, the prolonged alarm that had soaked my head in adrenalin and left me so.

All the colors I remember are dim, the movements broken and discrete, all of it overwhelmed by the memory of breathing, of looking out the window at the darkened streets, the broken lights, the silence of curfew. All the world seemed painted in blues and blacks, and the occasional crackling gold of a flame in the gloom.

We found a police car easily, because by then the curfew had emptied the roads of anyone else. We approached it slowly, across a flyway, passing a burning bus, while they stood parked at the other end with guns at the ready, lights flashing, the siren in my ears.

They ordered us to stop and we did.

We stepped out of the car, hands raised, and walked to them. Each step felt heavy, my body, within minutes, had become exhausted. Each breath came sharply. I could smell the scent of metal on fire, and feel its heat gentle on my back. I could see the lower levels stretched out on both sides, rows upon rows, blocks upon blocks, bathed in blue-grey and copper. They were so quiet. At the back of my mind came the dim thought that I had one last thing left to do.

The police didn't arrest us or shoot us, as you might have guessed from the tone of the book. We were checked for weapons and then quietly, but politely, seated in their vehicle. Slowly, passing checkpoint upon checkpoint, we made our way to the Governor's office. I gazed at it when we reached. It seemed larger than before. A looming, gaunt building, its classical facade an obstinacy. My footsteps were soft on the carpet.

The secretary rose when she saw me. She was prettier than I'd expected. She welcomed me, and opened the door. I asked Porridge to wait outside.

Wayne was seated at his table, hunched forward, his eyes on a portrait on the wall.

"You're here," said he, and his voice was absolutely, unexpectedly subdued. He sounded weak.

"Yes," said I, standing a few feet to his side.

His eyes didn't leave the picture. I later learnt that it was of his father.

"You're a clever man," said he.

"So I've been discovering," I replied.

He grunted, and then became quiet. I gazed around the room. The carpeting was bottle green. There were old fashioned paintings of past governors. There was too much wood.

“What do you think will happen now?” he asked suddenly. He turned to me. His eyes were gaunt.

“Now we will say our goodbyes to the people we knew in Ganymeda,” said I. “Then there will be war.”

“And who will win?”

“The contractors for shielding space-crafts against Jupiter’s magnetic field. Perhaps their shareholders.”

His fingers tapped his knee. He regarded his knuckles. “So you would like to call someone in Ganymeda?”

“Yes, I would.”

“It will be monitored.”

“Of course. I shall also require my cat to be returned.”

He nodded and called his secretary and she set up a satellite call for me.

I called Toshi.

The next morning, war was declared.

Epilogue

So there it is, my tale, not in its entirety maybe, but to an appropriate extent, and with a fitting end. What kind of writer would I be if I let myself ramble on to an anticlimax?

I understand that some of you may well consider such an ending unsatisfactory, a disappointment in terms of action, but what can I do, I am bound by a responsibility to the truth. Consider - if I were writing fiction, I would hardly have chosen myself as the main protagonist, and even if I had there would have certainly been more rolling about of every kind.

Still, I do appreciate that some questions might have been left unanswered in my quest for dramatic effect. These I will attempt to clear now.

First, and most importantly, Her Majesty was found safe, and we were re-united. This was not unexpected. She is indomitable.

Secondly, I did denounce Escalon during the official condemnation issued by Wayne and the DSAA government on the unrest they had tried to foster and the sedition they had caused. It was a marvelous speech, given to me by a team of hard-working speechwriters who despite not having slept the entire night, or perhaps because of it, had produced a beautiful balance of dismissiveness and horrified disapproval. I almost felt honored at the chance of being the vehicle for those words.

As for the rest, what happened to me after, the story isn't so sweet. I was given a house, somewhere in the east-side of Frontier, nice enough, but not as nice as my old home, or the room on my ship with its ceiling of stars. There is a big difference between a defection to a comfortable, beautiful city, and that to a Jovian colony that had now earned its name, and was a frontier post in the war.

The war itself, as you know, dragged on unendingly, even after the re-invasion, and does, in a way, even now. That's how these things go. They may start small, easily, born out of a few unusual and unsavory circumstances, sometimes ones so silly that they hardly make a good plot for a book. And yet, once it begins, it refuses to end. It is a cycle, a hydra. Blood for blood, and blood for blood again.

I am done with historical preaching though. I will say no more about the chain of fire and insurrection that was started by these events. It does not belong to this book.

I asked many times to be relocated to one of the inner cities, or if possible back to Earth. I wasn't heard. They were busy fighting a war. They had no time for me. I was a one-time political weapon, and after that I was useless to them, and thus, they to me.

Eventually I got another job, managing the food and shelter and information dissemination for some of the safety shelters. It was harder work than before, but at least I got to spend most of my time in those shelters myself.

I met a few girls, but though war is a fine time for match-making, it is disadvantageous if you are a foreigner. People tend to prefer their own neighborhoods at such times, familiar sights and sounds. Not one of them failed to move on to the next friendly Joe, who had lived in the alley beside them all their lives but had so far escaped notice.

Thus it has continued. Somewhere along the way, after, I admit, some inspiration from similar experiments I came across, I decided to write this book. I didn't expect to finish it, but it seems I have.

I returned to Earth for a little while once or twice, but that only vet the appetite further. I dream about it often, or so I like to think, but who remembers dreams with any consistency? I do know that I've lost hope of staying there again unless I can come into money of my own.

Lastly, if you have not realized the point I was coming to, then I shall say it out directly, and ask that if you have felt any of the tenderness that people sometimes feel so strongly towards what they read, then do pass on your recommendation. It shall be greatly appreciated.



'Conclusion'
by
Tre' Boubourne Romano