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The Dance Marsanna

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## Abstract

### The Dance Marsanna

By Joi Massat

Blair and Elliot Bourg want so little—money, success, the approval of their in-laws in a sparkling Martian society—but their seven creepy daughters stand in their way. What’s wrong with those kids? Will they ever do anything but stand and stare?

The Dance Marsanna is a bleak comedy with a garnish of satire and sci-fi. You will bite your nails as the Bourg couple, hapless, braves the sandblasted Martian wild, accompanied by their marriage counselor.

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To my brother, and Kecia and Frida, and everyone who had a hand in this thesis.

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## Chapter 1: The Bourgs

*La Gallierie Bourganna d'ella Nouve-Moedierne-Stille* was surrounded by a vast, oceanic parking lot. It was flanked also by a wedding chapel, a supermarket, a court, and a general store, all of them squat hunks of polished, shining marble. They formed an island chain, or a strip mall.

Hundreds of cars could park there; fifty was its peak; tonight it would top out at twenty. Right now, late in a Martian afternoon, under an alien sky long since neutered to match Earth's pale blue wash, there were a handful directly in front of the *gallierie*. All were crisp and pristine, white and black blocks laid on crumbs of red velvet cake. Even the one minivan shone like a pearl.

From the *gallierie's* entrance, one could see, through a thick haze of distance, pink castles with needle-thin spires shooting up along the parking lot's perimeter. All uniform, evenly spaced. These castles were far smaller and closer than they appeared, and that haze was the work of highly advanced smoke machines.

A big "ha!" hit the pavement like spread shot, ticking the windows. Kim Sendolorre's laugh was singular, and for Blair and Elliot Bourg it was a jolt of medicine for a nerve-racking day. A married couple and their closest friend, sans husband, stood together by the black marble doors still cordoned off by rope and gold stanchions. Blair wore a huge black fur with notes of blue while Elliot wore another one of those cream suits. She snickered into her glove and he sort of puffed.

Kim, in her peacock dress with feathers stretching from the midsection to her heels, told them, "So that's what Bourg Construction is dealing with for the next week or how-long.



Replacing gazebos. Our gazebos. That Tom and friends knocked down. High—” she swung her arm— “out of their minds!”

“What are they calling it?” said Blair.

“An earthquake.”

Blair, in lieu of laughing, spat. Fortunately, none of the mildly brusque things she did—spitting, rushing, getting snippy—tarnished her look. She considered this part of her charm, and even fancied that in a different world, she could have been some sort of star, a classic no-nonsense heroine. A little ambition would have taken her far, but she was never a dreamer, and became a housewife after all.

“Radford’s gonna be pissed,” she said, turning to Elliot. “Can't you see him now, finding a report of this 'damage due to natural disaster' in his inbox? Holding back his rage, eating his scowl, totally numbing his face? For hours? All week?”

Elliot smiled equivocally. “I...don't feel comfortable talking about my boss, ma'am,” he said, turning the truth into a joke.

“Don't let me see him at the show,” said Kim. “I'd laugh in his face.”

Seeing as they were on the Bourg estate, under the great glassy Bourg dome keeping out the Martian wild, most everyone at the party would be a Bourg. Besides the hired help that orbited the Bourg family, Kim knew everyone who would attend the party, and they would know her, thanks to years of crossing paths, of seeing each other at least monthly for global functions and gathering crumbs of information. There were fourteen families to keep tabs on—a cinch after nearly a decade of socializing on this planet—and the remaining population was merely supplementary.

One of the doors opened. They turned. In the crack was the shadowed face of Blair and Elliot's main assistant. He wore many hats: a photographer, a party organizer, a news reporter, a janitor. But he wasn't a member of any major Martian family, so he wasn't properly one of them; just in their orbit. Little respect was given him and none was expected from him. He made a pretty penny by Earth standards. Hardly anyone knew his name. Bourgs who worked closely with him called him Biff.

"Opening up," he said as he stuck his arms out to lift the cord away. The marble doors began drifting passively apart. "Nice evening." His words had no sentiment behind them.

"Good evening," Kim said with a grin.

"Exhibition space is open, you can also hang out in the lounge, show in thirty." He was withdrawing even before he finished the sentence.

Elliot cupped a hand over his mouth and hollered in after him, "Get the kids!"

"Alright." Biff disappeared.

Kim, looking uncertain, flashed her teeth. "They're at home?"

"No, they're in the car," said Elliot. He shouldn't have said that. Now his eyes were swinging back and forth, back to his wife and then across the concrete. "Biff's putting—taking them into the lounge. We, we don't have time to deal with them—talk with..." Blair's eyes widened at him. She shook her head subtly but wildly; it was vibrating. "Okay."

Kim turned to face the minivan. Now she could make out some of the eyes huddled inside. Even from afar, the septuplet girls had a way of looking and being that was prim, obedient, and savage. They looked perfectly like prisoners. Kim had a word of concern for the kids, but she sewed her mouth shut. Another equivocal look.

While she was watching the car, Blair and Elliot took each other arm in arm and hurried off to look like they were hurrying.

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The Bourg couple barreled past front desks and lounge chairs to plunge into the main room—into *gallerie* space—into searing, screeching red and orchestral pangs so big they throbbed. Canvases bulged along the walls, submerged in fuchsia soup. It would have been like seeing huge photos in a darkroom if each of those photos wasn't thick with sometimes mountainous, sometimes saclike paint. The couple stood at the doorway blinking. Mars liked party music and it liked red, but this was something new and hostile.

“Why are they doing this to us?” Blair shouted over the music, fingers in her ears, looking around and ahead.

“Doing what to us?” Elliot hollered.

“Make everything look and sound horrible just in time for Rosie's debut?”

“For what?”

“FOR ROSIE'S DEBUT.”

As Blair screamed, somebody did them a kindness and turned the symphony down.

“You mean this could be sabotage?” said Elliot. “No, nobody hates her that much.” Blair quirked an eyebrow; she wasn't so sure about that. Elliot tidied himself and strode in, and she went by his side.

There were two other people in the room. A vaguely familiar woman rushed flutes of wine to a mini-bar standing in the center, and a vaguely familiar man, spotting the parents, approached them with a blank face, which they permitted. On his shoulder he carried a black box. When he was three paces away, he stopped and gave a quick nod, a sign for a photo op.

They nodded back. Four hands from nowhere slid wine flutes into the happy couple's fingers; four hands disappeared. Smiles came to life and they toasted. Camera light flashed.

Then he followed the couple for shots of them tastefully appreciating Viro's art. Viro Bourg originals swarmed the *gallerie* because he was the only *artiste d'ella nouve-moedierne* among them, or at least he would remain so for the next half-hour. There was an upstart challenging his supremacy. One wonders what art world "supremacy" means, however, when the champ's best works look like three-by-twelve stretches of dried vomit.

The happy couple was led to such a stretch. They were pressed for comment. "Red was an interesting choice for lighting," said Elliot, still holding his wine. "I wouldn't say it harmonizes. But it really lends new vitality to Viro's work." Sated, the PR guy withdrew.

So far Viro had painted 827 works. He painted live monthly, on any given night producing one or dozens of canvases filled to bursting. People attended when they wanted to flatter him, curry his favor. Mostly the live painting was for his aged, decrepit friends, near-strangers skating around the edge of the Bourg orbit (it was hard for people like Blair and Elliot to remember that many people on Mars were not as young as they). On days when nobody came to his monthly performance, the clean-up crew still heard him whooping on the stage. Say what you will, he would always engage the crowd.

Blair and Viro walked listlessly past lumpy art, hugging the wall, until they found an artist information tag. "Viro (5 M.E. - present) took up art in the *nouve-moedierne-stille* late in life, though he had prior experience as a clown and dramaturg and peers commonly labeled him a 'renaissance man.' In his words: '*Nouve-moedierne* is live, but not a happening in the old style, because its aim is collaborative beauty. It is improv on a canvas. It is poise with personality. A

*moedierniste* knows that human failure is not failure. This is what has buoyed me through the years of rigor.”

“He’ll like Rosie,” Elliot assured his wife.

“If he’s here,” she replied.

“He’ll show up.”

“That would be nice.”

\*\*\*

One day, an age ago, an invitation found its way into the hands of Elliot Schmidt. It said, come to Mars, join us and help make us prosperous. Raise your family on Mars. We’ll create a new kind of culture together.

So he left Earth and embarked on what promised to be the profitable adventure of a lifetime. He would join one of the fourteen rising “corporate families” —so called because they were less familiar and more a means of social climbing and business doing. He was to work in buildings and architecture. In fact, Bourg Construction would soon be calling itself “the family that built Mars,” despite the blatant inaccuracy of that claim, the handful of habitable Martian domes long since established. They meant, of course, that Bourg would do it bigger and better, and build a little something on Earth too.

As the fledgling estates of Mars’ newest business conglomerates grew, Bourg and the rest wanted to become a *bona fide* aristocracy. Elliot was promised success, security, community, and a shiny new home if only he would follow their rules regarding family planning—that is, find a nice Earth woman willing to marry him and have his kids. In the absence of a girlfriend, he chose Blair Youngblood, a friend.

Upon arrival, they had always tried to keep in good standing with everyone, Bourg servants included. Every rule established by the planet or within Bourg's contract, including the "no swinging" clause, they followed. Nobody had seen them drunk; neither was remotely capable of fury, particularly Elliot, who seemed content sucking up to everybody. That was the very quality that had made Elliot desirable in the first place; he had begun his Bourgian life as spokesman to Viro, the family patriarch.

All the same, no one really liked them. Was there a reason to like them? Blair and Elliot treated people mindfully, with respect born of caution. If they had been pleasant in conversation and that had been the end of it, they would have found friends among their Bourg cousins, but what kept people at arm's length was their children.

Everyone on Mars knew the septuplets. Even if the estates hadn't been so small, a line of seven identical children was hard to miss. Everyone had a personal sub-theory somewhere on a spectrum between logical psychoses and aliens, but all agreed that they, the septuplets, had no souls. They were deeply depressed from the cradle. They crowded around themselves, but they hardly liked themselves. They could speak when they had to. They could read, they could write. They were incapable of fury, or of anything. They could not even play.

In the early days, when they were toddlers and the photos were still cute, everybody had breezy advice and a gift of sympathy for the couple with the seven blank daughters. Now all anybody had was advice. The girls had hit second grade, after all, and they were still staring holes in cameras like the flash had drained them of color.

There was no point in saying what all Martians were thinking: the parents were to blame. On the septuplet girls' first day of preschool, they all wore white. Blair thought theme-dresses would be nice. In execution, they became ghosts on parade.

Biff photographed them for the local news, the photo circulated, and Viro, the head of the family, the great artist, the great patriarch, summoned the parents to his castle in the center of his estate for an emergency private conference. Viro Bourg had none of his jokes or playful theatrics that day. He was demoting Elliot from spokesman to office worker. He told them, “Your children have gone from a curiosity to a blight on the global reputation.”

Symbolic confirmation, that's what the photo was. Proof that Blair and Elliot had somehow taken their daughters' souls.

It had scared Elliot to hear her say above their big cradle that she didn't love them, as early as their first year. She had been teasing the words for weeks, changing “don't yet” to “can't” and finally “don't.” Scary to her, too, that she could say it so calmly.

Then she said, “But wouldn't it be wonderful if they turned out to be savants?”

He nodded. Wonderful.

Then came a fateful day of kindergarten. No longer would each day of class mean seven clean easels; from now on they would mean six clean easels and one slathered in shiny dark green. Even as a gobsmacked Mr. Fierinda whisked the parents in to witness Rosie in the act of creation, she was still hard at work. At either side stood Kathy and Nia and Heidi Anne, and Jenny and Tammy and Hilary, their noses inches away from their easels, who would not even turn their heads.

Elliot knelt beside Rosie, stopped her, and, torn between special appreciation and a shrink's advice that they never single out one child, backed away so that each parent could walk down the line and hugged every daughter in turn. The tears, though, came when they came, and fell only on Rosie's shoulder, on cue.

As measured as a young hand painting can be, hers was that measured. The big curls on the sheet were wild at first, but at the ends they tapered, tamed by her finesse—in the words of the teacher, and then in the parents' report to Viro, the next golden envelope to slide into his box. Rosie had a talent ready for shaping, and a more valuable space for her in the family—at least more interesting—was almost carving itself. With Elliot just having lost his place, downgraded from spokesman to office worker by Viro and his kangaroo court, the news came at the right time.

If only the patriarch would have stepped down from his Martian home, that highest spire, and met the happy parents, to thank them for the service Rosie was poised to give. He had greeted them personally when they first arrived, and even before then when Elliot was chosen. He always asked that they look to the sky when his shuttle returned or took off, to see his sailing star. But in the face of this world-shattering news, he had not even a courteous reply, anything to comfort them. Still, they liked to think he'd read the report with a smile.

They sent Rosie to a boarding school, an Earth school, since the only school on Mars with any clout was L'Universitatte, a vast and dusty exoskeleton whose student body had gone from thousands to a trickle, and with those numbers staggered on for twenty years. Elliot was afraid to send Rosie away and Blair was afraid to keep her around. Nobody knew which was worse because nobody knew what was best for their children. Loving her talent, loving her desperately but without affection, they shipped Rosie off with breathtaking speed. When news spread to the whole of Mars, the planet astounded them with a vast wave of apathy. Suspicion confirmed, said Mars: the earthbound child was unwanted.

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A posse's worth of Bourgs started to come through the *gallierie* double doors. Blair and Elliot knew it, and knew when to turn away from the dubious artwork, by the sound of mannered clapping. That was the sound of Soraya Bourg and her group.

In she walked with her chin high, her mouth and eyes closed delicately to create the illusion that she was gracefully sleepwalking. Her arms were raised in a light shrug, her hands so placed for her husband and an unidentified Bourg servant to hold by the fingertips. Six servants had followed her in. They continued to clap, politely and for their paychecks.

Soraya's scaled, sequined, high-collared gown was supposed to glimmer with all the colors of the rainbow, giving the impression that she was a mermaid fresh from the sea. (Fun fact: there was no sea on Mars.) After the applause ended and cameras flashed and captured her initial dreamy expression, she opened her eyes and, with a grimace, felt the red light as an affront.

Blair and Elliot watched the transformation and were not surprised. In fact, they were sympathetic. What else was there to do at gallery parties and garden parties and birthdays and holidays and monthly inter-familial mixers besides show off and get some fun out of it?

They approached slowly, plotting out the approximately-twenty-second interaction they would be obliged to share with Soraya.

Then they were face-to-face. "Good evening, Soraya, Allen," they said with slight smiles and nods in lieu of bowing.

Soraya and Allen said back, "Good evening."

"We're sorry about the li..."

Elliot trailed off as Soraya and Allen pivoted away, moving deeper into the *gallierie*. "So it's ten seconds now," said Blair, who wasn't complaining.

They stood still as sounds of art criticism wafted over the classical muzak. Incredibly, Soraya and Allen were actually managing an excited back-and-forth. “They really get excited over this,” said Elliot.

“I know, it’s horrible,” said Blair.

“It’s just baffling.”

And the rest trickled in, slight smiles and goodwill. Lily and Joseph, hello, how are you? Thank you for coming. Sorry about the... Hello, Deanna and Clark, how are you? Thank you for coming. Sorry about the... Wesley, hello, Esther, hello...

“We couldn’t make it to the terminal last week because the kids were so sick,” Wesley explained out of nowhere. “We tried to explain, but Viro said we didn’t need to be by their bedsides.”

“They’re still sick,” added Esther.

“We’re just popping in and out, to be photographed.”

“Don’t be offended.”

“Not at all!” said Blair with a monumental smile. “It’s always so good to see you!”

“Best of luck to your kids,” said Elliot. Esther and Wesley grinned uneasily, took each other hand in hand, and dipped out.

Radford, Elliot’s boss for the past two years, came by himself, in a mellow mood. As soon as she saw the slightest glimpse of him through the door, Blair chuckled, turned away, and let Elliot greet him one-on-one as she examined one of Viro’s rare statues: an abstract tin figure titled “Ah! the Stones of Many-Plaited War #2.”

“Hello, Elliot.”

“Good evening, boss.”

“We have more filing for you.”

“Great. Consider it done.”

“Kids?”

“They’re alright.”

“Rosie?”

“Oh, better than alright, sir.”

The performance tonight. I’m happy for you.” He added, still devoid of affect, “I can’t wait to see it.”

“Me neither!”

Radford reached out to shake hands. Elliot gave it a few amicable pumps. Radford left, this interaction having gone as well as any.

Then the last guests entered. Reagan and Otis came in slow and stately. They made great targets for Mia and Chase, who shoved them aside and nearly onto the linoleum to race toward the cameras. Servants with boxes stopped the couple and flashed their shutters.

“Viro’s art is timeless!” shouted Mia and Chase.

Chase added, “Did you get that?” One notepad-holding servant raised her hand. “Okay, great.” They were both breathless, as if they had run all the way here. Then again, the Bourg dome was about three kilometers in diameter, so “all the way here” was never that far.

“Gonna head back and watch the kids,” said Mia, beginning to turn.

“Wait a minute. They don’t need watching. We have sitters for that.”

Mia stayed, gave him a dark look. “Hey. Do you want me to go home and do nothing at all, or spend quality time with our flesh and blood? Or work unpaid overtime?”

Chase didn't respond immediately, but his chuckle could be heard for meters around. Blair and Elliot and everyone else there watched from a safe distance, peeking around the servant-reporters; they knew this fight was the same old story, but they felt compelled to watch. Besides, the servants would never photograph this. They were supposed to share nothing but the best, the pleasantest narrative.

Mia reached into her purse and removed what seemed, through the thick red light and the arms and shoulders of watchful servants, to be a very long stick. It was her futuristic smoking implement. Chase slapped it out of her hand. Servants lurched away as it flew spinning past their heads, bounced off of "E Major Majuscule in a Heart," and hit the floor with a pathetic plastic clatter. The handful of nearby Bourgs scattered, knowing it was dynamite.

"The fuck are you doing? Not inside!" Chase yelled.

"I'm not a kid!"

"Don't act like one!"

Mia bolted, running the five steps necessary to get her to the stick, but Chase, deftly and like a soccer player, reached his leg around past her and kicked the stick away just before she could kneel to take it. Then he scrambled for it, grabbed it, and punted. The stick sailed through the double doors. The landing was inaudible.

Mia rose slowly, staring at Chase with shaking fists. He stared back. He might have been equally furious, but he had clearly won today's exchange. Mia left first, and she stalked out. Chase smirked and shrugged at nobody in particular, as if he was saying, "It's all good." Then he left looking as calm as can be.

"What a douchebag," someone mumbled.

"How uncouth," Soraya proclaimed.

“Can they get through an event just once?” said Blair with a glance at her watch. “I guess we don’t want Rosie to see too much of them anyway.”

Elliot nodded. He had nothing to add.

Two hands appeared to shake Blair and Elliot’s’. Reagan and Otis, still more of the faintly important Bourg pack, placed themselves in front of them, chuckling about the ‘situation’ that had just played out and how they got lost in the shuffle.

“Great! Thanks for coming,” said Blair.

“How are the kids?”

“Oh, Otis. You’re so kind,” Blair lied. “They’re the same as ever. Except for dear Rosie, as you will soon see.”

“What about their chemical processing? Like, in the brain?”

“It’s, uh, the same.”

“Are you sure? We’re all family, you know. If ever there was anyone you could confide in...”

“We’re sure,” said Elliot.

“I heard about the last days of school. So much fun! But so rough!” Otis said almost plaintively.

“Yes, we heard,” said Blair. She started to back away and mumble a goodbye, but Elliot nudged her with his leg.

“We are so sorry,” said Reagan, shaking her head. “Our child was one of them.”

A new voice said, “One of who?”

Everybody looked to the side and down at the strange and unfortunately familiar old person who had decided to join them. It was Ruby Fine-Bourg, one of Viro’s weird old-people

friends. Though her eyes and face were keen, she was 56 years old and looked every bit of it— one of the few codgers on Mars, and one of even fewer who had gotten no work done on herself. The Bourgs who at social events attracted her like fruit to a fly could never be sure whether the stuff on her eyelids was smoky makeup or a disease.

Even more disturbingly, she and Viro's other weirdo friends were members of the Bourg Family Council, tasked with the dull decisions that kept their world going 'round. She distributed funds. She signed off on every contract. If so inclined, she could submit a name for consideration in the annual culling—exile them. Thankfully, in practice she did exactly what Viro wanted. Every council decision was unanimous. In return, the council lived out extended retirements.

“Good evening, Aunt RuRu,” all four said in unison.

“One of the school bullies, ma'am,” answered Elliot. “But what about tonight? Isn't Viro's work wonderful?” But Aunt RuRu wouldn't take the bait; she pouted.

Otis continued, “The bullying's gotten really bad lately.”

“Yes it has,” said Blair. “Why would you embarrass us—”

“We can imagine,” said Elliot.

“You don't have to imagine,” said Otis, “we heard it all.” Blair kicked Elliot's shin.

In class, the septuplets were always getting picked at. The innumerable pokes and prods they continued to receive disproved the maxim that bullies will stop if their target doesn't respond. The response from teachers was clumsy, a series of ineffective time-outs and talking-tos. In the transition from Fierinda Nursery and Kinder-Care to first grade at Fierinda Accelerated Charter Primary Academy, kids went from group tables to individual desks, and paper airplanes flew clear across the classroom. But hit the septuplets they did not, for now the girls were established in a row at the far left of the classroom, behind a Plexiglas barrier not

unlike a salad bar's sneeze guard. Blair and Elliot still remembered a mixer by the spaceport where Ruby drifted around chuckling about the kids sitting behind a "salad guard."

"You see, Aunt Ru, during the last week of school, the kids got to eat ice cream cones outside," said Otis. "But invariably, one or several of the kids would instead use their ice cream to attack Blair and Elliot's kids. Our Maxie, I'm sorry to say, was one such attacker."

"I don't mean to lessen the severity of the thing, but they weren't 'attacks,'" said Reagan. "They dumped the ice cream on their heads."

"How many cones?" said Ruby.

"One or several."

"Then they left the cones there and the ice cream just streaked down their faces the whole rest of recess."

"Didn't they get frostbite?"

"Didn't Mr. Fierinda say the school may never serve ice cream again?"

Ruby, clearly amused, hacked a big fake cough into a frilly handkerchief.

"Yes," said Elliot with a composed sigh and a contented grin, "some of them did get frostbite. Maybe over the summer you and Maxie will sort it out." Blair was tugging rapidly at his sleeve, her two fingers like the mouth of a bird. "Well...bye."

The more Ruby hyucked about their waste-of-space kids, the more likely Viro was to get wind of it again and again. Maybe it didn't raise their chances of getting booted out of the Bourg corporate family, but it did not help, and it made them very nervous.

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"The ancients held that Mars was born in flame," Viro said in slow, measured, not-quite-embarrassing meter. "This I take to be true within my heart;/And what else should encapsulate

the pain/Of warring with weird circumstances which/Left child bereft of childhood,  
thereby/Divorcing parents of their parenthood,/I mean its promised treasures. They are  
brave/Who send their Moses from a Martian cave.”

“Uh-huh.” One of Bourg’s in-house tech specialist-janitor-journalists scratched the final  
verse on his notepad.

The patriarch was sitting at, reclining on the minibar, setting all of the wine flutes he’d  
emptied at one corner in triangular array. Four more and he could have bowled—no, three. The  
journalist wasn’t going to note this because he didn’t want to embarrass anyone. He did note that  
the minibar, along with its barstools, was gently hovering an inch or two off the ground, keeping  
steady all the while.

“I trust you did not summarize?”

“Uh-huh.” This ‘uh-huh’ and the previous sentence had made ten syllables; Viro smiled  
to himself. “What’s the cave?”

“That’s...just a general metaphor for Mars.”

“Okay. Yeah, I think your poems are getting better,” he said brightly. Just before he made  
a comparison to freestyle rapping, which Viro would not have enjoyed, Blair and Elliot  
interceded. Viro did not tend to act warmly offstage, so his gruff manner and cold welcome  
meant no ill will in themselves.

“Good evening, Father,” Elliot initiated. Seeing Viro here tonight was flattering and a  
little incredible. When Viro made no reply, Elliot cleared his throat. “I wish...that we had the  
time to see your work in better circumstances. Preferably in the act of creation. But the results  
are dazzling as ever.”



Viro snorted. "I wouldn't have chosen *'dazzling,'*" he said half to himself. He said louder, "The lights this evening. Were they your idea?" They shook their heads. "What do you make of them?"

Elliot said, "On one hand, they unify the space. On the other, they detract from the actual work. They bury the original colors."

"That's not what he told me," the journalist chimed in, tapping his notepad. Viro raised his eyebrows.

"Father, you know that's bullshit," said Blair. "That's just what we say to stay positive and keep up appearances. We'd never say that to your face."

"I'm not sure *why you're* saying that to me," Viro pushed back. "You've been so little help. A trophy wife,/But with a larger share of all our money./For those seven girls. I was excited when/The news first broke of your being so pregnant./I was proud."

He stopped himself there. Pride, from him, meant nothing to his daughter- and son-in-law. But everything that his pride could buy, he could have dangled like a carrot on a stick. It made them tremble to think.

"Rosie will make you proud," Elliot breathed.

The "she had better" went unsaid. The couple walked away stiffly and Viro went back to grinning at the servant, who wasn't there to transcribe.

They met one of their daughters backstage, minutes before the performance.

"How you doing?" Elliot said, kneeling in front of Rosie with one hand straight out on her shoulder. Her eyes flickered. He came forward and hugged her.

Just behind him, Blair stood next to the modestly dressed Earth teacher who had come as Rosie's chaperone. Nearly everything the teacher had to say about Rosie's impeccable technique, boundless creativity and general worthiness as a child and artist in the *nouve* style had been said over email.

“You noticed the lights at the *gallerie*?” the teacher said, dropping the last bit of news in by way of icebreaker. “That was Rosie's idea.”

“Really!” Elliot said for lack of a better reaction. He sort of puffed, and whether that puff was a real laugh or the imitation of a laugh, nobody could tell. Nor were the parents sure what to do with the teacher's new information.

“Is the theme of this show something like 'Earth and Mars?’” Blair asked Rosie.

“Yes,” said Rosie.

“Good,” she said with a weak nod. Actually, it wasn't good. Uninspired.

When it was time for them to take their seats, Blair, who hadn't hugged any of her children in several months and considered herself mentally unprepared to do it anew, dipped down to kiss her daughter on the forehead, and as she drew away she wondered if Rosie knew how empty the kiss had been even as it happened. The parents fled.

Velvet curtains fluttered as they dipped their heads out from backstage and surveyed the auditorium. Everyone else was seated; exactly one row of seats would be filled. At the shadowy far end of the room, over doors that perhaps should have been made of wood instead of marble, or just any material lighter and easier to maintain than marble, sat a humongous hunk of painted metal. It was the Bourg coat of arms, a shield decked in red and gold, framed by two white unicorns.

The couple could see Viro at the very very end of the first row, separated from the pack by Ruby and a servant. The latter was holding a machine that hummed—audible even from there—and, aggregating data from all the cameras and notepads of the evening, churned out a newspaper, floppy and greyish. It was a paper chronicling Part One of the *gallierie* exhibition they'd all just attended. Viro took the paper gingerly, opened, perused, and nodded with interest.

Six paper-doll children dominated the front row, each wearing a vibrant, patterned silk dress in a different color of the rainbow, but their uniform height and glare still made them an eyesore.

Thankfully, two of the sisters, at least, had turned away. They were facing chattering, animated Kim. both of them were nothing but attention, with emphasis on the word “nothing” and a slow dull drag through the rest of the sentence. Nothing...but...attention.

As the parents approached, they caught Kim saying, “...amazing, you know that? But you're amazing too. The skill doesn't make the woman. It's what she does with it that...” They interrupted her with a tap on the shoulder and a brief word of thanks. She turned and rose with a happy shout: “Oh, hey!”

“Kim, we missed you,” said Blair. She meant that in a purely factual, non-emotional sense. “Don't stay in the lounge next time.”

“Why not?”

“Because—I dunno—you're funny, we have a good time together...”

“I didn't come here to socialize for the umpteenth time. I'm here for *you*. Not them. If Henri doesn't need to see me with that crowd, I'm not there.”

“Who's Henri?”

“Patriarch,” said Elliot.

“Oh.”

When Blair and Kim first met mere days after setting foot on Mars, their friendship had been fast, fiery, spontaneous. It had long since taken a pragmatic cast.

Suddenly Blair and Elliot felt a prick of embarrassment, hanging around Kim like this. They ducked out and got into their seats, making sure to place Elliot, and not Blair, beside Hilary, Kathy, Heidi Anne, Tammy, Jenny, and Nia.

Then the lights above the audience, already dim, were killed. Other lights came to life behind the curtains, with a deep click.

The velvet pulled away, and there was Rosie in hard pink light with her art supplies. A stool and an easel with a fresh canvas stood just behind her, tilted toward the crowd. Other canvases sat ready in a stack. She would be using the classic handheld painter's palette, which leaned against the easel's leg. And she was standing dead center, upstage, almost on the edge, so that people could see the shadow patch under her chin.

“I have come to Mars from Earth,” she boomed in monotone. “Earth is very beautiful. My teacher has said that everyone knows Earth. But do you really know Earth?” Still facing the audience, she slowly backed away and, with a little fumble and some backward arm-waving, sat on her stool. “Now I will show you Earth, if you will speak to me.”

No one was particular about speaking.

“Show us the Sun from Earth,” Aunt RuRu shouted.

And she sat down to paint. Silently. Had nobody in that academy taught her how to interact with patrons during a show? Of course they had. Maybe the importance of this would dawn on her with time. Alternatively, maybe she remembered what to do and this silence was her utterly useless way of rebelling. While her poise on that stool before the easel was so self-

assured and adult as to be uncanny, her skills with the paint itself were average. Average. Robotic and average. Average, with neither flourishes nor errors, was sadder than anything.

With every movement of Rosie's brush, her parents' flesh prickled. Blair was a statue locked into attention, locked into her seat. For Elliot, the prickling was full-on fidgeting. One couldn't move, the other couldn't help leering away and shifting around and looking up and down the aisle, but in them both were frantic thoughts.

Couples around them murmured.

“This is tedious. We should go.”

“Not before Viro does.”

“I'd have painted that when I was three, not six.”

“She's, uh, polished.”

“What bullshit.”

“That's Elliot's kid? Where is he working now, the warehouse?”

But at least Viro had put down his damn paper. Elliot saw him far off looking up, his face wrinkled with attention like a sniffing rabbit's.

Again he watched the stage. He pushed the conversation away. Rosie was dabbing the halo on a goldenrod sun.

Someone's high heels thumped across the carpet, leaving the auditorium. Elliot swung around and barely caught sight of Kim's feathered dress as she left. The exit doors swished open and closed. He watched the space where she had been. Then his eyes traveled a bit and met Viro's face. Father, with the same face, frowned and nodded as if leaving was what he'd been interested in from the start.

The girls just stared ahead.

Whispers were exchanged between the parents of the young *moedierniste*. At least, that was what Elliot tried to bring about, but Blair was flat silent. So he turned away and left. Charging with as soft and unobtrusive a step as he could, he passed through the exit doors and found Kim with her back against the wall of the disposable place between the auditorium and reception. She had just put a tissue to her face.

Curtly, as if talking to a child, she said, "I'm glad you came to see me, Elliot."

He nodded. There was no good neutral reaction for this situation.

"Why do you think I'm upset?"

Because of overwhelming...happiness. Nerves. Anger? At what?

"I'll answer that." She sniffed. "We're all just playing a game. A stupid game. We do things to please these strange old rich people, and these strangers who we should know better after this many years. And this, tonight, was a game," she said, gesturing with one arm as if the audience were before her. "I don't pretend to be better or deeper than you. I play it like everyone else. But...what the fuck are you doing with your kids?"

Every few months, there came a busy day when Blair and Elliot needed more hands in the house. Elliot would be absent, Blair would just be fed up, and Biff would be tied up with chores, and maybe the kids would be sick or would need to be taken outside someplace to assuage the parents' guilt. Kim came to the rescue. Not only that, but she was happy to do it.

"We're doing the best we can with our kids," said Elliot. He added a touch of assertiveness because he figured Kim appreciated that in a parent: "Plain and simple."

She exploded. "I don't mean *that!* I'm talking about how the instant Rosie gets back, you put her on stage. You put sky-high unrealistic expectations on her shoulders. Then—I saw you twitching—you wanna act all embarrassed when everyone around you starts gossiping about it,

criticizing your decision and you.” And he was twitching again. “You can’t do this,” said Kim, now trying to level with him. “I mean, you can’t do this to Rosie. Don’t stress her out like this, you’ll kill her!”

The first thing Elliot considered was how exasperated Kim was, and how he could possibly placate her. The second was guilt, his part in the whole Rosie affair.

“It wasn’t my idea to send her away—”

“I was not talking about that!”

Elliot was silent.

“Just go,” she said, simmering, and she waved him off. He rejoined the performance.

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Blair and Elliot had a few minutes in the minivan to themselves. It was dark, inside and out. Some shine from the lights outside hit them from the side windows, traces of the parking lot’s glow-in-the-dark paint. Blair was leaning far back in the driver’s seat with her legs over the steering wheel. Exaggerated recovery from a paralyzing performance. Elliot was just a little sweaty. He had already decided that they would discuss what Kim said later, and Blair seemed to realize this.

She rose slightly. “Alright,” she said, reaching for the glove compartment. “Time to get out the wands.”

Both of them reached in and removed their own very long sticks. Blair “lit” them with a gold-plated box and a cherry liquid scent. Grey air wafted from the wands. They reclined and vaped.

“I really wanna drive tonight,” said Blair, “if I feel up to it.”

They were silent for a few moments.

“What do you think of Rosie?” said Elliot.

Blair looked out the windshield. “She did good. She wasn't wonderful, but I don't know why we were expecting she would be.” Turning to him, she said, “She has a spark, though.”

Elliot exhaled and licked his lips. “You think so?”

“I know it.” She paused. “I was thinking maybe something's holding her back besides her age. Maybe by sending her to Earth, I made her lonely. I'm sorry about that.” Paused again, meditatively. Then she said what she had really meant to say. “Let's send the rest off to school, Elliot. The same school. We shouldn't be keeping one daughter separate, right?”

“...Right.”



## Chapter 2: The Wedding

What was Mars? In 60 M.E. it was a loose confederacy of towns and research bases sprawling across scenic desert vistas. There were fourteen domes filled with castles, with corporate families, freshly built, but there was also a smattering of squat villages, and another smattering of sealed cities. The villagers' numbers had fallen, so they had abandoned most of their little domes and huddled together. The cities had failed, so except for Urbo Marsa, they silently crumbled.

It was tough for earthlings to care about Mars. There were always people interested in Mars' geography and the constant search for water and life, but they formed an ever-decreasing pool of nerds. There were always anthropologists musing about the ramifications of culture divorced from Earth. Now that Bourg Construction and Sendolorre Productions and Wayforth Motors and Rouja Innovative Technologies and the rest of the new corporation-slash-aristocracy had their flags planted there, trade was resuming between the red planet and Earth, but really, who gave a hoot? All most people knew about Mars was, it was a huge desert and it was hot. (Mars' average temperature was actually below zero degrees Celsius. The typical elementary school student had to learn this fact four times. It did not sink in because in the end, nothing important happened on Mars.)

Once upon a time, a table of freshmen in an introductory writing class were asked to test their essay-writing skills using any facet of Mars they found fascinating.

“In light of the omnipresent Greek and Western nomenclature of Martian natural fixtures, it comes as a surprise that Greek, Roman, or even distinctly Western architecture is not just as common in its villages.” Thus wrote Elliot Schmidt. Martian architecture did not interest him at

all. However, since he was considering studying real estate, he welcomed this chance to research dilapidated and frankly ugly houses. He was always a mediocre student. The paper tanked.

Blair Youngblood was in the game of genetic modification. In her eyes, even less than nothing happened on Mars—while earthlings were pioneering superfoods, the *marsannoi* piddled around with species aesthetics. That is not to say that they made everything more beautiful. One of the earliest successes was a buttercup that, every year or two, dripped blood-red sap. Villagers smeared their faces with the blood-red sap. Nor were there useful chemical properties to the blood-red sap. “It is ironic that the bioengineering community of the mighty red planet has not popped out some kind of living war machine,” she wrote half-heartedly. “Their greatest contribution has been another breed of hypoallergenic dog.”

“And what do you think of it now?” Elliot asked Blair over a slice of cake on a thin silver plate. It was their wedding reception in the year 53, and they were sharing a brief moment alone-ish as the stream of people as new and young as they walked by. Here in the ruby chapel, delicate afternoon light streamed through glass filters incarnadine and made a checkerboard of rectangles that stretched over them all.

The two were standing by the long table with the classic white-tower cake. It was twelve stories tall, and on the other side of the table the servers cut it as they spoke, using ladders.

Blair thought the question over. Between Elliot’s proposal and this fateful trip, she had become convinced that ahead of them was a foreign land rich with mystery. Soon they would prove it. They had only just alighted on its surface when the powers that be rushed them into this thirty-two-person mass wedding of various Bourgs, as well as Bonessas, D’Attennes, Planedegannas, and suchlike.

“Well, while I’m aware that about 95% of Martian land is legally American territory,” said Blair, with uncanny specificity because she had just read this factoid online the night before, “this world really is like a frontier. The people feel mythical.”

“Do you mean from the corporate families?” he said, disbelieving.

“Sure, in a fairy sort of wa—”

A gregarious young man interrupted, clasping and shaking Blair’s hand. “Glad you could make it!”

“Ha ha!” She laughed without meaning to. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Enjoying the catering, I see. Not just space tubes you’ll be eating up here. No ma’am.” He pulled two business cards from his breast pocket, passed them forward, and introduced himself as Mr. Bonessa, just one of the many Bonessas.

“It’s a...pleasure doing business with you? It’s not like we have any choice.”

Blair grinned, belatedly. Mr. Bonessa grinned back, and left. When the coast was clear, Elliot, eyes on the looming cake, said, “Please be less rude, Blair.”

“What?” she said cheerfully. “He started it.”

And many more like him were strolling up and down the chapel’s reception. They hadn’t been married in the same ceremony and were not interested guests, but merely attended to serve as representatives of their clans—in a word, shills. Beyond the wedding cake’s table, running down this entire east wall, were even more tables, with eager shills and frozen smiles waiting behind them, and each one topped with familial goods. Mr. Xun Mode’s table passed out handbags, and Mrs. Pramida eagerly detained anyone who tried to walk past her complimentary first aid kits. Knowing this, Blair and Elliot kept away from the wall as they walked observing.

“A lot of them are like flies, flitting all around the place. And when they land...” Blair paused, and her eyes fell to the floor for a few seconds. She was struggling to finish an important simile. “Did you know that flies shit every time they land somewhere? That’s what I mean.” Blair followed that immediately with, “But aren’t their clothes so nice? I’m sorry, this is really shallow of me, but we’re all *shining*, okay?”

“So you concede that they’re shallow?”

“‘Shallow’ doesn’t mean not acting like royalty. Royalty is shallow as hell. That’s not a good metaphor, Hell’s probably deep.”

“What about the people who have been here for years?”

She almost blurted out that she’d forgotten about them. “I f– uhh, I thought they died?”

“No, they just consolidated.” Blair felt very ignorant. Elliot blinked. “Well, they consolidated after *some* of them died.” Blair was slightly right. She relaxed.

“I think that they’re a different sort of mythical creature. Dignified and rustic.”

“Let’s go meet them.”

“Sure. We’ll take a tour sometime.”

“No, they’re right there.” He arched his arm and pointed over the people at the very last table.

Blair squinted as if through a haze. “*Them?* Oh, no.”

“What?”

Three Martian villagers in the flesh, peddling their textiles and pottery...in collared, ironed shirts. “That’s an affront. They look like they repair computers.” Elliot huffed a laugh.

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The only endeavors Elliot had applied himself to in college were business and football, and neither of them strong suits. Nobody was more surprised by the ticket to Mars, the thick, precious card, sparkling, embossed, its border intricate with flakes of real gold, miraculous, that seemed to flit into his hand.

Now he and Blair were outside of the chapel, the sun setting and the sky nothing but lemon light. To old family on Earth he was lost and confused, joining a deranged cult pretending class and business, seduced by a piece of paper. And to Blair's, she was as good as dead, seduced by a man with a piece of paper. When they came outside, they remembered not the doubts of Earth people but the astounding beauty of the chapel, and of the castle spires that now seemed crystalline. Then they crouched and made fun of the ornate parking spaces, guzzled up with grapevines and doily frills.

Not far away, Radford exited the chapel and deliberately placed himself behind the shady wall. He smoked a wand and paced. Blair and Elliot glanced at him over their shoulders...and snickered as they remembered their first meeting an hour before. "Can I tell you a secret?" he'd said, looking exhausted already. "I'm going to leave. I'm gonna honor my contract, take the paychecks, and leave."

And it was funny—they overheard him saying the same thing to couple after couple. Of course they could relate. But it was too early to count the Bourg estate a wasteland. Fun and optimism were boundless. So was novelty.

They rose facing each other, holding hands before Elliot bowed theatrically and said, "*Chu alle vie plachusse dancie, belle-marsanne?*" And they danced for a while.

### Chapter 3: The Video

Altogether there were twenty-five identical homes in the Bourg estate. A few were in disuse and one was slated for repurpose. They formed two rings that faced each other, leaving plenty of space in front, in back, and between, and spaces for “wild” flowers and trees that billowed in the breeze. The road connecting them all was six lanes wide. Dropping by next door took a five-minute walk.

If this setup lacked a sense of security, the castles themselves strove to make up for it. Surrounding each was an oval-shaped wall of earth-tone rocks spiked at the top with black iron. Generous in circumference but not in height, this wall rose a little lower than your average picket fence, and were jumpable.

There was no moat and bridge around the wall; the homeowners needed only lay a fingerprinted hand on the rock for a hinged chunk of the gate to pop inward and let them through. The moat and bridge were *inside* of the wall, and to be fair, the moat was really more of an oval pond. Like a dumbbell, it connected to trickling granite fountains on either side. Every last fountain was unique, but amounted to a different configuration of jug-bearing, nondenominational cherubs. Whether all the topiary clogging everyone’s lawns would be trimmed into unique shapes was up to the Bourgs granted the property—or, more and more often, to their servants. Right now Biff was shaping up a life-sized unicorn, the steed of Bourg, clipping stems with speed, determination, and a little frustration.

Outside there may have been cone roofs and parapets, but the interior of Blair and Elliot’s castle made no attempt to conform to that of any Earth castle. Viro had called this ‘the bold decision to innovate.’ It turned out suspiciously like his suburban childhood home.

In one of the larger rooms, the walls were painted lavender. All of the ribbons strung up along the ceiling, between painted clouds, and the brighter lavender rugs, were just the same as they had been when this room, the place where the girls had always played and slept, was known as the nursery.

The girls found it too dull, Blair thought. They found it comforting, Elliot thought.

But today Rosie came back a changed sister. The parents hoped she was raring to go, to re-enter the ring and effect change, make new and enriching group dynamics.

Now the sisters entered the room for their designated leisure time. One reclined on a child-sized couch; she sat on one end, collapsed on her side, and did not move anymore. One planted herself in the rabbit-eared rocking chair. Two stood and stared at each other. One stood right in the middle of the room. The last one was in the kitchen or bathroom and would join them shortly.

The parents could intuit this because the septuplets never broke their schedule. They knew it for sure because they and Dr. Ivan Utz-Rouja, licensed independent psychiatrist, were huddled together in that home office where the couple convened with the whole roundelay of therapists, shrinks, and other such professionals. Curtains were drawn and lights off, the better to see the two video feeds wired to the playroom. The feed on the left looked like monochrome night vision or ultrasound. It was useless to them. The feed on the right was a normal feed, bathing them in a lavender glow. They were starting to sweat.

Twice a year, this doctor came by with his mental process-to-image translator, or *mensprocedde-al-videobilde changille*. The *changille* screen changed the churning thoughts of people into coherent images—or they would be coherent in a few decades, when the technology

ceased to be so primitive. On the ultrasound there were fluctuations far too subtle for the naked eye.

Blair laid a finger on the screen. “Which one’s that? Is that one Rosie?”

“What’s in her hair?”

“Something green...a square...”

Elliot checked the legal pad to see whose hairclip that was. They were keeping a series of legal pads inscribed with a series of tables, and the first box of every table was for hairclips. Each day they brought the procession of children past a tub of hairclips, asking each to take one. This served two purposes: ease of identification and identification of heretofore-untapped personality. But no girl had ever reached into the tub for more than one second, nor glanced inside. Nonetheless, all results were logged faithfully and sent every month to Dr. Nancy Stud, an Earth-based behavioral analyst.

The septuplets were written in the table as letters: H, HA, R, J, K, N, T. Next to today’s letter “R” was written, “White flower.” “Oh, that’s funny,” Elliot pretended. “Ha. Rosie’s wearing a white flower.”

So the one in the middle was Kathy, not Rosie. The parents took a deep breath before they started tossing their eyes around, searching for that particular hairclip among their exuberant, playful, playful children.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bourg,” whispered Dr. Utz-Rouja to the parents on either side, “you don’t happen to know why you included baubles the color of your daughters’ hair in the pile, do you?”

“Who bought that one?” said Blair, and then just as quickly, “Well, when we bought them we didn’t expect to be playing far-off hidden camera games with them.”

“I see something shining whenever a breeze goes by outside.”



“That’s—a pearl.”

“Hilary.”

“Shh,” said the doctor. “Notice, notice...” He wagged his finger at the lower corner of the screen. A door had opened. Shoulders in the home office tensed.

From this angle they could see Rosie’s back, and her arms that were circling a platter loaded with cups. The parents knew that these were most likely cups of water, since this was one of the daily hydrations also on their schedule. Hydrating themselves was a chore the sisters assumed dutifully, with one girl filling the tray at five intervals across sixteen wakeful hours. Which girl was to take the tray, and why, was a mysterious question never yet answered to the parents’ satisfaction. Hoping that an expert could suss out better answers, the parents had these apparently random decisions logged faithfully and sent every month to Dr. Stud.

Everyone crowded around the color monitor as she walked and turned, fighting to see any special touches. Maybe there were fruit wedges, or teaspoons.

Rosie knelt to set it down in its usual place at the center of the room, only coincidentally at Kathy’s feet. The children gathered slowly like flower petals in reverse. There was nothing special about the tray...

Dr. Utz-Rouja knew that the parents were losing heart at the sight, the notion that nothing had changed. He wasn’t so worried; he assumed that the real fireworks would go off when all recording was done and the *changille* printed out its results as raw data. So for now, he patted their backs and muttered, “You’ll see, you’ll see.” But they thought he meant they’d see it on the screen, so they continued perspiring with set faces growing sullen. Their faces were so close he could see every crease on them.

Until Elliot backed away the slightest bit, to check the legal pad and raise it to his nose.

“Doctor,” said Blair. Her eyes were still fastened to the screen. “You think there’s a chance they know we’re watching and reading their mental processes?”

Elliot backed away more.

There’s always a chance,” said Dr. Utz-Rouja with dismissive sarcasm. “Of anything.

Blair knew that her question was just the start of a whirlpool of unproductive possibility. If the children knew, maybe their knowing affected the results, because maybe they were nervous, or capable of something they didn’t want filmed. But since the girls gave no good answers, this was all unknowable. Blair couldn’t help herself sometimes.

She reassured herself that when school started again, all of this would fly off their shoulders like birds.

Then something incredible happened. One of the girls moved to the easel.

The doctor gave a start. “An imitative act?” he murmured.

Blair and the doctor watched in silence, Elliot still shrunken back, as Kathy, the one with the green square in her hair, lifted a dry brush and began turning it over this way and that, examining it like a sniffing animal. The other girls were uncurious. They were drinking at the watering hole like animals who might sniff later. And Blair’s thoughts were racing, saying get the paint, get the paint...

“Which one’s Rosie?”

“The flower,” Blair said, “she’s the one with the flower.”

“Yes, that should be Rosie,” Elliot agreed, but then he trailed off. “That’s...her...” The legal pad was almost pressed to his nose, and his eyes scanned back and forth over the same few lines. The show went on without him.

Dr. Utz-Rouja grinned at Blair, the light shining off of his apple cheeks. He looked as if he wanted to say, “What’d I tell ya?”

Kathy got the blue acrylic and dipped her brush.

“Incredible,” Blair said, slowly, shaking her head. “We made the right call. We’ll have a train of artists. Who hopefully someday will stop painting the same thing,” she added as another blue sky appeared on the canvas.

“Hold on,” said Elliot, voice failing. “The one who’s painting, with the green square in her hair. That one’s Rosie.”

“What?”

“I wrote ‘K’ wrong and it looked like an ‘R.’” He paused, and said solidly, “Rosie’s painting.”

“Well, doesn’t that explain it?” said the good doctor.

Right on cue, sound erupted from the monitors. “I am Rosie. I have come back from Earth. My teacher says that you all know Earth. But do you really know Earth?”

“Shit,” said Blair.

“Why are you so unhappy?” Dr. Utz-Rouja said, raising his voice high above Rosie's and beginning to spread his arms and gesture. He piped a single hearty laugh. “I’ve never seen your children express *any* powers of expression beyond the rudimentary!”

“It’s the same as what we saw last night,” said Elliot.

“Old news can be good news.”

Blair realized, “We don’t even know if it’s her own original thought, it’s like a script.”

“Settle down,” said the doctor. “Let’s not have our thoughts flying into space here.”

“Rosie went off into space,” Blair said as if to herself. “She probably planned the exhibition with a teacher. Maybe it was the teacher we met.” She had lowered her eyes. Elliot was looking at her and nodding.

“This *changille!*” Dr. Utz-Rouja cried. He stepped away, bent his knees and patted a little box barely visible in this darkness. “*This* is gonna show the breakthrough.” And Blair died down, but over the course of seconds, on her own time. They looked at him silently, with no apparent appreciation.

Elliot cleared his throat and said, “We thank you for what you’re doing for us.”

What a load. But the doctor replied with a delightful smile, since honest thanks were hard to come by on this planet.

The *changille* now had nearly all the footage it could hold. Dr. Utz-Rouja pressed a button on the side of each monitor, reverting them to black before flicking on the office light. Above them a chandelier-like fixture, a shapely hunk of electrified quartz rock, popped on with a light buzz. Then Dr. Utz-Rouja invited them to wait in the room as the Rouja brand, state-of-the-art technology (it was behind Earth *changilles* by about five years in all but price) transmogrified the murky ultrasound into a couple of languages they could all understand—not English and Esperanto, but numbers and graphs.

But they declined. “You’re welcome to join us for a little tea break,” Elliot told him, Blair having already left. “What’s more, we messed up with our schedule and we’re double-booked. We might have another guest soon.”

“Therapist?”

“That’s not his business,” Blair said from ten meters away.

“How’d you know, doctor?”

He shrugged. “Does anybody else really come here?”

Elliot smiled and huffed nervously.

The living room was filled with light and utterly plush. In a space apart from the sofas and inevitable television, by the bay windows, there were two imitation-antique lacquered wood chairs, and between them a tiny, low table. Blair flew in carrying a tray loaded with small cups and a kettle, and set it down indelicately. She and her husband seated themselves quickly and without fuss. The tea was poured, and Blair said, “I—”

But sure enough, the doorbell rang. “Come in,” she yelled—before she saw one of the girls swing through the living room, headed for the door, Rosie with the green square in her hair. The parents’ first instinct, despite the total lack of danger, was panic.

All three rushed to the door, an eight-foot semicircle of white wood and gold rococo. Rosie had power-walked faster than her parents and pulled the door open with a straight face. Before them stood the latest therapist, who last year had introduced herself to the family as “Soon-to-be-Doctor Candy Urwell.” (She was getting her degree online.) Every day she wore plum and grey; strange for a member of Urwell Ore and Metal Works to wear such tawdry clothes, and in fabric that looked like craft felt. She looked serene and unflappable as ever, hands folded, with that tight near-constant smile.

“Who is *this*?” she said, surprised faintly, greatly charmed. Ms. Urwell bent a bit, hands on her knees, and greeted Rosie more directly. “Are you the one who just got back from art school?”

“Yes. I am Rosie.”

Ms. Urwell withdrew and turned away. Her arms returned to her front. “This is great!” she said. “It looks like that place is teaching initiative.”

Elliot nodded and beamed with pride.

“That’s what we’re hoping,” said Blair, nonplussed. She leaned over and whispered to Rosie, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Rosie said as loud as a megaphone in comparison.

The kids didn’t all do that. “Did that school take away your ability to whisper?” Blair whispered.

“They told me to project,” Rosie boomed.

“I can hear you, and I wish you wouldn’t criticize your child,” said Ms. Urwell, sounding baffled.

“I’m not criticizing the child—”

“Say ‘our child.’”

“—our child.”

“It can come off that way.” She changed gears. “Okay—let’s start therapy as usual.”

Blair and Elliot rustled Rosie’s hair by turns, sent her off to the playroom. “But first, how are your interactions with your kids?”

“They are...at an all-time low.”

Ms. Urwell nodded gently. “That’s okay,” she lied. “I want to see the kids toward the end of our session. How’s your timetable today?”

Blair said, “I’m home all day.”

“Normally I’d be off,” said Elliot, “but they want me to work extra hours from two to ten.”

“As long as you get paid for that,” she said. Then she watched his face as it slumped into depression. Getting the truth from him was very easy. “Wow. Bourg doesn’t do overtime? What

a shame. I suppose that's what we should expect, living under the king's allowance. Do you want to talk about that?"

"If we must. But...I'd appreciate it if you didn't prey upon my insecurities outside of therapy. We don't pay you for that."

But he didn't want to scare her off. Mr. Urwell had been a doctor-in-training for just over a year and their therapist for a few months. Her methods hadn't been put into full practice yet, which was the main reason they retained her and still respected her. She was not at all stern. When she gave commands, her small voice almost trembled. But they hung on her words in a way they hadn't with past counselors—the too-cold, the too-strategizing, or, in the opposite camp, the too-inspirational who wanted everyone to just find themselves. She was a withdrawn person who shrank into herself, yet self-assured, ready to assure others. Her tricks still up her sleeve.

"We're going to have this session outside, if you don't mind. You two need some fresh air."

"Oh, no. We don't mind at all," Elliot was quick to say.

Ms. Urwell asked what the best place for fresh air was, and they said the spires. Mr. Urwell led them back outside again. They crossed the bridge, passed faithful Biff still hard at work on the hooves of a fierce, bucking unicorn, and curved around to a free-standing tower. Dotting the tower were stained-glass windows prettied with red and pink that let in just a little light, gave just a touch of variety to the interior. If not for that, who could know how sad the dusty spiral stairs within would look? Traveling upward in this dim, spattered light, and her long skirt that nearly brushed the stairs, Ms. Urwell looked like a ghost revolving.

At the top was a pointy roof, along with a great view of Mars, seen through very tall, meter-wide parapet holes. Their neighbors' homes were as numerous and tall as skyscrapers, but with effort they could weave their eyes past them and find the orange Martian wild. They could even make out the Bourg dome itself if they searched the sky for the Sun's reflection. And a fresh breeze entered, coaxed by the estate's network of hidden fans.

The couple and their help had come to a cozy relaxation area with false grass for turf. A couple of cushioned plastic patio chairs lounged here. So did a hammock between two plastic trees, never used. The corporate families boasted of never cutting corners, premium homes as well as premium consumer goods; apparently this at last was where corners were cut.

As the parents claimed the chairs, Ms. Urwell seated herself in the middle of the hammock, her hands at either side to keep steady. "Plainly this is a time for change," she said pleasantly. "Let's make that change gentle and gradual." A phrase which did nothing for the parents. Seven years into parenting and "gentle and gradual" had lost all its reassuring power. "Why don't you start by telling me what I need to know."

"The show was...fine," said Elliot. He knew, and Blair knew, that it hadn't been, that their chances of going on with Rosie and Kim and Viro were now jeopardized. But now was a time for the best news and most heartening interpretations, they'd agreed. One of their past therapists had also said that, to be positive—yes...they all agreed on that. "Rosie's promising. I think she's also more confident and assertive."

"That much is obvious! And what about more independent?"

"No," Blair almost blurted—but instead, she did as she knew Ms. Urwell would suggest and started to see the bright side. "The academy's been a great thing for her. So we've decided,"



she went on, now grinning, “to send them all there next year. We've slept on this. The idea's really growing on me.”

Blair searched Ms. Urwell’s face for approval, but she should have known she’d only find a placid look. In therapy and out, her emotion was in her voice, and deftly controlled.

“Elliot,” said Ms. Urwell, “tell me if this was a group decision.”

“It was not. But I agreed—I agree, I mean, to it.”

“A Freudian slip?”

“Freud is outdated.”

“Forgive me,” she said with her head ducked a little. “I just started a History of Psychology course. Two weeks in.”

“I see. That's alright.”

“Now, about the decision. You feel...”

“I feel neutral about it,” he clarified.

“Mm.” She closed her eyes and nodded once, meditatively. “Tell me more.”

“I enjoy spending time with our kids. I love the idea of watching them grow. So I don't feel great about the idea of having them grow miles and miles away...but at the same time, I can't deny that Rosie has had some successes. I think I'm being overprotective, but...especially at this age...I don't like them being out of my sight, let alone control.”

“Okay. Go back to that part, 'Rosie has had some successes.' Let's talk more about that.”

“I'll talk more about it.”

“Just say it—straight out.” That was her frequent advice to him.

“I’ll just—say it. I don’t like... I like her confidence, I’m not saying that’s bad. But her mannerisms haven’t changed. Actually, they might be less human than ever. So I don’t...like what’s become of her.”

“I don’t like that either!” Blair cried, surprised and pleased that Elliot agreed. “But we don’t have any other choice here, do we?”

“I think we have options,” said Elliot.

“No. There are no good options. We either send them away or they go to the same old schools here. Which are probably underfunded. Which you wouldn’t think they would be, since Fierinda is loaded.”

Ms. Urwell stopped them with a big, happy, toothy “wow!” Elliot put his response on ice, and they turned to look at her with open mouths. “This is what I like to see out of you. A crossfire! Civil anger! Especially from you, Blair! You’re the one complaining about how you don’t have emotions!”

“I don’t complain about not having emotions,” she said defensively. It was only the first question out of her mouth whenever they found a new therapist: “Doctor, do you think it’s my fault because I didn’t nurture them right, because maybe I don’t...?”

“Don’t you two see?” continued the soon-to-be-licensed therapist. “This is you showing your *love* for your kids. This is Mama and Papa Bear right here. You are fighting over your flesh and blood.” Then suddenly Ms. Urwell began to look bashful; she was about to say something personal. “That anger. *You* may not *feel* it, but I can *see* it. I see it rising off of you like rolling red steam. And to tell you the truth, I want to see it kindled into fire! Into a great aura of passion for each of you.”

Blair mouthed to Elliot, “Is she crazy?”

Ms. Urwell said, “Blair, you have to stop doing that. Everyone in the room can see and hear every stealthy comment you make.”

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“But I understand your fears. I don't mean the anger that makes you punch out your loved ones and hate everything you know. I mean the anger that gets things done. And don't forget the other passions. Passionate happiness. Sexual passion. It's not *lack of* emotion. It's *weak* emotion. Rouse yourselves.”

The parents stared dully.

“I thought that was a pretty good speech.”

“It was!” they said in unison.

Ms. Urwell remembered that these two didn't function well unless they had some very specific, concrete advice to chew on. “Take your kids and go on an adventure. As the higher-ups in your family permit, of course.”

“About that,” said Blair. “They have an interstitial summer camp program—optional support—” she was swirling her wrist around as she spoke— “and we thought it would be good for them to...get out sooner.”

Elliot knew what Ms. Urwell would suspect, so he nodded with a vengeance.

“When does the flight leave?”

“Next week.”

“I don't like that,” Ms. Urwell said flatly. “I don't like what I'm sensing there. You're not giving Rosie a chance to simply be *home*.” But the parents weren't receptive to her message here. In their minds, it was clear that Rosie had, was having, a perfectly good chance to do so and be a good, relaxed, happy child at last—but she'd decided to squander it. Just like she'd had

a chance to perform and stun the crowd—squandered it. “Ultimately,” Ms. Urwell said with great patience, “it is not my place to dictate your lives.”

They were out of time sooner than usual because Elliot’s phone buzzed with a message from the mind-scanning psychiatrist in another room of the house. Ms. Urwell accepted this and said, “Well, there’s not much more to say from me. I may as well leave now. Anything else you need or want to get off your chests?” And the parents said no. Meeting adjourned.

Since the shuttle for summer camp came before her next visit, she asked to see the kids off. So they went into the playroom, world of lavender light. Elliot went into the room and passed the children one by one to Ms. Urwell, with words and soft nudges, as if she were meant to bless them. Ms. Urwell stood in the doorway and watched them assemble into an expressionless line. She looked them over, feet to heads. And then they went to their previous spots again, going back unchanged. Except Rosie went back to her canvas to paint more clouds.

As the adults turned away, Ms. Urwell said to the parents, “Rosie has the same aura as ever, the same aura as all her sisters, but I’m convinced that they’ll all change with time.”

“Nothing but time?” said Blair.

She nodded. “I think that as parents, you have nothing to worry about.”

Elliot thanked her for her services and kindness, and Blair tentatively put on a happy face.

What did the ultrasound have to say?

Rediscovered by the parents in an office that now looked like his and his machinery’s natural habitat, Dr. Utz-Rouja was sitting in a rolling chair and thumping his papers on the almost-empty desk, straightening the edges. He then turned to a stapler and pinned together—the

staple just barely held out—thirty pages. When he noticed their expectant faces, he stopped humming immediately, got right into the business again.

“Ah,” he said. “It’s ready.” He pushed the paper into the hands of Elliot, the closer parent, as he gave a little background. “These results were very hard to analyze, as usual. Most of your girls are still working with what I call the bare minimum of mental processes. A few waves of action, but...again, nothing visible on the screen, not even for me.”

“Maybe...” Blair turned to Elliot. “Can we have him back to study the kids while they do tasks?”

But the doctor said, “I’m afraid that’s not going to change things. For six of them, the mind at leisure should be showing greater effects than this. However, for the other, for Rosie...she’s kind of a bright spot.”

“Well, that’s great!” said Elliot.

“Not so great. Check out the numbers.”

Pages of the report alternated between bar graphs in primary colors and long lines of numbers in typewriter font. On the graphs, there was always a tall bar (the average) next to two slivers (the sisters). The doctor’s pen-written marginal notes gave context. On the page headlined “USE OF LANGUAGE/INNER MONOLOGUE,” big arrows and circles guided the parents’ eyes. Six numbers were grouped under the label “Main Sisters.” He’d written their average: 13. Next came Rosie: 56. That would have been a major improvement, only “Normal Five-Year-Old” stood at 576,241. And every page was more of the same, more of the same. Ten whole pages were devoted to the *changille’s* formulaic textual breakdown. “TEST 1.13: OUTLIER HIGHER BY 5.68X. ALL SUBJECTS UNDERPERFORM. TEST 1.14...”

Wire the *changille* to a room full of children and you would see nothing coherent at all, because the screen would burn with shifting form and color. and sound poured over itself, everyone's inner voices and forms emerging loud. Children—engaged children, particularly those at play—will surround themselves, voluntarily or no, with figures concrete and abstract, creatures, splotches, mental maps and personal intercoms, their own monologues and the words of other people, and even motion, taste, impressions of touch. A shifting cluster of sense that would devastate the screen.

Blair turned to the ridiculous pie charts. She read aloud, “Estimated percentage of second-graders scoring 500 or above in practical application of the mind’s eye: 97.25%...percentage of those below...” She trailed off, now looking annoyed. “What does Rosie have to do here?”

As Dr. Utz-Rouja and all those before him had asserted, it wasn't that they *couldn't* do it...they simply refused to. Did not want to. Were not taken with life or effort. “You all just need better stimulation,” he said, blinking. He blinked more. “Right? I’m not being crass here?”

“I just did that. A week ago. We went to the pole to watch Kim’s film shoot. So many times we’ve traveled across the planet, looking at the wild.”

“*Good! That sounds good! Keep doing it!*”

But that was like telling them to change nothing. Seven years of this.

“It may be too late for travel,” Elliot murmured.

“This summer is going to be the best, the longest, the most immersive experience they’ve had to date,” said Blair. She herself didn’t know it, but she meant “we the parents.”

## Chapter 4: The Party

Blair and Elliot shut a door that sealed as tight and strong as an airlock. They were in the entryway of a rocking rover, the RV of the stars. On one side hung light coats, hats, even ties and purses, and on the other side hung spacesuits with their massive helmets clanging together whenever the rover shook—so, three times every second.

“They sound like a bunch of castanets,” said Blair. “It’s so annoying.”

“And I wish you wouldn’t talk about every little thing that annoys you,” said Elliot. “*That annoys me.*”

As the rover hit a rock or a snag and orange dust rose in puffs from the floor, they fell against the spacesuits. Some of those, too, were dusty. The couple coughed and futilely swatted powder off their faces.

Ahead was a tantalizing closed door, and music, an indistinct, murky pounding.

Chase opened this door, came out, and shut it. When he saw Blair and Elliot leaning against the suits, trying to keep their balance in what felt like a moving train, he jumped. “I was gone for like two seconds,” he complained.

“You left the door open,” said Blair.

“Okay, but you’re not on the guest list.”

“Obviously! We’re never on the guest list!” Blair was yelling because she and Elliot were trying to be more vivacious, to channel their inner something, as they remembered Ms. Urwell saying (remembering more and more dimly).

“The guest list is very important, people. If John and Jane don’t get along, I can’t have John and Jane onboard at the same time. Or else someone will have to pay, and that someone is me.” He pointed at a spot on the brown plush floor—or maybe decades’ worth of stains, like

paint, had blended into coherent brown. A tear exposed the concrete below. “Exhibit A: Soraya’s nails.”

Elliot was variously pointing in the air and touching his lips, connecting dots. “I have trouble believing any of this,” he said. No way Chase Bourg had been the host of Bourg’s raucous, edgy, Viro-unaffiliated parties all along.

“Why’s that?” said Blair. Elliot hesitated. “Be honest...”

He wanted to say that Chase had always been a douchebag. Not the right kind of douchebag for the job, either—not the kind that one might want as a host, but a comedian, outwardly confident but dying for attention, very punchable.

Who could forget his desperation in their dry inter-familial meetings? He would walk into conversations that weren’t remotely his, pal around tugging at peoples’ shirt shoulders, and then sometimes, on days when he felt particularly unwanted, he made himself and his briefcase present by the wine bar. Every family had its trademark wine lugged to every meeting (for Bourg it was champagne, because “when all that’s asked of you is to watch o’er/a globe, O architect of your domain,/all waking hours for you are celebration,/and all your children celebrate the same”).

If Chase had approached the worn-out family wines with the intent of knocking them over and setting up his own brusque, party-man drinks, he would have been the right kind of douchebag. But he was the simpering kind. Inside his briefcase were innumerable shot glasses. He thumped these on the table and bellowed, “WHO WANTS TO GET *SHOTS*?” Everyone would look askance. Mia would leave, probably to hide her shame.



Actually, it was wrong to say Chase had never changed his style. One day he shouted “who wants to get shots” and a guard-servant tackled him to the ground. He had misheard. From then on, Chase instead shouted, “WHO WANTS *SHOTS*?”

Then there was his career success, which was ungodly.

“It’s as if you live a double life,” said Elliot. “You have one side nobody likes, and one side that’s just...astronomically popular.”

Chase grinned. “Yeah, s’all true. That’s life. Twists and turns. But you know what? Water under the bridge. In fact, fuck the guest list—you two should be my guests of honor.” He reached a hand out for Elliot to shake.

He shook. “Sure, um...what exactly for?”

“For taking your job?”

A few moments and that flash of recognition went across the couple’s faces. “Nobody took anything,” said Elliot, sparkling. “It was a reallocation of shared family resources and it was neither my decision nor yours. Oh, I mean—” thinking back to the hazy advice— “it should make me angry, but it won’t unless I dwell on it for a long, long time!” He added some misplaced laughter.

“Well, dudes, help me ease a guilty conscience by giving you a tour. HA!” Chase barked abruptly. “Just kidding, I have no conscience.” Chase was the public face of their entire organization. “Alright, jokes aside.” He opened the door and the music came full blast: “California Dreamin,’” like a dirge. Inside, leaning on wood-paneled walls and leather couches, was a crowd of the fabled hard partiers. They left much to be desired.

“So this is it,” said Blair.

“Yeah, man, and we got shots in the ki—”

“Everyone’s dead. They all look dead.”

Chase turned to the partiers. One shuffled in a circle and waved his arms in slow imitation of dance. The rest moved gradually like dripping matter down walls and couches and onto the carpet stains, where they curled up or stretched out.

“Oh. That’s because they all got shots. Drank themselves into a stupor. Hey, Radford.”

“Hello,” he said, shuffling about. “It’s not doing it for me tonight, Chase. I’m gonna collapse. And not in a good way.”

The rover rattled over another harsh bump, and everyone shook, flopped, and rolled. Radford landed against Chase’s shoulder; Chase propped him back up and gave him two hefty pats on the back.

“Stay strong, bud.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he said plaintively, circling anew. “Can’t I get some opportunities around here?”

“Sorry, dude, not tonight. There’s not enough.”

Elliot said, “Opportunities for what, for advancement?”

Now Radford saw him, and yelped, “Elliot! Get the hell outta here, get back to work!” He stamped closer and tried pitifully to slap him, but Chase held him off, Elliot standing calm.

“I *will* work, sir,” he muttered.

As Radford eased off and became like mold, settling onto a wall, Chase and the couple veered into the kitchen, where a bewildering selection of drinks decked the counter, from vintage wine to nostalgic, backyard beer cans. “Alcohol is gross, I don’t want any of this shit,” said Blair. She immediately blushed because she hadn’t said “shit” in a decade.

“I’ll take vodka,” said Elliot. “What do you recommend?”

“Well, we’ve got–”

“Wait,” said Blair. “Alcohol is a depressive substance. If you drink it, you’re only going to feel depressed. Or you’ll start telling everyone that you love them. Chase, do you have any speed?”

Chase guffawed. “HA! Y’all are rich. Of course we have other ‘substances,’” he said in his most nasally sarcastic voice with his largest-possible air-quotes. “People haven’t done ‘speed’ or ‘molly’ since the 90s, numbnuts.”

“Fine. Give us some moon rocks.”

“HA! That’s not a thing, Blair.”

Someone sober approached, knocking on the kitchen wall to signal his presence. He was unfamiliar to Blair and Elliot, only the ghost of a memory. His clothes were simple and carried a rank whiff of Mars dust. They guessed he was another family’s servant until Chase said, “This is Dr. Singh, lives in a lab by the village.” Chase extended his hand in a gimme-gimme gesture, and Dr. Singh obliged; he had brought sky-blue bay leaves in a plastic baggie.

“It’s called Blue Echo,” said the doctor.

Chase showed the bag off by dangling it by his fingers and shaking it. Excited, he said,

“Ladies and gentlemen, the cure.”

“You’re finding cures?” said Elliot, bewildered. “Well! Congratulations!”

“My mother died of cancer,” said Blair.

“What?” said Chase. “No! Who said anything about cancer? It’s a drug, dickbrains! Cure! Opps! Ring a bell?”

“Not at all.”

“Geez louise. You two better come with me to the opp room.”

“Not so fast,” said Dr. Singh with his hand out. Chase rolled his eyes, dug in his pocket, and handed him a baggie of metallic powder. Dr. Singh scrutinized it, squinted. “What is this, gold dust?”

“Yeah, check it, it’s authentic.”

Neither Elliot—who was starting to eye his watch and fret over work—nor Blair—who crossed her arms and put on a grumpy act—could any longer imagine this night coming to anything useful. No fights, no awkward hook-ups?

Chase showed them the opp room, a repurposed bedroom where a handful of Bourgs huddled around a table while giggling and snorting space cocaine. They were taking opportunity, one of Mars’ two great drugs.

“It’s an emergency! We need an opp intervention!” Chase shouted. “Pile up all the unused opps you’ve got.”

“Fuck off,” said Esther.

He shrugged to Blair and Elliot. “Well, dudes, I tried.”

“That’s no problem,” said Blair. “Cure us.”

“Oh, you don’t want that. Besides, we’re saving it for the concert.”

Now she was interested. (Now Elliot checked his watch.) “Will it be a wild and crazy concert?”

Chase hesitated. “No,” he said with a great sigh. “As epic as that would be, we can’t have craziness out in the open or the patriarchs will decide to notice.”

Then the rover hit a string of speed bumps, and the three fell against the walls and cabinets. People yowled as opps sprang from the table into their eyes. Elsewhere, in the rooms

that Chase had no time to show them—the five hookup rooms and the modest orgy room—participants suffered minor injuries.

“S almost time,” said Chase, almost casual. “Three bumps in a row means the entrance to Urbo Marsa. Have a look?”

They left the opp room and approached the front. Like a train operator, the rover driver was in a tiny room of her own. They saw her through a Plexiglas window that shuddered noisily with the rover’s every jolt. Ahead of the driver dimly seen was the night sky dimly seen. To get a better view, Chase brushed the corpse of Terrence-Wallace Bourg off of a side window. Blair and Elliot had rarely been outside of their dome so late. There were black silhouettes on the purple sky, cliffs and rock columns. A radio tower, unlit. Like a flash, a truck passed by, carting resources to somewhere.

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In its glory days, Urbo Marsa had been dense with skyscrapers, clustered, cluttered, each one fighting to reach higher, every tower all but hitting the dome’s peak. There had been, and there were still, parks and small side lanes, schools and libraries, unglamorous factories hidden by office buildings with endless, amazing windows. But the towers of the city had been knocked down. What the rover approached still easily spanned the horizon, and the entrances around the whole circumference were like gleaming jet studding an inset pearl. There will still towers, but they were only the bases of buildings, the highest among them half that of the dome. And though a few lights twinkled, the city would never again be thick with light—and actually, first-time visitors were surprised to see that countless leaves, not stars, dotted the towers. In daytime they were aesthetic panacea that poured over grey ruins with their brilliant green, but at night they

were dull lumps slowly coming into view, growth-like on black monoliths, with the result being that the longer one looked, the more unnatural it appeared.

Only a few of the city's gateways, the ones connected to the main road, were still operational. The rover drove up to the gate. Its spidery limbs, tipped with wheels, squealed to a halt. The driver laid eyes on the gateway's scanner. It came to life; laser light scanned her face and eyes. When it shut off, the gateway opened, its garage door loudly rumbling up.

Then it was a quick journey through darkness, a few inches through a tunnel, air jets pummeling as much dust as possible off the rover's hide, a dry car wash, and the door on the other side opened as the first one shut. There waited the Martian metropolis, still home to the active Universitatte, also home to the Urbo Marsa Beautification Project which had left its skyscrapers looking like children's building blocks under huge bundles of oregano. Some skyscrapers were repurposed as housing, newly lidded with black roofs. Some, not lidded at all, were holding huge trees whose leaves toppled over the edges of grey garden boxes.

The first thing to greet them was an illuminated billboard, not overgrown at all: "*Bonne Venonne al Urbo Nia—Arondissementte Bourganna.*" The Bourg District also welcomed them with a park area, one that was tolerably normal aside from the fantastical topiary. Twenty-foot unicorns darted around free-standing Greek columns, bush magicians, and geometric shapes. Weaving through them was a dirt path; the rover was expected to use this. The rover cut across a shortcut of dead grass, one of many. A servant in pajamas was trimming at a hoof when the rover heaved into view—he leaped away.

Beyond some imitation Greek statuary was a clearing facing a massive concert stage, with some grass nice, some dead and wearing away and providing a decent road for the rover to take. It came to a stop directly behind what seemed in the darkness to be a captive audience of

thousands standing at attention, even though the people on the stage weren't playing. The space RV scrunched back and forth as the driver fought with its controls, struggling to get it in the right gear. The audience never turned to see.

Finally the rover's strength and incorrigibility piddled away, its airlock opening and the end of its little staircase plopping on the ground. Precious few of the passengers emerged. They hunted for standing room.

Chase escorted Blair and Elliot to almost the front of the crowd. Those weren't people; they were robots in the shape of boxy, cheaply-made people. They were bolted to the ground. They were totally still because these models were not really designed to *move*, but to allow Earthlings on a budget to experience Martian concerts. Very occasionally they would pass a row where a single robot's head-screen was brightened by a face beamed from Earth. Attempting to see them, the head would turn a full ten degrees.

Clearly Chase was pumped. He chattered about this band Mortavort and their licks and tricks even as the band itself began with some announcements, and their talk merged, both parts becoming equally unimportant. Elliot whispered to Blair about the time—“if I don't go now, I'll be filing into the morning”—but Blair insisted that since they'd come this far, they ought to make it all the way.

She was interrupted by an ear-destroying growl, one that electrified them. The couple feared for their safety. Poor innocent dickbrains. That was no sound of danger—it came from the weathered, dark-pink throat of Mortavort's frontman, who looked equally like a cowboy and a hippie. Patter of drums, acoustic strumming, and wild, intermittent pelting of a keyboard were his backdrop. The active robot in their row said “woo!” and in one animatronic movement simulating human thrill his arms shot up.

Blair pointed to the stage and with an air of disgusted suspicion yelled, “Who’s that guy, Chase?”

“The one in front? That’s Gilth!”

“No! The one on the right!”

“Oh! That’s Pilth!”

“The one with the dreadlocks?”

“Yes!”

“How is he?”

“I dunno! This is, like, world music, I don’t pretend to understand it!”

“No, I mean morally! He has dreadlocks, even though—” Gilth unleashed more discordant, Germanic-sounding cries and she shivered— “even though he’s white?”

“You’re right! I noticed that!” Elliot wailed.

“He’s from the village!” said Chase. “It’s different!”

All of the instruments stopped abruptly as Gilth said, “Music with a message!” Then all of the instruments resumed abruptly. It was the opposite of a thunderbolt.

Chase shouted wittily, “I understood *that* word, amigos!”

But no eyes were on him. Blair and Elliot were holding an unwieldy conversation by whispering back and forth in each other’s ears. When Chase noticed this, he made a good joke about tonguing earholes.

Then, having decided, they drew apart, and Blair said, just barely audible to Chase, “Well, you go home. I’ll wait for things to get wild.”

“That sounds good.”

“But watch this first.”



“It won’t work, but okay.”

There was another interruption— “Music with a message, people!” —and tedious resumption.

Blair, quickly and with the fluid poise of a dancer, fell backward onto Chase, grabbed him by the head, and mashed her lips against his cheek. Elliot watched stoically. He began to breathe deeply and flare his nostrils, but looked just as placid as before. It was as if he had read a self-help book on how to be angry.

Meanwhile, Chase was close to seething. He shoved Blair off and roared, “What the fuck!” But Blair smiled, ready to play the coquette. And Elliot hurried away, anxious about work.

## Chapter 5: The Night

An event foreseen, oddly, by no one: Elliot needed a ride home. Before he realized that he should call Biff, he wandered Urbo Marsa's Bourg district, frustrated but nursing idle thoughts. Where in these servant quarters did Biff live? With eyes alone, there was no way to tell. Under spring-green leaves, in the burning bright glow of the occasional white streetlamp, the buildings were still nothing but windows on boxes.

He found himself in an alleyway that was snowing. Elliot looked up. On the corners of the buildings on either side of him, where gutters would be, were fans churning out powder with a whir.

Ahead he could see the main building of L'Universitatte, which was a black turtle shell with doorways like studs—nearly the old Urbo Marsa in miniature. It dawned on him as he stared at the place that he'd had no business going so deep into Urbo. Why all this? Public transportation was dead—was he looking for a bus?

Turning back through the alley of snow, he called Biff, who was at home and, initially, asleep. Yes, the kids were asleep, but he was no kid. He even had the gall to yawn into the receiver. He asked Biff to pick him up and, for a time, walking through Urbo's quiet streets, resented him. He passed graffiti that the foliage tried in vain to hide, and late-night gardeners who seemed to avoid acknowledging him on purpose.

Then he was in the SUV trundling across the dirt of the wild. A few more trucks, their sides advertising food from Earth and Mars alike, passed on their left, and Biff kept his eyes ahead, made no attempt at small talk. Elliot, his head on his hand and one elbow against the passenger window, the road straight and flat besides wide curves that swooped into estates, could not help thinking of road trip movies in the deserts of Nevada. Suddenly he felt like he'd missed

out on his youth, the summer of his life that could have been not just easy, but free-wheeling. He was never interested in it before. All he'd ever wanted was to be secure.

The face scanner of the Bourg dome recognized Biff's face and let them in. The gateway, newly replaced and well-oiled, flitted open. Lights popped on and an automated recording of Viro's voice said, "*Bonanne noctonne.*" Elliot had learned the language of Mars in his final, tumultuous, happy months on Earth. He'd developed a beautiful signature and learned to write with a fountain pen. He'd read all of Shakespeare's plays and pleased Viro exceptionally. He had so many impressive skills.

There was the neighborhood. Behind a low-standing billboard that simply read "BOURG" stood the Bourg parks, Bourg statuary, and most importantly to earthbound investors, a panoply of new-age classical statuary like that in Urbo, only three times as great, massive, and cluttered. The SUV passed right under a modern take on the Arc de Triomphe, the carvings on which retold the wonderful origin story of the fourteen families of Mars. It reframed a series of quasi-legal land acquisitions as the tasks of Hercules, including a strapping Viro with the Nemean Lion.

Biff took Elliot around the dome's edge, down the empty circle road. There was almost no point to the street lamps—everybody was out at a shindig or home in bed. Perhaps, though, an employee who talked directly to Earth companies, someone as inert and gullible as he was, remained awake in the office complex across from the *gallierie*. Their body would go hollow as machines beamed their senses away. But that person wouldn't truly be awake either.

The SUV was allowed into the dwelling of its proper nuclear family. It pulled into the butter-churning tower which was the garage and shed, with walls nearly as empty as on the day Blair

and Elliot were granted it. Shoe scuffs and hanging gardening tools marked Biff's corner, but even here there were no touches to make it like home.

Biff got out, opened the door for Elliot, and curtly said, "Well, good night." Then he walked around to his own car, pulled out of the garage, and it was just Elliot. Then Elliot left the butter-churning tower, since it was detached from the house, and tonight he was peculiarly sensitive to how inconvenient this was.

Once inside the castle, Elliot hung his coat in the closer and went to the stairs, so fast that his eyes had no time to adjust to the darkness.

The suburbs of the estates *marsannai* were dark compared with most on Earth. In homes the difference was especially striking; there were so few lamps and headlights bouncing their light in that sometimes the only illumination really was from the moons. If nothing else, the nights were calm. Elliot emerged in the septuplets' room. Gentle light from a couple of moons streamed in from a wide window. It thoughtfully covered each head just the same. His daughters were sleeping flat on their backs, on pillows hardly thicker than blankets.

He remembered a night years ago (they were three) when he had come home late and decided to kiss them goodnight, to tap their foreheads, just to forge a tender moment for himself. So he had planned to go along the row, starting with Tammy. He leaned and kissed as lightly as possible, but when he withdrew, he saw Tammy's eyes ratchet open. She stared at him. She had a glassy look, as if she were a doll that only happened to be looking his way. The moonlight gave her a special glaze.

His heart raced in panic. He backed away and whispered, "Sorry. Go back to sleep." Tammy obeyed and her eyes slowly closed. He checked to make sure that he hadn't awakened the other children, that they weren't staring too. He didn't kiss them and he closed the door.

And tonight? Elliot was not enough of an experimenter to kiss Rosie and jot down the results. Even if he did so, there was a chance that she would recommence her demonstration of the wonders of Earth.

So he went back to work.

Simultaneously, a desert expanse away, Blair was having a time. A good time? A bad time? She would do a poor job of explaining it over the phone.

The concert had led to a backstage smoke session where she, Chase, and the indelible band sat cross-legged in a circle of community. It started as a heated political discussion of affairs on Earth. This was strange to Blair because she knew that remarkably few Martian villagers ever traveled to Earth, feeling that it had been desecrated. Then the topic was philosophy. Or was it mythology? When had they raised the subject of summoning the interior spirit of Mars? The details, naturally, flew right over her head.

They passed hand-rolled cigs, smoked, and marveled at their shared hallucination of a Martian emissary or of the Martian god who himself was Mars. That is, the band and Chase marveled at it. While the band debated with their miraculous image of the divine and while Chase leaned back on his palms, his face glittering, Blair fell into a totally different hallucination of rings like comets around Saturn, but swirling behind the cross-legged group, a comet ring of people who glowed and walked with their arms like the photo of Bigfoot, and she came to realize that they were her children cloned infinitely, striding in a circle. She wondered if they were staring at her or just looking ahead, and she couldn't tell because they were all bleeding into each other like each other's afterimages. An indistinct voice, not theirs, arose, a voice of fury, someone criticizing her for her parenting choices. It was nothing new because she so often criticized herself, but because she had no clue where it came from, she sat terrified.

But that was hours ago at this point.

“Everyone’s just smoking together,” she said.

It was 4 AM. Elliot’s phone, on speaker, sat on the corner of the home office desk. The desktop computer with all its files glowed over his face. He listened sagely to Blair’s ramble with his eyes closed.

“You’re high,” he said.

“Oh,” she said heavily, sarcastically. Behind her was conversation and hissing smoke.

“Well, thanks for calling. I’m still lucid.”

Elliot did not find this call very enlightening. Worse, he couldn’t decide what was the most responsible action for him to take, or advice to give. “Don’t drive yourself back,” he said. “But don’t...don’t let a stranger drive you back.” He paused for a long time. “Do you know where you are?”

“Yeah. We dropped ourselves off somewhere in L’Universitatte. It’s raining.”

“That’s good.”

*I will call back in one hour*, he said to himself. Twenty minutes later he had tumbled across his keyboard.

Everything hovering on the screen, inventories, records from three years back that had yet to be organized but would do nothing but take up file space once all was said and done—it had never been any part of his field. Face-to-face interaction plus occasional videos for the Bourg online channel, and for prospective companies, and for the odd outsider news outlet that really cared that much, used to be his main gig. Pimping the brand. And without his efforts, that pavilion in New Zealand, the downtown of a new urban project in the Northwest Territories, innumerable specks across the Earth, would have gone to the competition.

Once or twice a year, when he still had the spokesman position, he would even set foot on Earth, descending in the flesh with Viro as his right-hand man. This always put him in the easy mood of the most special, the most trusted child. At other times Viro would go down alone, on business or just on winter vacation to a cabin in the Alps.

On Mars he simply took to the castle and locked himself away. Meantime Elliot would divide his time between the home office and the complex they called the *officeille*. More often than not he would take the elevator past the cubicles and spend time in the press room, where it was only him, servants, scripts, and the work to be done.

How stunned he was when the elevator doors opened and nobody was there, save Viro, waiting for him on the white background of the film set with a lit cigar in hand. The kids were three, and Elliot was brimming with good cheer.

Viro had an announcement. Elliot knew there was an impressive gala in Morocco coming up; he had never been so impudent as to guess that Viro would bring him as a guest.

The moment Elliot stepped out of the elevator, he knelt as to a king. He said, “I thank you, Father, more than words can say.”

Viro did not respond immediately. He exhaled some smoke and said, “Is that all you have to tell me?”

“Yes.”

A big smile cracked up on Viro’s face. He reached out a finger and waggled it saying, “That’s a couplet! This is a man after my own heart!” Elliot laughed along, proud to be relaxed—feeling that years of preparation had been meant, in fact, to relax him in times of ingratiation. “We’ll do Lear sometime, eh? We ought to do Lear sometime.”

“King Lear?” echoed a voice from the stairwell. All of a sudden there was Chase, walking in with his arms swinging with an exaggerated ‘casual’ affectation. He had no business being here, since all his work was in the cubicles. “My kid’s doing Shakespeare.”

“What?” cried Viro, as if performing without his consent were highly illegal.

“Yeah. He’s going to acting camp. I just submitted the approval form,” he added, because performing Shakespeare without Viro’s consent really was illegal.

Viro put a hand to his chin. Elliot rose and began to tense. Viro asked himself, chin-stroking, “Have I seen that proposal yet?” Then he said louder, “Chase, how is your domestic life?”

Chase dropped the supercasual act. “Our family is doing well, Father,” he said with a faint smile. “Otis is starting to get a little rowdy. Mia and I figured he’d do better in the Sendolorre acting class than our little league soccer program. Less heads to smash.”

“Is it that bad?” said Viro playfully. “Ah, the rebellious kindergarten years!”

Chase simply shrugged.

Viro tilted toward Elliot, gestured with his free hand for him to get up. Elliot stood. “Join the conversation, man,” said Viro. “Come. What have you been up to?”

“Nothing much,” said Elliot. Apparently this perfect line of iambic pentameter was less funny than the last. “We’re nursing a few colds at home. Other than that...life goes on.”

“Ah,” said Viro a little too fast. “Elliot, don’t come with us to Morocco.”

Elliot stared. As the news and its fuller ramifications dawned on them all, Chase lit up, clapped his hands, and bowed before Viro many times, pouring out words of thanks and adoration, and Elliot stared. He would not be out of the game until the first day of preschool



when Blair put the girls in identical dresses. He would be culled from the planet if he sank a single inch lower.

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When he woke up, the sun was much brighter than the screen and it saturated the room. Dried drool had connected his powder-blue shirt cuff to his face. He wiped himself off roughly, and the massive stream of 'd's he'd been typing through the night finally stopped.

Elliot took a brief look at the garden. From the home office he could see the rearing unicorn topiary, how its blunt horn seemed to sparkle at the tip from this angle. What's more, he could see Biff crouching nearby, clipping at a pegasus in mid-trot. Seeing Biff hard at work in the daytime and without supervision stirred in Elliot a mild feeling of friendship. Maybe Biff really was in his corner; maybe they really could take a trip across Mars and be each other's Silent Bob. And the unicorn was nice. Any Bourgs without unicorn topiary were automatically submitted to the annual culling.

Drowsiness soon fell away, and Elliot strode into the kitchen. He had slept so long and late that already seven emptied pink bowls, with their pink spoons and trickles of milk, sat in a honeycomb cluster on the counter. The daughters, sure enough, were doing their duty of sustaining themselves.

Elliot dumped the bowls into the dishwasher. He wondered if the dishes could do with a small change. Opening the cabinets above the sink and counter revealed seas of pink: pink glassware, pink ceramics, the swirly pink china that was too good use. On every cabinet door was a color dial that he could set to anything in a pale rainbow. He clicked every dial from pink to yellow, and accordingly the dishes shifted as from sunset to day. He hoped this would be a

symbolic portent of the change he could make possible in his own life, once the tedium was out of the way and he could really think.

He went to the foot of the staircase. He could not hear a sound of the septuplets' play even if he were a stethoscope and they were a huge beating heart.

He watched them from the playroom door. Unadorned with hair clips and unmarked on the pad, they no longer had names—only he as happy to see Rosie, clearly Rosie, in the corner with a pencil in one hand and kneeling by a big sheet of manila paper. Blair would be pleased to know she'd moved on from paint, but not pleased enough; hopefully a bigger change was soon to come. He moved in.

“What'cha drawing there?” he said, stooping next to her. Only on the floor did he notice that she had drawn nothing.

“Nothing,” she said. She had turned her face to a part of the floor between him and the paper, as if needing to devote the same attention to both.

“What are you thinking of drawing?”

She didn't respond.

Elliot pointed to his own face, and he felt honest cheer rising in him. “How about me?” he said.

He did not finish the word “me” before Rosie set to work drawing the big simple loop that was his head, using her whole arm and drawing wide like she was a compass. Rosie had turned her full attention to the paper. As she worked, adding hair, face, she changed positions to bend closer, much closer, to her art. Soon her hair trailed onto it, and her hair moving was like Spanish moss waving as she shifted to and fro above her paper. Elliot watched, and all the other girls went silently about their empty play.

In that moment he was so caught up in simple happiness that he wasn't thinking of anything at all—until reflection and self-awareness hit him and he sat surprised at himself. Work and worries came back to him in a heavy wave. As Rosie sketched the noodle hair, he asked himself how these girls would be living at thirty, and what kind of a dull lavender life this nuclear family would be leading before they got to it.

He didn't say to himself, "I'm satisfied that Rosie's getting something out of art. Moreover, I'm simply glad that my children are here in this moment, and that they have their health." That kind of concrete positivity would have been nice in hindsight. Unmoving in his meditation, Elliot watched Rosie work. He watched until a searing flash obstructed his vision, wiping Rosie, and everyone else, from his vision and even from existence.

A crash of glass, a click, and then this flash had just flooded the room.

There should have been footprints, but Elliot would find none.

The effects of the flash bomb seemed to fade in an instant. In reality, they had dazzled Elliot's senses for over a minute, and in that time the children were taken or had disappeared. The window had been broken and then shoved open. He came sluggishly to his feet and ran to it, his shoes stopping on tiles of glass.

Leaning over the windowsill, he could see the same old street—empty—and the same wild leafy horses. He wished he could lean far enough to view the castle wall stretching below him, see if any evidence was running down the side.

A bush rustled. He spotted it, only to find Biff rising from it, empty-handed, looking all around, confused.

Nervously Elliot called down to him. "Are you alright? What happened?"

"I don't know, sir," he said.

Elliot turned away and believed him. Elliot rubbed his eyes hard; he felt a migraine coming on. He looked around at the dust, his confederates. “Well,” he said to the dust, “Blair will probably be relieved.” He wondered if Blair could be suspect number one.

Immediately he called her up and was met with the Bourg operator. A canned sound of windchimes proceeded him. “Good afternoon, this is the number of Mrs. Blair Bourg, unfortunately she is unavailable right now, can I take a message?”

“Hi, Fletcher. Can you reroute me to Chase?”

“Sure, Elliot. Here he is.”

A doorbell sound played, and then there was Chase’s voice fizzing out from the other side. A whole new planet with telephone systems built from scratch, from literal space-age technology, yet the call quality was just the same as on Earth: voices of static through a metal pipe.

“What’s up? Oh! Your wife. Yeah. Blair is okay, she’s just a little conked out...”

“What does that mean? Is she sleeping?”

“No!”

There are a few shuffling sounds. “No,” said Blair as she took the line. “Hey, Elliot. Chase and I are just in the commune. Sorry...I forgot to turn my phone back on.” Chase muttered something to her. “Oh. I guess it’s technically not a commune. It’s just that village of hippies.”

“You need to come home,” he said. “It’s about the kids.”

“...Well, how urgent is it?”

Urgency? What a strange way to think of a kidnapping by unknown people and with unknowable stakes. For all Elliot knew, their daughters might have dissolved magically into a

timeless expanse. "I guess it's...not time-sensitive," he conceded. After all, in all likelihood there was nothing she could do about it.

"That's good. They tell me this is the day of an important town hall, so I want to stay until evening. Chase says he can drive me back. Is that alright? Are you fuming with jealous rage?"

He was silent for longer than appropriate. Now he was sitting against the wall, knees partway up. Instead of anger or sorrow, there was an emerging awareness of disappointment in Blair, of in this moment not liking who she was as a person. For which he chastised himself. Surely Blair wasn't a stupid woman. Elliot was the one being vague.

"Are they sick?"

"Yes. Biff is watching them," said Elliot, allowing the lie to grow. "I'll explain it when you get here. ...Actually, let me meet you myself."

"Okay. That might be fun."

Chase's laughter came in amorphous globs.

After hanging up, Elliot wavered. He wondered who had the motivation to spirit their children away. It could have been Biff, or Viro... Perhaps Kim thought she could do a better job raising them, and perhaps she would be right.

Then he lingered on *how* it happened and began to pace. A flash bomb had crashed through the window and knocked them out with that blaze of light. Then the girls had been collected. If technology had advanced to the point that the culprit or culprits could simply 'delete' their tracks, why, he'd eat his hat.

He imagined Blair next to him by the door saying wistfully, "Maybe they became the light itself." Which made no sense because light came into rooms, it didn't leap out. Now,

becoming the dust itself—that was another story, a conviction which Elliot held onto unconsciously and which was the real reason the sight of the broken window bothered him so much. He served this hope when he exited the room by as small a sliver in the door as possible and sealed it carefully behind him. If the septuplets had been transmogrified into light, that would be aesthetically pleasing, sure, but being dust was the best of all possible fates: Elliot could live on believing that his children were safe drifting in their room and would live out existences of the kind natural for dust, and Blair would never have to see them again.

He called the police.

## Chapter 6: The Village

The houses in Mars' only inhabited village seemed to be caked in bird shit. They were more than chalk-white; to be more precise, it was as if each house, over its brick foundation, first had been hit with graffiti, then doused in silly string and egg yolk before that final crust of bird shit, plaster, and papier-mache.

It looked like ancient kids had had their way with them long ago—millennia ago. One could also contextualize it as a mutant Martian mold overtaking the place. The people of the village had a religious justification for it. The gaudier the house, they said, the more likely it was to draw the eyes of Mars. So essentially the facades were a design choice. Besides, the time for Martian plagues had long passed. Elliot knew that in the pioneer days, a couple of pathogens escaped the confines of a lab within one of the village's domes, not Gaudy House but another village. The stuff swamped the place, and killed half the people. Fifty years later and they had certainly entered the age of high security. And that other village with the pathogens had ended up empty anyway.

Elliot was glad to be having these thoughts, rather than mental meanders about the dangerous predicament his children were in, as his car glided along a startlingly fresh asphalt road. In between worries about the kids and musings on Gaudy House was a catastrophic gulf: the idea of magic. He avoided this too, but he would stumble in now and then. Gaudy House made a quaint impression, but as he understood it was a spiritual, dippy place, and Charles Manson was a dippy man.

But for now he was parking, and scanning his front-window view of the village for hints of his wife. Uniquely, Gaudy House allowed for wide open spaces, so its homes were interrupted

by scrubby desert and even—to supplement the greenhouses—farmland. He saw a visitor's center nestled in wiry trees.

A knock, and a cheerful face, materialized in the car window. This spooked Elliot. He rolled down the window, refusing to step out and put himself right where the overfriendly neighbor wanted him. Fans of his eclectic-prophetic rock group Mortavort knew him as a smoky-voiced singer who mingled Esperanto, English, Farsi, and words 'from beyond' to deliver socially conscious messages with amazing power and relevance to Mortavort and Mortavort only. Elliot knew that he had brochures. "I'm Gilth the Nea," he said, "but you can call me Gilth."

"Ah, I remember you. Great free concert." Confused, he started to dig in his pocket for a tip.

"Here to watch the town hall, right?"

"No," said Elliot, "I'm just looking for someone."

"Well, we could always use another voice in Town Hall," he said unflappably. "Here, read this—" and he passed a brochure through the window hole. He did it so quickly and without warning that it fell to the minivan floor. Elliot didn't flap either.

"But sir," he said, "I'm not going to read that."

"There's a map on the back," Gilth added. Then he grinned wider, briefly, before leaving Elliot alone. Once the coast was clear, Elliot stepped out with brochure in hand.

Quite a few cars were parked in the same lot. They were all white Wayforths, sold by Wayforth to all the corporate families, more or less indistinguishable. Elliot saw one of the Roujas leave her car at the same time as he did, but moved away quickly—no point to conversation.



Rocks, moist soil, dead plant matter splaying out, and drooping white flowers pockmarked the terrain, which was already parched and cracking. The only differences between the earth and the footpath were indentations worn by travel and a slight difference in dirt color. Elliot hadn't needed to watch his feet in years. He passed the visitor's center to make for the center of town.

Close to the visitor's center was not a gift shop at all, but an authentic bazaar selling artisanal goods primarily to outsiders. There were sellers at tables under tarps and sellers sitting on rugs. There were corporate people who had dressed for the location by donning shiny scaly gowns with the stripes of monitor lizards and gila monsters. Some of the products were crude, hardly better than rocks; in fact, they actually were just uncarved rocks. Others were fine, like the one shopkeeper's crowd of Ares statues standing proud.

Elliot spotted Kim Sendolorre with a couple of camera people crouching and adjusting their lenses. They twisted them back and forth, over and over, to capture a textile merchant's expression as she stared into the distance. Was she stern, or mournful? What the look would signify was to be determined in post-production. Kim was looking shrewd. Never before had Elliot seen her in the mood of an auteur.

She turned—but Elliot was gone, speed-walking between the stalls.

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“I am not merely a celebrity on both sides of the cosmos,” said Gilth, who was wearing an unbecoming crimson toga and sash. He stood on the Town Hall's soapbox-size stage and its twig-thin podium. “If you don't know me, check out the albums—Mortavort—vinyl or digital—it's all about the message.” He kissed his knuckle before hoisting it up and out, a gesture associated with his band, if you didn't know.

Someone in the crowd did the same and yelled, “Woo!” The crowd was suffocating, almost literally. Elliot could barely see the fan’s fist pump, and he was constantly straining himself to rise above the crowd, twist and pivot, searching for Blair.

This is not about sacred land,” said Gilth, “for as we all know, the entirety of Mars’ land is sacred.”

“We gave an inch,” said a man next to Elliot who hung his head.

“Rather, it is about keeping the peace, and kneeling before you as lambs.” He crossed his arms. “To put it into terms that you might understand, it’s about keeping what’s ours.” He pointed down to someone specific and said, “Don’t tread on us!”

A good amount of people clapped as he jogged offstage and melded with the crowd. Elliot imagined him grabbing triumphant high-fives through a whole tunnel of people.

The man Gilth had pointed to scaled the soapbox. He wore a laminated suit and a back-in-vogue bowtie. Elliot recognized him as Clyde Urwell, the bald, baby-smooth patriarch of the planet’s mining operation. “That’s a low blow,” he said with a chuckle. “We’ve made agreements with you every step of the way, something we have *never* had any obligation to do. We are digging *twelve kilometers away from you*. So what’s the problem? That’s not your land, it’s not any particular holy site, and the U.N. —which should always be our ultimate arbiter,” he said with a cautious up-pointing finger—“has given us the all-clear, with no appeals. *We are just a business*,” he said with his hands out. “Any of you who want to misconstrue this as a power struggle, you’re sorely mistaken.” A rumble of talk began in the crowd. “Either you keep the deals you’ve made,” he added with a raised voice, “or we clear out and continue with our operation, without you.” He marched down the steps.

“You can keep your jewels,” shouted Gilth, and in that moment ten or twenty artisanal craftspeople wanted to leap on him and clamp his mouth shut.

Then another figure emerged, one in a dress so ostentatious it was a wonder Elliot hadn’t noticed her sooner. Now, as she treaded up the stairs in a long plum train, he goggled. It was Candy Urwell in a cascade of silk, wearing a ruffled collar that suited her like a cone did a dog. Yet she bore it regally.

“People,” she said into the mic, her voice soft but with every sentence rising. The people continued to grumble, but she was undeterred. “You all have heard Urwell’s position, and it is not budging. But I, like you, recognize Mars as both our protector and our child to cultivate with truth and light. You settled here to escape Earth’s ills, not to reproduce them! That’s why,” she said, raising her chin and arms, “I have decided that I can’t abide it any longer!”

The talk quieted.

Candy was still. During this weird and uncomfortable silence, two no-name villagers scurried onto the stage, grabbed Candy’s dress on either side, lifted, and yanked it off in a flourish of swirling fabric. There was a collective gasp. Underneath were a plum toga and sash. The two Gaudies let her dress drop and leaped acrobatically out of sight as Candy reclaimed the mic.

“From now on, I am Ms. Candy Out-of-Urwell! I will walk where you walk, and commune with Mars even in your own shrine.”

Clapping started, then nearly filled the house, and Ms. Out-of-Urwell showed off a broad smile that amazed Elliot. All of this clapping to him seemed totally uncalled for—naive at best—but, he figured, who was he to judge? It wasn’t his affair. It wasn’t as if he kept up with the news anymore, not on Earth and not on his own doorstep.

Soon villagers were shaking Ms. Out-of-Urwell's hand and servants were snapping cameras. The town hall was spontaneously adjourned, in a wave of enthusiasm that Elliot would have refused to understand even if the flashing weren't agitating his migraine. He left, haltingly, moving with a chunk of people that went slowly, slowly, out the door.

Elliot eventually left Town Hall behind him. When he exited, it seemed to shrink. How could so many people have fit in that house-sized sauna?

He was ready to agonize over the thought of picking through this ever-shifting crowd when Blair took him by the arm. They hurried off together. "Hey, honey, what's the matter," she said none too convincingly. To be fair, she was exhausted, no doubt, so given the circumstances how well could one expect her to perform?

"I'll tell you when we're in the car. I have a headache." There was a yell from the heart of Gaudy House; it sounded like Candy's voice. "Did Candy leave before us? I didn't even notice."

"What did you think of that?"

"I didn't," he said, himself weary.

Just the idea of thinking anymore today was starting to get on his nerves, and the higher his nerves mounted, the more he hated it when he bumped into members of the dispersing crowd, however briefly. He had hoped they could cut across the town square, but the town square was nearly packed—and Candy was so close to them and extending invitations. Before Elliot could turn Blair and himself back, Ms. Candy Out-of-Urwell had Blair's hands clasped in her own, for all intents and purposes trapping them both.

“Well, if it isn’t you two,” she said as the villagers behind her turned to talk amongst themselves. Behind Blair and Elliot loomed shitty houses. “Are you looking for the shrine? You both look worn out.”

“It’s just lack of sleep,” Blair said lightly.

“Are you sure it couldn’t be a burden on your spirits?”

“You’ve never been one to talk about spirits.”

“I don’t mean literally. You might relieve some stress if you go down to the inner sanctum and make confession.”

That word ‘confession’ nearly made Elliot seize up. It was the exact wrong word for the moment, and it gave him an idea that she may have been a kidnapper or a witch. “There’s nothing to confess,” he said.

“It’s a catch-all term. Confession can be a prayer, a song, a life lesson, anything that’s on your mind. You just open your heart to Mars. You don’t have to believe that Mars is listening to do it. It need not impinge on your existing religious beliefs at all.”

“What if I’m atheist?” said Blair.

“Then you can say it’s a big rock,” Candy offered, “instead of a big rock with a soul.”

Blair smiled, acknowledging the wit.

At last Elliot said, “We really need to go. We can continue this talk at our next appointment.”

“Right,” said Candy with something like a curtsy. She waved, said goodbye, and jubilantly rejoined the crowd.

They turned away from the town square, followed the map to another foot path—Elliot was greatly relieved—far less people in their way. They reached the parking lot in sunset. Elliot

saw the rose light coating the cars; he called it ‘rose’ in his mind and felt a weak wave of despair. He was about to open the passenger door for Blair when his phone buzzed. He took it, nodding along. “Yes. ...Yes. ...Absolutely. ...Right away.”

Blair patiently waited, looking nowhere in particular. Elliot took longer than usual to explain the call. The time for truth had come just a touch too soon.

“We’re not going straight home,” he said. “We’re wanted at the police station.”

“They died,” said Blair automatically.

He knew she was saying that because she had jumped to the conclusion, because she thought she was ahead of the game, and also because she thought that both of them were beyond pain of any kind when it came to their girls. Yes, it was fine to *think* those words, but why would she *say* them?

At any rate, he was proud of himself for not immediately assuming that she, like Candy, had also been given demonic powers by the Cult of Mars.

“Or they’re...food poisoned?” she revised.

“No. It’s a kidnapping.”

“Oh.” She looked away, over her shoulder, at the sunlit houses. An artificial wind blew over the terrain and roused a curl of sand. Elliot asked if she wanted to smoke and she declined.

## Chapter 7: Back Home

Blair was dried out, as she had been since the party drew to a close and as she would be for days and days after that.

A brief and straightforward interrogation took place at the D'Attenne estate, where the castles on the circumference were chrome. Buried deep in the dome, behind handsome shrubbery and the police station that resembled a rest stop, was a prison which, it was boasted, had barely reached ten percent capacity. Vigilant hawks stood on free-standing turquoise pillars. They were only statues, though. Walking under the pillar and into the station, Blair noticed with amazement that none of the hawks moved. Apparently the drugs of the future had no side effects or hallucinatory aftershocks. People who dropped acid in the sixties died believing they were apples.

She learned all about the crime from her husband and was very aware of her own straight face. She feared that the D'Attennes would find her vindictive enough to do it.

The police family combed Blair and Elliot's castle for three afternoons, each time for three hours, seeming to amble about with phone-shaped devices in their hands. They would wander about, but then suddenly one would drop down into a squat or pause to take a curtain's edge in hand, to prove to the two dreary onlookers that they knew what they were on about. Then the officer stuck whatever object had grabbed their interest with what looked like a box cutter extending from their phone. The DNA sample was added to a digital library cataloguing all that constituted or could reliably be connected to septuplets' skin, their dust, and their clothes. Blair and Elliot, for purposes of answering the officers' questions, sat at the tea table doing absolutely nothing else. When they received questions, they were rare, and weird ones like "did they ever

touch the curtains.” Questions that for most children would be “yes” or “maybe,” but for the septuplets they had no relevance.

After that period began the search. The D’Attennes would go out in no particular hurry, surmounting their neighbors’ walls, carrying electric blue lanterns. These were called *dnailloi*, which meant “DNA tool” and was a word that refused to be beautified. An officer stood in place holding a *dnaille*, press the button on the handle, and in seconds a great idea flashed blue. As the light faded slowly into ether, the officer took twenty paces to torch the next place.

Blair watched one leave from one of her home’s high parapets. No shuttle to summer camp for them. The day for it had come and gone. She wished one of the officers, just one, were hungry to get to the bottom of this crime; they could use some variety around here. Procedure was so slow. She really had a hankering for a chief with waving fists saying he needed those samples stat. At least they had cleared out of the domicile. When she first laid eyes on her future home, she had loved the idea of inviting a crowd over for sophisticated, wine-and-deviled-eggs types of parties, but it never came to pass, so the investigation with its uninvited guests had a special stink to it. Elliot was standing beside her.

“I have to say,” said Blair, “I really do think the kids are dead.”

“While it bothers me that you didn’t say ‘our kids,’” Elliot replied, “I do have to admit it’s been a few days.”

“Here’s what I propose,” she began to propose. “After an appropriate period of time, we hold a candlelight vigil. I was looking at the *dnailloinne* and thinking how that would be a beautiful representation of their souls ascending to heaven, if you believe in that.”

“Would there be seven candles?”

“No, there’s a candle for evert person who decides to come.”



Elliot looked away.

“Is that morbid? I don’t have that much to think about all day, Elliot.”

Entertainment options in the house were limited; while TV and Internet theoretically offered limitless thrills, the couple was limited to an hour a day. They did own a cozy reading room, however, its cabinets crammed with deep red, stitched-cover classics. Blair pulled a book from these cabinets one day and discovered that inside it was all blank.

“Wait,” she thought aloud. “Now that the investigation’s out of our house and the—*our* kids are probably dead...I can travel the world.”

“Given infinite resources,” said Elliot, “where would you go?”

Sometimes in movies, a character will ask a question in one scene and the other character will respond in the next scene, and this next scene will happen at a dramatically different time and location, implying that the two said nothing at all for hours even while going about their adventure or everyday life. That’s just what happened between Blair and Elliot, and between that afternoon at the parapet and that evening in the dining room. Here, at the parapet, Blair just stared about, looking as if she’d forgotten the question already. Elliot looked at her with a bit of a sigh and went back downstairs, and Blair would follow eventually.

Later, Blair and Elliot agreed to adjust the tablecloth in the dining room. Nine sets of yellow plates, cups, and cutlery were all set on a rug. The tablecloth’s edges were being shifted meticulously and measured with metal rulers.

“I guess I would like to go to the Amazon rainforest,” she said, “or some other place with a lot of biodiversity.”

“Just any of them?”

“I’m not picky.”

“I didn’t think you were still into plants.”

Mars had sapped her interest. “Me neither.”

The agriculture and wildlife of the planet were heavily modified and strictly monitored. Even the most outwardly ordinary tree was, genetically, a far cry from one on Earth that looked alike, because it needed to get along with local bacteria and without needing any symbiotic relationships with Earthly animals to survive. And there were very few animals on Mars to replace those same relationships; there had never been squirrels or birds that ‘worked.’ There were only worms, insects, and other such creatures hard to love, with ingeniously modified DNA that compelled them to stay in the gardens. Had Blair been on Earth with seven vacuous children and no job, she at least would have gotten a dog.

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Ms. Out-of-Urwell had requested that for their latest session they go into the Martian wild, in full astronaut regalia. Their copper suits were almost sleek. Given a decade of continual advancement in fashion, they could even walk down a runway. The three of them strolled down a road, and the sound of the occasional car and truck sizzled in their earpieces just after the wind of them hit their bodies. Beyond the street, they could clearly see domes and, farther back, incredible stone columns, the work of the wild.

“Let’s talk about you two,” said Candy. “Is there any dysfunction between you today?”

“We tried to engineer some dysfunction,” said Elliot, “but it mostly didn’t work.”

Blair said, “Mostly?”

“Well, what do you think?”

“It didn’t work at all. We’ve just been quiet lately. Which is natural after a tragedy.” And was possibly their natural state, all other factors being removed.

“That’s good. It means we can still function as a couple, because I didn’t make it obvious that I...don’t like you anymore.”

“Hm!” went Candy.

Blair felt pressure to opine, but, as Elliot had implied, if there was no noticeable change in how they interacted, then functionally there was no difference. Should she have cared? “You hid it surprisingly well,” she said.

I didn’t try,” he said.

“Well, this is no good,” said Candy.

“I think we’re pretty okay with it.”

“But as your family counselor, I can’t just let that stand! Frankly, I think it’s time for you to go on vacation.”

“But that would be suspicious.”

“Okay—trips. Trips around Mars. Tell the news guys that you needed space, and time alone, in this time of trial.” She spread her arms to indicate the limitless space, dead, of Mars. “And it can be as simple as what we’re doing now.”

Candy pointed to a rock that was large, for a rock, but not oddly-shaped enough to be memorable. “Let’s sit down there,” she said. “It’ll be fun. Like a picnic.” She was starting to be cloying, getting further from their wavelength. As they changed trajectory toward the orange lump, she asked, “When was the last time either of you had any fun?”

“When I was at that party in Urbo Marsa,” said Blair, “there were weather malfunctions in parts of the Bourg District, so drones were showering snow. Chase and I leaped in a snow pile. It was completely unpleasant, but we laughed. He laughed, and that made *me* laugh.”

“We’ve got to get that laughter coming from the inside,” said Candy. “And you?”

Elliot said, “When I watched Rosie drawing before the flash bomb.”

“When did you two ever have fun together?”

“When we studied,” said Blair as if it were obvious. “On Earth, in college, when we studied together.”

“That’s problem number two,” said Candy as she sat crisscross with her back against the rock. Her hands were on her knees, her elbows up. She was ready to engage in some life-altering action. The couple sat before her. “And problem number one is going to be navigating your self-worth in these transitional times. I don’t pretend not to grieve for your children, wherever they may be. And I know it’s hard for *you* precisely because you *don’t* grieve. It was hard for you to value your children, so you undervalue yourselves. Do you value yourselves at all?”

Blair said no and Elliot said yes, as an asset to the company.

Candy said incredulously, “Do you know that people *like* you? Lots of people have great respect for you!”

Blair said, “Who?”

“Look over there,” said the counselor, pointing far away. They turned and saw, cloaked in blue haze, among cliffs, one rock face with a fraction of a bubble dome embedded in it, making a cave habitable. “That’s Wild House,” said Candy. “A man named Peter the Nea, feeling that he was unloved in his own village, left with amateur tools and air tanks to make his home in the wild. He became a hermit. Love found him, but not because of religious devotion, necessarily. It followed him from Gaudy House, because he had been valued all along.

“It’s got to be the same with you. The moment you leave Bourg is the moment you’ll see allies coming out of the woodwork.”

“Did you get that from your experience with Urwell?” said Elliot.

“Oh, no, but that was different. There was a messy divorce, people were taking sides, most of them knew Jeff better than they knew me—but you, as I understand, you’ve been meek and humble to the end.”

“Sure,” said Elliot, “but nobody here really knows us.”

Blair said, “What about Biff?”

“He commutes.”

“Think harder,” said Candy. “Delve into your memories and try to dredge up some times when people were good to you, minus any sense of obligation.”

“We’ve tried that, doctor, there’s no one.”

“Then I must throw up my hands,” said Candy, and that she did. “I love probing your lives for signs of the good in them, but I’m no time traveler, so—”

“I’m sorry we’ve wasted your time,” said Elliot.

“What? No such thing,” she said with sympathy.

“Blair, I never wanted Rosie to go to art school. Another reason why their kidnapping is so great is because now they can’t go to summer school. You might appreciate that, Candy,” he said. His voice wasn’t as caustic as he had wanted.

“You don’t mean that,” said Blair, distant and knowing as a shadow. “Art school is the best thing that ever happened to Rosie. We literally have statistical evidence of this.”

“And they would have gone stagnant forever?”

Blair nodded.

“You emphasize statistics. They weren’t much more than objects for you.”

Blair’s jaw dropped. “This...this is the first time you’ve pissed me off! Because they’re objects for you too!”

“I misspoke. You consider them less than objects. Less than pawns. Nothing but points for...”

“Status? Well, they’re not doing us any good there.”

“As representations of...”

“Of?”

He turned away and looked in the dirt, to cogitate. Blair followed his gaze a moment. Then she looked back to Candy, who had clasped her hands neatly together before her helmet. Her face and body were hard to read, but she seemed...giddy.

“Well, my time is up here,” said Candy, “but I’ve sewn some kind of seed. Wouldn’t you say?” She rose.

The parents didn’t respond, not for several seconds, after which Blair said, “A little fast, wasn’t it?”

“I have a lot of responsibilities, being both a student and a radical.”

“Yes,” Elliot said, feeling the sting of lost money, “but we didn’t know that when we brought you on.”

“There may be no more for me to do.”

Elliot searched her face for something like the logic behind her statement, but all he saw was an easy smile.

“Let’s let her go,” said Blair. “We’ll have something for her next week.”

Elliot bristled at the phrase. As Candy stepped out somewhat clumsily from between him and the rock, in his mind he repeated the phrase “we’ll have something.” Over the course of moments he prodded himself with the phrase, told himself that it was uncanny and that it ought to have offended him. Moments more and the thoughts were revolving on a carousel.

Their counselor had left and was now approaching the horizon.

“I’m going to ask you something, Blair,” he said, “and if I don’t like your answer, I’ll...probably lose all respect for you.”

Their faces in the helmets were dim.

“If I went to Earth, to stay, would you go with me?”

Before Blair answered, Candy’s disembodied voice came over their receivers saying, “Oops. I better disconnect.”

Blair still did not answer.

In fact, she did that movie thing again and said nothing at all for the next several hours. At least this time it was due to a storm of thought, not the vacuity that so irked Elliot now.

So the daily drag went on for hours and hours. Though the investigation was such that now neither of them was bound to the household, they stayed, for now. Blair felt tentatively as if she could turn into the spirit of their castle, reclaiming territory after the siege cleared out. Then she imagined that their septuplets were spirits, enjoying a funny children’s-book life in the spirit world. Or maybe (Blair thought as she supervised the dishwasher (which she couldn’t see into because dishwashers don’t have windows) but she acted like she could anyway) they, being so empty, would be perfectly okay with their own obliteration. Except Rosie. Oh God. She really couldn’t forgive herself if she gave Rosie a soul, only for that soul to lose everything almost literally in a flash. Should she tell Elliot that (she thought when she remembered how Elliot was standing in the sunset light of the kitchen window)? Mind-bending thoughts are the ones worth sharing. But maybe it was her job to act more pleasant.

“I have to wonder if this all might not be lucky,” said Blair. “We’ll adopt. Not ideal, but we’ll make the most of it.”

“Oh,” said Elliot. Since the chandelier still hadn’t been turned off, he was nicely shrouded in deep red. “So you either dismissed my question from earlier or...completely forgot it.”

Blair turned to him. She stood up straight and wiped her eyes as if waking up. “I’m sorry, Elliot,” she said, not bitterly. “I did forget the question.”

“So I can lose all respect for you now.”

“And you hadn’t already? Look, I don’t need...I’m not looking for respect. I just need a comfortable life and—”

“Blair.”

“Is that alright with you?”

“Blair!” He came a few steps forward and was no longer red. “Can you consider that we’re not the same person and I’m not satisfied with just a live-in maid?”

Blair glanced back at the dishwasher. “Not much of a maid,” she amended.

Elliot took a deep breath. “That is getting on my nerves now. You don’t have anything valuable going on in your head. I thought you were brilliant, years ago.”

“I was hoping you’d be stable.”

Five firm knocks on the door stopped their talk. That meant one of two things: an emergency message from the D’Attennes, or a gold letter from Viro, and fear of the latter shook them to the core because it meant either deportation or a budget cut.



## Chapter 8: The Enjoyable Conference by Viro's Fireplace

The first time Blair and Elliot visited Viro in his castle, it was their family application interview. It was to be long-distance, but they were still guaranteed a brief guided tour. Together they went to a specialized center billed as a teleportation service (name of the business: “The Warp”), but which really combined virtual reality and a fantastic intergalactic internet connection. After a brief medical examination, the couple was anaesthetized, knocked out, and laid out on operating tables so the employees could crack open their skulls. Then their bodies were ladled into holding chambers, and their exposed brains, hooked up to a network by a few plasticky wires, remained as active as when their bodies were awake—because of course, their temporary robot bodies were awake. The couple ‘arrived’ on Mars in rudimentary things little better than tin cans: fragile shells, tank-tread bodies, face-sized screens connected to the base by a pole adjusted roughly to height.

“Come in, come in!” said Viro at the open marble gates, bowing gently toward a golden lobby. Even as he spoke, several smartly dressed servants crossed the room. It was an immaculate display of both hospitality and wealth.

The robot bodies moved steadily along, rolling over carpets of gold and copper fibers, toward an elevator. Since each interviewee had taken lab courses involving robot bodies of even less appealing construction, nothing about the situation was disturbing to them.

They boarded an elevator that took them to a hallway filled with warm light and dark cherry doors, hotel-like. “Is this the servant quarters?” asked Blair, her voice fuzzy and hard to recognize.

“*My* servant quarters,” said Viro in good humor. “For future reference—in case you are accepted—don’t use that word again. Say ‘employees’ or ‘maids,’ it’s less controversial.”

“My apologies.”

He chortled. “There was an interview,” he said. “Quite early. I had not settled the details and I called the servants *malle-superulloi*—”

“Underlings,” said Elliot.

Viro clicked. “Yes, yes.” Using a pen, he scratched a favorable note into his palm.

The hallway was curving into a closed circle like a belt girding the castle. This implied a wonderful waste of space, since the castle was squarish. The three of them rode the curve, passing many closed doors and a few open ones that revealed how settled the underclass had evidently become: papers on desks and lined-up shoes. Even in these rooms things felt prim. An unmade bed was hardly even ruffled.

They took a second elevator, its door gilded and rococo, up the central spire. Another round hallway, a small circle with a lighter ambiance. To the couple’s delight the walls were sky blue, the floor cream carpet, and the windows were a tinge nautical, rounded like bubbles in a hull.

“You may be wondering why my quarters are so blue,” Viro said, without having so much as glanced at the monitors to gauge Blair and Elliot’s reactions. He led them out from the elevator and around the long bend. “Well, there are two things I’ve long wanted to do on Mars. The first is, or was, to build marvels the likes of which this planet—*no* planet—has ever seen.” He took in a big smell, then exhaled with a slight moan of pleasure. This came across as a non sequitur and was exceptionally disturbing. “Can you smell that?”

“The Warp only adds the senses of smell, taste, and touch with its most expensive package, sir,” said Elliot. He then apologized for good measure.

“Well! You are missing out. That’s an artificial sea smell. When I arrived on this parched planet I sensed that it craved ocean, I had a vision of myself looking out on the water. So my second desire is to erect a sea. A vast one, when the atmosphere is less toxic and we can tear down the glass firmaments.”

“What a stupendous dream, sir,” said Elliot.

Ahead, the Ruby Fine-Bourg who was to become their aunt stood beside a door with her arms behind her back, looking girlish. Viro signaled for the couple to wait. He walked ahead to chat with her, both keeping their voices low. She explained something, counting off fingers with a gentle smile. Viro nodded and reached into his pocket. He set a clump of stuff in her hand, something bright and misshapen that looked, from Blair and Elliot’s short distance, to be hardened lava with a gold sheen. Only after Ruby had scurried off did they realize Viro had handed her a literal gold nugget.

Viro’s room had dual security: facial recognition via the laser panel by the door, and an iron key so big it hardly fit in his hand. It was so thoroughly ornamented with intricate, sumptuous vines that the couple couldn’t see it and not think it magical.

The door clicked open. These were his living quarters, bed and all. Its edges were crammed with scholarly things—two full bookcases, stacks and crates of paper documents, one desk saddled with test tubes and a microscope, another with graph paper and a compass, and a bronze telescope between these desks, propped on three sharp legs and pointing through the window, craving that ocean. In the middle were a leather couch chair and sufficient space for the interviewees to ‘stand.’ Viro sat. The Q-and-A began.

“What are your hobbies, children?”

“I enjoy football, calligraphy, and the classics,” said Elliot. It was a stream of blatant lies. “Though my degree is general, but I specialized in the housing market and would often research it in my spare time.”

“Hmm.”

“I’ve always been interested in living things,” said Blair. “Less behavioral, more biological and existential. So I keep a few plants at home, but I’m not great at taking care of them.” She looked out the window; the robotic neck turned with an unseemly squeak. “You want an ocean, I want forests. The one thing I foresee myself missing about Earth is all the greenery.”

In Blair and Elliot’s high school years, a series of micro-eco-revolutions seized Earth cities. Broad leaves and huge ferns overtook rooftops, hiding the blacktop; the cityscape that housed their college was tropical. All the rainforests crawled down along walls, into windows, like the final and most celebrated evolution of kudzu. Explosions of green life had even settled into the arcadian hallways of their school. Blair had experienced these stretches as an extension of her career path in life, her future of literal, alchemic life-changing, breaking in to overpower a self adrift.

“Have you been to any American cities since the New Green Initiative?”

“As it happens,” Viro said, “since their enactment I have remained pent up in castles on the planet incarnadine. Supervising the initial construction, you know.” He gestured, his hands arcing like a rainbow. “I thought I was not missing much. Too much green, I would have said. I was, however, green myself.” Viro smirked. Everyone produced a laugh. “There is something vital in that, that partial return of the agrarian to urban life. Earthlings are a dispirited people.”

“Of course,” she said. “You know, I have a degree in genetic modification. When I was in school, I imagined that *that* was the force of the trees in our hallway—the literal, alchemic

life-changing, breaking in to overpower a self adrift.” She turned back to see if Viro was about to clap; he was attentive, but fully grim. “But it turned out that the force was you.”

Don’t be so hasty,” he said, but she was confident they’d get in. “You do know, Blair, that there will be little time for genetic play for you, or for any member of our family.”

“I do know, sir,” she said, after a pause; she’d known babies would be involved, but she expected to have significant help from the servants, and then there was a vague idea about shindigs and deviled eggs.

Happily, both Blair and Elliot were deemed acceptable. Blair was rightly offended by Viro’s closing remark that Elliot keep her in line.

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Every time Viro left Mars, a Bourg meeting was assembled at the spaceport. The purpose: to watch Viro’s shuttle leave. Every time he returned to Mars, everyone gathered again. The purpose: to watch Viro’s shuttle return.

Blair and Elliot had missed his last takeoff, their excuse being “grief.” Nobody in Bourg had lost their children before—who could predict Viro’s reaction? He would pick babies up, pinch their cheeks laughing, then return to his natural state and dump them whence they came. He liked children, friends, and society the way one liked an ant farm. All agreed that at the very least he was less fatherly than uncular.

Bourgs loitered at the tarmac of Planedeganna’s space station, standing in the *faque Bourganna*, which was designated by signs bearing the family crest and cords on gold stanchions. There was bubbling champagne for all, enjoyed by none, photographed by servants.

Blair and Elliot avoided all questioning because for once they spent the whole time talking to each other. Bickering, but talking nonetheless.

“I don’t see how you can think that way,” said Blair. “Maybe you’re closed-minded. After all, you didn’t indulge your curiosity and have an eye-opening sensory experience like me.”

A breeze blew in. “I wasn’t curious at all,” said Elliot.

No,” said Blair as the breeze became a strong wind that threatened to take her tiny top hat off. “It’s a drug, ‘cure’ is just the trade name for it.”

“Can you stop that? You know I didn’t mean that,” said Elliot as the wind became a roar and jet engines sparked across the tarmac. “This isn’t ‘Waiting for Godot.’”

“What?”

“I SAID THIS ISN’T ‘WAITING FOR GODOT.’”

The final burst of wind came and went. Bourgs brushed past them to give Viro their customary greetings, and photographers captured a scene identical to those of yesteryear, the year before, and so on. “I don’t know why you expect me to know anything about ‘Waiting for Godot,’” said Blair. She crossed her arms. “I know what it is. I know it’s in our library. Which isn’t saying much. You must think you’re better than me.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Come, now, children,” said Viro. He had come between them and had a hand on the shoulder of each. “I cannot see much good coming from referring to Godot in times of trial. How about a little more hope, my son.” He switched to holding their hands. He had never touched them before and the act set them on edge, if they hadn’t been edgy already. “‘The mediator between head and hands must be the heart,’ eh?” Neither of them cheered up.

Viro focused his gaze on a point between them, where their hands would meet. He pulled their hands together as if bridging an awesome gap with great strength. He brought their hands

together. They refused to interlock, and when he pushed and rubbed them against each other, they only smeared.

He let them drop, saying, “Ah, that is pitiful. My castle, then.” He left for his car and *shoeffour*. Blair and Elliot soon followed.

Then to Viro’s reading room, which was the reading room of every Bourg household, only more perfect. The fireplace to the parents’ right was hidden behind overgrown quartz crystals and therefore cast a pinkish, alien glow. But it was a friendly tint of amaranth, and they almost—almost—felt they could relax. All were seated on soft leather, on chairs with hooféd feet. Viro sat before them and looked gruff.

Viro took a deep breath and said, “You know how disappointing this has been.”

“It disappoints us most of all, my father.”

“Elliot, don’t be a smartass.”

“Father,” he said, “we are all victims here. All we want is to have our kids back safe.”

But Viro was unmoved.

“Elliot,” he said, “you realize this is a golden opportunity—your kids are gone.”

Blair wanted to interject, “That’s what I said.” Instead she smirked, suppressing a laugh, and she hid the smirk behind the fist on her chin.

“You did not like those kids,” Viro said with a mild shake of the head, “and they were not helping anybody.”

Elliot blinked.

“Don’t act traumatized, man. You act as if we murdered them.”

“Viro, eject me from the family and send me back to Earth.”

Viro barked a laugh. “What!?”

“Send me back, or else I’ll make such a big fool of myself that you’ll have no choice but to send me.”

Now Blair was the one looking horrified.

Viro turned away, his hand on his forehead, caught in a giggling fit. In the middle of it he threw his hands up and managed to say, “As you wish!”

“Great!”

“Elliot!” Blair cried. “You are *not*—at least take me with you.”

“Make a life here. There are labs. There’s a school. Don’t just sit here being ridiculous.”

It was hard for Elliot to be deadpan and emotionally affecting with Viro’s laughter erupting in the background. Now he literally was saying “hee hee hee.”

Elliot turned back to Viro and said, “I shouldn’t exist just to be useful to you. Not that—”

Viro wheezed, settling down, a hand on his chest. “Incredible,” he said to himself. “What do you expect to do with yourself on Earth? Start a revolution? Just watching you is—” he wiped tears from one eye— “whatever it is, you won’t last a minute.”

Elliot silently wondered if he was finished. After a few seconds, he said, “Not that you ever wanted me for who I was as a person.”

“I did,” said Blair.

“You’re more useful to me in Bourg than out of it,” said Viro.

“What about the village?” said Blair. “There’s no reason to go back.”

“And I’m not paying the spacefare,” Viro noted.

Elliot chirped, “What? Why?”

“Why would I pay to aid my patricide?/Why feed I your mistake, your treachery?”

“It’s not treachery. It’s an option open to me.”



“A deliberate breach of contract.”

“Yes it is.”

Elliot fought the urge to look away. Only now, suddenly, was he nervous, self-conscious, and feeling foolish. Those were rather weak parting words, weren't they? And yet because he couldn't think of any stingers, they were his only option. He pushed the couch chair back from under him, hoping it would make a dramatic sound (which it didn't) and marched out of the room. A few minutes later, Viro's servants would direct a wandering Elliot to the exit. One would collect footage of the event, and Viro would find this footage very funny.

This left Blair and Viro alone. Blair felt a hint of tears, but maintained her calm. “Father,” she said as if to her doctor, “I'd like to discuss my options.” She would watch him at the *gallerie* later that night.

## Chapter 9: The Lab

Terraformers were the true architects of Mars. They had compelled the world to spin in twenty-four-hour days. They had placed atmosphere filters, can-shaped eyesores strategically placed far from human settlements. They had managed Earth-like gravity. And they were in the process of taming Mars' epic sandstorms. By this year 60 M.E. they had coaxed them into a milder state.

The progress was amazing. Just a decade earlier, domes prepared by entering lockdown. Nobody was to go outside. Spacesuit fabric would be lacerated; rovers would hold up, but they might fly off, and dust would clog their works, worming inside, coating everything in infectious dirt.

A decade before that, not even rovers would survive, the sand a rain of needles or storm of bullets. The hull would become lacerated fabric, and then nothing.

So the reddish-grey surrounding the village of Gaudy House that day still frightened people. In their homes they exchanged stories of Mars' wrath that were fast becoming myths. An idiot caught driving outside in today's Martian storm could pull over, wait it out in the car, and drive on the next day.

When Blair looked up through the village dome to the storm, heard the light ticking and thrashing it made as it streamed around the dome, she thought of the black-and-white fuzz on a TV screen.

She walked slowly through the village. She followed the main streets that took her on a wavy path, almost dizzying, between shack homes so close they ran into each other. All around there were people standing and talking, a sight unfamiliar even to the coziest suburbs. She often paused and lingered, but was too nervous to approach these strangers. She spotted the man who

had once sold her a faux-Hellenistic amphora; he was a stranger too. She wished to pass through unobserved like a ghost.

Viro had prodded her to serve as a “Gaudy House ambassador.” The falling-out with Urwell left a gap for the goodwill of other families to fill, and Candy Out-of-Urwell’s stunt suggested the means. If Blair could put on a friendly face, she could—rather than becoming the villagers’ soul sister—further their enterprise. Viro had seen videos of the latest town hall meeting and he knew what could use patching up. The well in the middle of town had seen better days, hadn’t it? Perhaps they wouldn’t allow alterations to their ugly homes, but what about new pipes?

All business that Blair had no interest in. Inevitably she *would* interact with these villagers, but not yet...not yet.

She was working her way over to the labs, concrete cubes that stood in a space apart. A lot of space, and trees and bushes, separated them from the village and from each other. The funny thing was, Blair couldn’t say she was interested in genetic modification, either. This lack of interest was terrifying. Either she had left an old love to shrivel, she thought, or she had never loved anything at all.

Seeing the name “SINGH” on a sign gave her a thrill: merely recognizing the name gave her the odd feeling that Dr. Singh knew her, would love her, and had something for her, as if networking meant thirty seconds of existing in close proximity to each other.

The building was unfriendly, with few windows on the concrete facade, but beside it were two greenhouses almost its height, crammed with plants, which also made Blair feel welcomed. Also, the front door could have belonged to any Earth home. She used the knocker and waited.

Chase appeared with the fling of a door, but hesitated and became nervous in a heartbeat.

“Oh...Blair?” he said.

“Yes. I’m here to see the doctor.”

“Oh! Yeah! Right.” He reached to rub the back of his neck, didn’t make it, put his arm back. “Right, yeah. The doctor’s—”

Inside, Dr. Singh called out, “How much Twinkle Night to Yellow Mind Bomb?”

“One-to-three ratio,” cried Chase over his shoulder. He turned back saying, “Yeah, the doctor’s in, but he’s kinda tied up right now. Why don’t you chat with some of the other lab dudes here?”

“Well, I want Dr. Singh.”

“Who wants me?” cried Dr. Singh.

“It’s Blair! Blair Bourg! Clean up!”

“*What? Blair Bourg!?*”

“Don’t—oh my god, shut up! She’s right here!” He cringed. “Blair, I’m so sorry, this is crazy.”

“Looks fine to me.” She peered inside and saw a foyer not unlike a waiting room, with tiled floor and unmanned reception desk. “All this commotion. Wouldn’t this be a fun place to work?”

“You say that now,” Chase muttered.

“What makes you say that, do you work here too?”

“No, just—can you please go to someone else’s lab. I don’t want you to meet Dr. Singh because it’d be awkward.”

But by now Dr. Singh had walked out into the foyer, clearly visible in a gap between Chase and the door frame. “We don’t have anything to be afraid of,” he said. “On this planet, cannabis and all its relatives are perfectly legal.”

Chase approached him and stammered, “Yes, but, but—but remember that certain people may be highly allergic to the cultivar you’re perfecting now!”

Blair sensed that that was a compelling reason to leave, and turned around.

“Nope! That’s a lie,” said Dr. Singh. “You should come and have a look. We can’t hide this forever.”

Blair reluctantly turned.

“He means we can’t hide this wonderful strain of cannabis forever,” Chase whispered to her.

“Alright. Would you give me a tour of the place, then?” said Blair. “Just don’t show me the cannabis room.”

“That’s the one room we *have* to show you,” said Dr. Singh.

“Okay, well...give me a surgical mask, at least.”

They led her down a hallway, past many closed doors and an open one containing a rec room. That room in turn contained the members of the band Mortavort, two on a couch and two playing foosball. Blair’s passage was like a cloud bringing shadow, and Gilth mumbled an audible “*shit*, Chase!”

“Hey, guys, what’s up, no problem here,” Chase replied, clipped, as they went. Then he assured Blair, “Don’t freak out at what we’re about to show you, okay?”

“I withhold judgment,” said Blair.

She was led into an un-laboratory-like room where light poured in over vases, cabinets, clay figurines, dressers, and seven pallets on the floor that consumed the leftover space. Each pallet had a girl inside. Each one wore a respirator. Each looked as though she was supposed to be sleeping, but they all were clearly wide awake, since Blair could see the row of open eyes even from the doorway.

After she had gotten a good look, she looked uncertainly to her escorts. Then: “Hello, kids.”

“Hello,” they said in chorus. Even Rosie. The respirators barely muffled the sound.

“Why did you let me see this? ‘Shit, Chase’ is right.”

“The investigation will end eventually,” said Dr. Singh with a passive air and a bit of a shrug. “We might as well cut it short.”

“Look, Blair,” said Chase, trying to begin a heart-to-heart that Blair neither wanted nor needed. “My bros in Mortavort have their hearts set on leaving for Earth, but they had to check off everything on their bucket list first. I’m sure I speak for all of us when I say that we really, really hate seeing your emotionless children, even when it’s just in pictures. So we took matters into our own hands, Blair. I’m sorry, from the bottom of my heart, but they just couldn’t leave without resolving this, and I...I had to support them in this endeavor.”

“Yeah, I think something’s wrong with those kids,” added Dr. Singh.

Blair said solemnly, “I know what you mean. And I know how you feel. Trust me when I say I share your frustration.”

The septuplets’ breathing would have been inaudible if not for the little amplification of the respirator filters.

“Yyyeaaaaah,” said Chase. “So...they’ve been on meds for the past few days.”

“What kind?”

Dr. Singh said, “It’s a form of a prescription drug used to treat depression. They should’ve taken it long ago.”

“We had reasons for keeping them off medication—didn’t want to stunt their growth, throw their hormones off-balance...inhibit receptors...didn’t wanna make them hate us when they got older...”

She shifted.

“So has it done anything?”

“Not yet.”

“Not at all,” said Chase. “But, what can ya do, it’s gotta kick in.”

“You mentioned Earth,” said Blair. “Why don’t you have Mortavort take the kids along?”

“It’s not a vacation, it’s their form of a business trip. Mortavort’s first Earth concert.”

“I mean, can they find someone who will adopt them.”

Chase didn’t know what to say. “Really?”

“Yes. I hate them. In fact, I don’t even want to keep facing them. I just do that to be polite.” In that moment, in the wake of discovering her life’s lack of love, her hate for the kids became her bedrock. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, Chase.”

“Well...great, I’ll...tell the band what you said, I guess.”

“Maybe I can tell them myself?”

“Maybe you can tell them when we’re all relaxed, after cure.”

“Hm. Okay.”

“And maybe don’t make a big problem out of all of this. We want Mortavort on Earth with as unmarred a public image as possible. Remember: they’re just trying to make a difference in this world.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” said Blair, confirming Dr. Singh’s suspicions about her character and allegiance to the D’Attennes’ law.

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Blair wandered like a ghost around Gaudy House from afternoon to evening. The storm would blow on into the night. She followed the glass barrier at a place where the foliage growing at the rim broke. As she walked along, she traced the boundary with her palm, but when she saw people in her path, she tore away, walking somewhere else. It was a group of children and their supervising parents. The children pushed their palms and faces against the humming, ticking glass. The sand outside was darkening, the color of a locust swarm.

She took backways in the village. Unlike the rustic places in the Europe of her history books, in Gaudy House there was no pestilent trash littering the streets; instead there were pestilent piles of compost in open buckets, exposed to the open air. There were no rats; just bugs. She took note studiously because she wondered if her whole life would move here.

These villagers and the Mortavort people were different breeds. She thought this while listening to the aging butter-churner’s chat with the blacksmith about the progress of this week’s butter. It was achingly quaint. And how many did she hear talking about the weather?

To avoid eating at anyone’s restaurant—she was not even sure the villagers had such a thing—she leaned against a tree and pulled out one of the food tubes lodged in the bottom of her purse. After so many years and a repeated fear that they might like toothpaste, the tubes’ time to shine had finally come, and it was delicious.



Soon she weaved through the main streets again, and, to her regret, said hello to passersby. Before anybody could say “how are you” or “lovely weather,” she was off, and without thinking she pulled herself to the shrine in the big flat dirt plane that was the center of town.

The shrine, which was a pit. Its walls and steps were stone. It was as if Ares’ worshippers had managed to dislodge a temple corridor from the oldest ruin, dig a hole, and slot it in. Maybe years ago the blue of the passage had been brilliant.

Inside was—well, she didn’t know what she’d expected—inside, all lit by a hanging electric lamp, was a panoply of stuff that would be at home in a thrift store. Maps, paper maps, claimed some part of the wall. So did a movie poster, a record player, and an alarm clock on a dresser. There were books, toys, gadgets, even dirt and debris scattered across the floor. Was there at least a pedestal in the center, to pay religious homage to? Indeed there was, but it was no higher than a packing crate. Resting beside it was a glass of tranquil orange juice. It was set here as an offering hours ago, and it was putrid.

So here she was meant to share her grievances. If she was meant to find something in Gaudy House’s innermost part—say, the deepest most beautiful meaning of all existence—that idea was dashed long ago, the moment she saw the villagers’ repulsive homes. It would be nice if there was a great hidden empathy in the universe. It would be nice if her kids were people.

She left without speaking because she was too embarrassed by the concept of speaking to nobody. As she mounted the stairs, her septuplets were on her mind. She had an ironic idea of paying them reverence, which was especially strange because usually in inward moods like this she considered *Viro* the ridiculous godlike figure.

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The rec room was dark red with the last shining of light through the sandstorm. It seemed to Blair like the light of a seance.

Scientific bubbling entered the rec room from just across the hall. It was Dr. Singh with a bunch of test tubes, not ignored so much as himself disinterested.

The keyboardist, an unexciting man like a pipe cleaner, laid across the length of a couch. The drummer sat on the floor against that couch. She was fidgety even now, a caged rat baring teeth. The dreadlocked one who played the scorpion carcass sat in a wood chair, as did Gilth the Nea. Gilth was wearing his red sash. Gilth was the definitive leader, here as there.

Chase and Blair sat at opposite ends of another couch. They were all arranged roughly in a circle, though between Gilth and the keyboardist's couch Blair could see the corner looking like a conspicuous shadowed gap, unreachable by the world's red light thanks to the foosball.

Gilth cracked his neck saying, "Lots of things to discuss today."

"That's every day," said the keyboardist. He passed Gilth his phone with one hand.

Gilth studied it. "...Oh my lord."

He tossed it to Chase, whose eyes bugged out.

"Someone down at the Environmental Alliance," said Gilth, "is not doin' their job."

"Look at this, Blair."

It was hard to describe the photo. A cluster of white triangles on the water's surface. Sails without sailboats? Or was it a huge mechanical hull spiking and curving outward?

"But Sydney's gone," said Gilth. "If you look where the building meets the water, you've already got acid damage."

"Who is this?" Blair whispered.

"Sydney Opera House," said Chase.

She passed the phone on to the guy with dreadlocks. “At least it makes a beautiful ruin,” she told him.

The drummer said, “Biosphere’s a lost cause. Dead.”

“Right,” said the dreadlock guy.

“Amen to that!” Chase cried. “Oh, sorry, not amen.”

“We can interfere in a coup,” said the drummer.

“Okay,” said Gilth, “which one?”

And she began to rattle off battles in every pocket of the world as if she herself were the news, between nations and between city blocks. Yes, the prime minister of Scotland was about to bring Finland to a standstill, but what of the preservation of human rights, and who were the terrorists in the Pacific. A war between Japan and Turkey became a talking point.

Blair put on a face of curiosity. Though in terms of pure statistics the amount of discord on Earth hadn’t changed, the players had shuffled beyond her recognition and she became newly determined to stay on Mars.

The dreadlock guy pounded his fist. “The South African anti-violence march,” he said suddenly.

Gilth said, “Okay, what about it?”

“They’re having another one and we need to be there.”

“But they shot the last one up, Pilth,” he said as if the idea were silly.

“That’s why it’s so important! You can’t cling to life over morals.”

Chase clicked his tongue. “You don’t understand, old man.”

“The longer we live, the more we can do,” said the keyboardist. “Only by being maximally useful can we increase the amount of happiness in the universe to the fullest possible degree.”

“Ares didn’t fucking say that,” said the dreadlock guy. “He said to fight as if you have no life.”

The keyboardist raised his voice. “That’s *advice*, not law. Don’t forget we’re leaving his planet. Besides, what makes you think an immortal knows a thing about life on Earth. Use your head.”

“I saw you praying to God last night, hypocrite.”

As the two began to lean into each other like prowling cats, the drummer cried, “What about what they’re calling the second Dust Bowl?”

“My mother lives in the Dust Bowl,” Blair said hazily.

The keyboardist was boiling. “Forget that. Save the Arctic.”

The dreadlock guy railed, “Nobody lives in the Arctic!”

Gilth clapped and bellowed, “*That’s* it, that’s it. Let’s cut it out. Doctor, we need you!”

Immediately Dr. Singh was there to hand out blunts. Hard faces softened. Chase threw the doctor a baggie of gold dust that almost hit him in the face.

Blunts and a lighter roamed around the circle, passed this way and that, clockwise and counter-clockwise, in festive confusion. Blair had to collect them in her lap.

Gilth got up and moved backward, into the shady corner. Blair watched him. When she realized what he was doing and what was in that corner, she actually jumped with fright. There were humans, little imps, sitting with their knees against their chins. All seven of them had been part of the meeting all along.

Blair's forehead grew hot.

Why, exactly? Was she offended to have missed something that everyone else seemed to be in on? She thought back to a particular day when there was no school. The car dropped her off and everything was normal until she peered in the window and—no school. She cried. The halls were empty. Nobody had told her, and yet everybody knew. Somehow. Indeed, tears were welling in her eyes tonight too, so maybe that was all it was.

“I can't smoke tonight,” she said to Chase. “I'm sorry.”

And where did that decision come from? She guessed that maybe she couldn't bear to be excluded, so, petulantly, she would deny herself any part of their fun.

“Oho,” said Chase. “Mama's keepin' watch.” He pointed into that corner. “Baby's first blunt, huh?”

She didn't respond.

“Trust me, that is their first blunts,” he added.

The keyboardist gave Gilth and the kids a glance and wink as he lit up, or, as they called it these days, “satisfied his curiosity.” Meanwhile, Gilth murmured to the girls and pantomimed smoking motions, those primordial gestures passed from generation to generation, the teaching of which really should have been Blair's job.

Now there were bits of conversation again. More like chatter. Soft faces became jolly ones. Blair, conversely, went rigid. She had heated up and, naturally, begun to sweat.

There were smooth hisses, fragrant smoke, and little fires that studded the dim room. Translucency rose, and their mouths themselves were incense. Blair knew that Ares had made himself known because now Mortavort and Chase looked toward the center. Now and then,

though, they threw a look at the corner where Gilth kneeled and the children smoked. The children were dutiful, though their smoke stayed in that same corner. Their eyes were owls' eyes.

Then abruptly, cutting off a bandmate's sentence, Gilth said, "Bring 'em in?"

No one human replied. Gilth looked to the center, nodded gravely, and led the kids in. They assembled before Blair with sticks of cure in their mouths, facing no one direction, facing whichever direction they happened to be brought into.

The keyboardist, sprawling and stretching, said to the children, "Give us some advice that we as fellow humans can relate to."

The girls said nothing, but one coughed once.

"Oh god," Blair whispered. "I hope that's Rosie."

Chase examined the group as if he were a judge on the next great reality TV competition. "Who's gonna crack?" he giggled. "It's like playing spot the difference. 'Cept there is no di--"

The girl at one end of the line ratcheted forward. Her hair flew over her face, willow-like, and she froze. A thick plume of smoke washed over her face. Everyone was still.

They were expecting a prophecy. Instead she fell to her hands and knees, heaved, and vomited.

Chase shivered and cried, "oh, shit!" The keyboardist settled even further into his couch and moaned, "Woah." The drummer lurched, but moved away. Blair was pretty sure the dreadlock guy was asleep.

Gilth took the hurling girl up under her arms as one would a cat. Her stream of vomit continued. "Okay, stop them smoking," he said as he made his way out of the rec room. Another girl coughed.

“This is crazy, Blair,” Chase said after a tinge more laughter. “Who’s gonna get them to stop, me or you?”

Blair gaped at him. “Well, that really puts me on the spot.” The answer in this case would be her, of course. But Chase didn’t have to put it that way, didn’t have to say it as if he couldn’t even help or was running a– oh, he really *did* just run away.

She turned back to her beautiful smoking children with a sigh.

“Mortavort,” she said to the three curios in dubious states of consciousness, “I’m glad that you allowed my children to try this, because you have the sort of bravery I could never muster.”

The drummer and the keyboardist were as unimpressed with her as with her progeny. The drummer turned to the keyboardist and said, “False prophets?”

## Chapter 10: The Garden

“I think I might love you,” said Elliot. He was holding Kim Sendolorre’s hand at a garden party. The confession had come abruptly, in the middle of banter between Kim and her fellow Sendolorres. He was not included. He’d interrupted.

Elliot did not necessarily expect acceptance nor rejection, but if it were rejection, he thought it would be—thanks to company—demure and polite.

“*Jesus*, Elliot! Stop that!” she shouted, and whipped his hand off. “You *don’t love me!* If I wanted to talk to you right now, I would! Don’t you remember what people do when they want to have a serious talk?” The other Sendolorres watched with lowered brows; they sipped from wide-mouthed wine glasses. “They *arrange for* the talk. Call me! Don’t grab my hand in a—a public place!”

Only recently was Elliot grasping the power of the cellular phone. How long it had been since he sent a call to Earth for personal reasons, let alone a call on Mars. Really, Kim was far from the only shoulder he had to cry on; billions of people were literally at his fingertips. But for years he had simply forgotten this, as if Mars existed in nothing but its own web.

What was wrong with him?

He figured he would restart the conversation on that note.

“Kim, something’s wrong with me and I need to talk about it.”

“Then find your course—”

She stopped. A connection came back together in her mind; she remembered. Elliot was not simply Elliot the questionable friend, but Elliot the father of missing children.

“I’m such an asshole,” she whispered.



Suddenly one of the sidelined Sendolorres was clapping—quite a feat when one is holding wine and pamphlets. “Go on, Kim!” he said. “Send him back to his estate!” The others pitched in with “yeah!”

“You have...wingmen?” he asked, startled and breathless.

“Yeah, I have acquaintances, so what,” she said briskly and rhetorically, though Elliot didn’t pick up on that part. She lowered her voice and said, “Just meet me after the party and we’ll talk, okay? Okay. I’m sorry. See you.” Kim took Elliot lightly by the arm and shoulder, spun him about-face, and sent him off—not to the Bourg estate but at least twenty paces.

He remained in the garden of the Sendolorre gala. All around were strung neon lanterns, yellow, blue, green and white. About eighty lawn chairs—premium lawn chairs—faced a wooden stage and its backdrop, a white screen. There was a projector waiting for the ceremony, also known as *la ceremoenie*. And there was the Sendolorre crest at the foot of the stage, a gold and green shield with peacocks playing guard.

When the evening light became medium blue, when everyone was seated, Elliot spotted Kim some rows ahead of him with her husband Tom. The sight made him feel guilty. The guilt burned and made his next hour restless.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Henri Sendolorre, their leader, aging yet preeminently smooth, “I present to you the seventh annual *Ceremoenie de Premioi Verre-Kinofilmai*.” With a bow and wave of his hand, he summoned a round of applause. 95% of the audience was Sendolorre and hoped to see their name in lights tonight. Some of those smiles were bloodthirsty.

“The nominees for Best Actor are...” roll clips of romances in close-up... “Richard S., Don S., Carlin S...”

“And the nominees for Best Use of Natural Scenery are...” roll clips of scenic vistas, the mountains and melting icecaps on Mars’ own snowy pole... “*Atom Life*, *La Tutte-Marsannuje*, two-minute dream sequence from “Late Night with Bird Jacob Feldman,” and...”

One time that night, the award mattered. Kim was called to receive a “Marsie” — not for cinematography, but for Best Supporting Actress, a role that Elliot never knew she performed. There were so few available hands for Sendolorre Entertainment that the typical family member was an all-rounder. They were the baseball team of film. That was probably why they were so third-rate.

“I can’t stand it!” Actress Kim wailed in heavy makeup and moody lighting. This was her clip from *Atom Life*, where apartments undeniably from Urbo Marsa stood in for lofts in Seoul. “You take and you take and you take, but you can’t *give!*?” She collapsed into a coil like a sleeping cat and sobbed.

Then the clip ended and the applause was like a roar. Kim took the stage, nodded and bowed to all, and thanked them before wisecracking about her brothers- and sisters-in-law. Elliot couldn’t tell if the laughs she got in reply were strained or genuine. Regardless, she was back in a good humor. She charged off the stage, and Tom actually threw her flowers.

More awards passed.

“Now,” said Henri when he returned again, “the handing-out of the *premioi* is over, but our gathering tonight has not.”

He lowered his head and rested both hands on his cane. He was playing, a figure of fake, exaggerated solemnity. But the crowd was dead silent, as if they didn’t get it and were taking him at face value.

He began to cross the stage, pacing back and forth. “Tonight’s a time of great joy as well as...good tidings. You know, sometimes my mother would say to me, ‘I have good news and bad news. Which would you rather hear first?’ I know now that I was supposed to want the *bad* news first, to get it out of the way. But I’d always tell her I want the good news first.”

Ever since Henri got to pacing, the Sendolorre beside Elliot had been derisively muttering the whole speech with more or less exact precision.

“You see, the thing about my mom is, every time, she would find a way to make even the bad news uplifting.”

“Even the bad news uplifting,” Gregor Sendolorre said with a groan.

“Without further ado, we now begin tonight’s second phase: our seventh annual combined Family Culling and Comedy Roast.”

As usual, the only people who would participate in this roast were Henri and the handful of playful peers around his age group that constituted his entourage. They not only determined the recipients of the *premioi*, but also who lived and who, in returning to Earth stripped of their title-name, died. But as they liked to put it, they determined who lived and who died...of laughter!

Tonight’s losers were Gregor Sendolorre and his wife Margie. They took the stage.

“Gregor,” said Henri, who had just re-read “The Metamorphosis,” “I have known you for almost a decade, and I have one question for you: were you always such a repulsive insect, or did you just wake up like that one day?”

Gregor looked down at his shoes. His siblings by marriage made unconvincing imitation of riotous laughter.

“If I had to use two words to describe you, they would be ‘bah humbug!’”

“Who’s got apples?” hollered Henri’s friend Uncle Jake.

Gregor made a sound like a whining dog.

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Kim, Tom, and Elliot, a quiet party tonight, walked the short distance from the party on Henri’s lawn to their house on the massive ring-boulevard. Their houses were just like the Bourg houses, only the pink and red was gold and lime, two colors that were not just muted at nighttime, but nearly grey. Obviously the other difference was the leafy peacocks. Tom opened the door to the monochrome castle and went ahead in, turning on lights, while Kim checked the letter box. There was something inside that didn’t quite fit and left the lid open garishly.

Kim yanked it out and the box thudded closed. “Come on,” she moaned. “Not again.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a commemorative acetate of the party highlights.” She showed the film reel to Elliot. “We usually just dump these down the trash chute.”

“And this time? You won this time.”

They walked into the home light. “Yeah, I win all the time. Not literally *every* time, but...I win such that I don’t care anymore.” Elliot hung up his suit jacket. Kim tossed the film onto a couch chair in the foyer.

The interior, too, was just like Blair and Elliot’s, save the adjustments to the color scheme. Even from the door he could see that exact same tea table in the next room over—uncanny.

Elliot heard wisps of Tom’s chatter with two kids in the kitchen.

“Sit,” said Kim with a point at the tea table.

They took their seats, without tea or other refreshment. It turned out there were a few décor differences here, small, in the form of little trophies and picture frames with contents too small to make out from here.

Elliot took a breath. “Let me start all over again.” There were busy sounds coming from the kitchen. “Kim, I think I love you.”

“No, you don’t,” she said as if setting it in stone. “You don’t love me. You never did, and you’re not about to start.”

“At the very least, I admire you... I mean, I’ve always admired you. Me and Blair both. Look at all of this.” He spread his arms out to the far reaches of the room. “All the success that you hardly even give a thought to, because it becomes you so well.”

legs were crossed and her elbow was on the table. She rested her chin on her hand such that he could see her wine-colored fingernails. She leaned forward. “I thought you were going to unload your grief,” she said. “What’s this about?”

“There *is* grief,” he said. “I lost the kids, as you know. And I’ve lost any love for Blair I might have had.”

“So what do you want from me? I assume that’s why you came in flattering me—because you want something. Elliot, this isn’t how interactions are supposed to go. I’m not your *boss*.”

Elliot drew inward. “What’s wrong with me?” he said more quietly. “I don’t even know how to talk to people.”

Kim pivoted. “It’s okay. I don’t either, not really.” She chuckled. “There is not one good interview with me.”

“If I’m not playing by someone else’s rulebook, I...keep messing up,” he said, undeterred. “Kim, what’s your secret?”

She didn't say anything.

"I haven't talked to my family in years."

"That's fine!" said Kim. "Not every family is happy."

"But nothing's happened between us. Nothing at all. I just left and...disappeared of my own accord. I'm sure that was selfish..."

He looked around as if suspicious.

"I just tried to reconnect. Last night. I sent my younger brother a message, something like, 'Hello, how are you?' He was so excited that he couldn't help sending me years' worth of news, I mean everything that happened from the day I left until now. And I felt overshadowed. I said, 'Wow.' And when I turned the phone off for a few hours and came back, I saw my message again, 'Wow,' and wished I had said nothing at all, because my brother had replied 'are you okay' as if when I'd sent it I wasn't in my right mind. And..."

Elliot paused, and then his eyes watered. Tears trailed down his face.

This crying was beyond Kim's comprehension. She waved her free hand and said, "Pffft. That isn't anything at all! So what, you said 'wow.' You're overanalyzing." When he didn't say anything, she filled the air with more common-sense advice. "You read the news again and then you respond. You respond later when you're not so overwhelmed."

"I know!" he cried. "That's what I keep telling myself! That's not the point!"

The kitchen was still bustling.

"I know that this is going to be a cycle with me. When I fail in a social interaction, I'll overanalyze it. Even when I succeed in a social interaction, I'll do the same. And when I talk to people, I'm only trying to get what I want. And I keep noticing how little I think about the kids—my own kids."

“Elliot.”

They didn’t speak for a minute or two.

“I’ll...make some noise about my kids,” said Elliot. “Maybe that will speed up the investigation.”

“Well, they blew through this estate last night and I heard they just picked through Fierinda, so I’m sure they’ll have no trouble picking up the pace.”

“That’s not helpful, Kim,” he told her. “Yes, I know I shouldn’t have said that. It was the wrong time to be honest. But let’s move past that. After they’re found I’ll make even more noise, and get myself culled. Blair and I have talked this over.” (By a certain definition of “talking over.”) “She can stay here on this planet. You can even help her.”

Kim was baring her frustration again. “She is not just—” she searched for a metaphor— “a horse that you can ride or just put in a shack wherever you please.”

Elliot was struck dumb. This was a real accusation, the first he’d taken in years. What were the rumors about taking his daughters’ personalities? They were nothing. What had Blair accused him of beyond financial instability, which was not insulting so much as obnoxious restatement of the facts? *That* was the extent, he’d thought, of the cares of this Martian aristocracy. But tonight, he felt slapped across the face. He had been accused of toying with—manipulating—the person he had married as if for love.

“Yes,” he said emphatically, to agree with the essence of her statement. “I’m horrible. I don’t know if I can change. Or, if I change, what I will look like. Because the old me, the normal, normal-world me, wasn’t remotely valuable.”

They went silent again. At some point during the past few minutes, the family in the kitchen had left.

Kim struggled.

“We all have those moods,” she said softly. She could not uplift the mood.

More silence.

“Kim, how often do you leave this planet?”

She snapped back almost fully into her casual mode. “Every now and then. Tom and I had a trip to the Rockies two weeks ago...we didn’t tell you?”

Elliot came very close to screaming. “*WHAT?*” he said so loud, so out of nowhere, that it was terrifying. Immediately following was a quieter, “You have vacation time?”

“No, it was for a film shoot.” Something clicked in her. “Oh, I see. You’ve been cooped up here for two...three years straight.”

“Yes?”

“And Blair...has it been seven years for her?” Her eyes grew wide. “I didn’t realize—” She brought her hands to the sides of her head. “Oh my god...”



## Chapter 11: The Final Stride of the Dance Marsanna

The very next day, the case of the missing children was happily resolved. Prosecution was pending, since by the time the officers D'Attenne made it to the site of captivity, the culprits—including Mortavort but not Dr. Singh and definitely not Chase—had left for Earth that morning. There had been no interference in D'Attenne policy by Viro Bourg whatsoever. Viro had no knowledge of the plot, and no conceivable motivation for attempting to cure the kids by his own methods—I mean, by Mortavort's own methods.

All sarcasm aside, Blair agreed to drop the case. She agreed within herself to never discuss the case beyond what became necessary, and to that end, as she moved about Elliot's household, she strove to stay as much in her own space as possible—she would carve out this part of the living room, and he could have that end of the kitchen.

A Dr. Pramida had set up the septuplets' room like a hospital suite, and the bluish beds went well with all the lavender. The girls had IVs stuck in their arms. “To be honest,” she'd said, “nobody on my estate is sure to what extent their bodies are in shock, to say nothing of their minds.” Aside from the initial vomiting (which Blair didn't report; she recounted nothing she'd seen or done at the lab, not to anyone), no clear symptoms had come from any of the drugs.

“That's great,” Elliot had said.

“That's worrying. We don't know what to expect or how long we should stay monitoring,” said Dr. Pramida. Suffice to say, the doctor would continue monitoring until they could no longer pay the bill.

This event became increasingly likely as the date for the Bourg Annual Budget Cut and Culling Trial approached. Just as likely was eviction from Martian society entire. Theirs was a

jumble of problems too numerous to focus on. They decided to focus on none at all—just take what was coming to them.

On the day before the trial, Blair sat at the top of a castle spire, looking through the parapet gaps at a mellow blue sky. After a period of trying to think of nothing at all, she ended up on the phone with Almost-Doctor Candy Out-of-Urwell, who wanted dearly to come.

“It’s not really a public trial,” said Blair. “If you’re not in the family, attendance is discouraged.” Viro was no showman because unlike, say, Henri Sendolorre, he had standards.

“Discouragement is not the same as a rule,” she said happily.

“Why are you coming? Because you like me?”

“Because it’s not right, it’s injustice. Like he has you in the palm of his hand.”

“Yeah. That’s exactly what it is. I put myself there.”

“That doesn’t make it right, does it?”

“Look,” said Blair, shifting. “Viro leveled with us, Elliot and I, had us over in his castle, and gave us the trial results ahead of time. Elliot is going. So are the kids, his ‘worst investment.’ I’ll stay. I might adopt someone.”

“Really... And how is that for you?”

“How is knowing that? It’s...fine. I have no problem with it. I have to put my mind on the family business, though. Think about architecture rather than—”

“Your dream.”

“It was never my dream.”

“That’s insane, Blair. You’re losing everything you had. From where I stand, it doesn’t matter whether or not you truly wanted Elliot and the girls in your life. Viro is dealing with a

woman who has lost damn near everything. He's not dealing gently. If you don't emerge as Blair Out-of-Bourg the lab specialist within the next year, I might pull you out myself."

"It's *fine*, Candy, really."

But she was fraught with fear, and she would have a sleepless night.

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"We'll bring her in. Why not? She'll have her say, /But I'm the king. If I say 'stay,' Blair stays."

Viro's black robe would have touched the floor, if he were anywhere near the floor. His throne and podium reached almost up to the ceiling; the podiums of his lesser judges seemed to be his stairs.

This courtroom, which stood somewhere between the *gallierie* and the chapel, had a deceptively humble interior besides the skewed proportions of the ruling party. There were brown wooden benches and lamps with decorative bulbs made only of semi-fine quartz. On the entrance's wall, ever facing Viro, the family seal appeared in full splendor.

Camera people stood on the walls and crouched by the aisles. In attendance was every Bourg citizen who had nothing better to do, which made about fifteen guests. Chase was on his own in the front, wearing a fine seersucker suit. He waved a loud paddle fan even though the room was air-conditioned to perfection. He wore this getup because to him and Viro it was funny, very funny indeed. Every now and then throughout the trial, Chase would smile and wink at Viro for no reason whatsoever.

The gap between Blair and Elliot as they sat on the short bench for cullees was not meant for Candy, but she came in and sat there anyway. Then the marble doors were closed.

“Everybody knows this is not a real trial,” said Viro. “That you have your, what, your child counselor come in to defend you, is madness.”

“That’s marriage counselor, sir,” said Candy.

Three blazing fast stenographers typed unceasingly at the side of the room.

“We are gathered here today for a purely ceremonial restatement of the facts. Let this testament be recorded,” he said with arms spread wide in a benevolent gesture of community, “and the mistakes never repeated.”

Chase shouted, “Yeah!” Not even the stenographers acknowledged this.

Viro addressed the parents. “Now, I allow that you endure some pain,/your children are a never-ending blain,/Your usefulness outdone. All this is plain./But try to think from Father’s point of view.” Later the stenographers would be asked to reword his statement so that the record preserved no attempt at a rhyme scheme. “When you hurt, I hurt too. Our pain is one./*Succumb* to pain, you take the whole world down./You have succumbed—and even *asked* to leave.”

He left a pause. People looked at each other and at the unflinching parents; nobody gasped, but they came close. Candy and her defendants stayed watching Viro.

“Insanity, defiance—patricide./Ungratefulness. *This* unforgiving look.” A spark of anger: “I said we should do *Lear*. We never did!”

As if summoning lightning, he raised his gavel for an instant. Applause! All from the lesser judges at his sides and from Chase. Viro had lost his cool; he was embarrassed. He laid the gavel softly down.

“No stage directions in the record,” said Viro.

“Excuse me,” said Candy, rising. “Blair and Elliot Bourg may be the sanest people among us. You have helped them to flourish for so long, and for that they are grateful.” The

couple behind her nodded. “They only leave from under your wing because they’re entering the next stage of life. Mars is the egg. Now they hatch.”

“Listen to yourself,” Viro sneered. “Stupid. This is no *egg*, this is the real world, a world of law. Obedience is not merely *expected*, but the stuff of life; it is *mandated* until the bitter end.”

“Our demands are simple!” Candy cried. “Do what you will in all respects but this: allow Blair some freedom.”

“Freedom!” he spat, equally entertained and raging mad. “Bourg is not just a shuttle ticket to paradise. Life has consequences.”

“Give her three months.”

“Candy, you’re embarrassing me,” Blair murmured.

“Nobody important is laughing at you, Blair.”

Blair’s attention wavered. She moved her hands into her silk-lined pockets.

“See?” said Viro. “She does not even deign to look at me. Little wonder that the childre—”

He was hit. A shot was fired and it hit him in the quivering throat, just under the chin. Mortavort, the revolutionary hopefuls, would have been proud, if only the shot was a real bullet. But it was just a pea, spat from a straw in Blair’s hand.

The pea rolled onto the floor ten meters below. Viro froze He and the audience looked around, unable to see the straw.

“Who did that? Was it Candy?”

“No, it was me, Dad,” said Blair.

He was almost speechless. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“I dunno. Just because. This is stupid. I should go.”

She slotted another pea into the straw and nicked his earlobe, which had also been quivering.

Blair was quickly apprehended by two servants acting as guards. They took her up by the arms and she dropped her straw of war. As they shuffled away, another servant took Elliot's hand and he surrendered willfully. Candy, however, was confused and even panicked.

"Unbelievable," said Viro. Now he attempted to make his tone that of a parent who is not mad, just disappointed. "I will have no more nonsense. Send both parents to Earth! Strip them of their titles! Court adjourned." He prepared to tap his gavel.

"But sir, the children?" said Candy. The parents were already being led down the center aisle.

"The children are Elliot's. Honestly, who cares." His voice had dwindled and was hardly audible below.

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Thanks to great mercy and the financial contributions of Kim and Candy, Blair and Elliot were given a brief vacation on their way to exile. It was a stopover on the Moon. Not the most romantic place—what with all the exoskeletons of excavation, construction, and industry clogging the pitch-black sky—but it was perfect for Blair and Elliot's moon. It would have been more perfect if that black sky were starless. Or if there were seven stars.

Their shuttle approached. A grey tarmac on white rock began to illuminate the cabin. This was a miniature shuttle in which they had no choice but to sit close to each other. It was like a train with only twelve seats. By sitting next to her, taking the aisle seat rather than the window seat, Elliot was really doing Blair a kindness, what they both recognized as his last kindness.

Blair looked out the window and said, "We shouldn't associate with each other."

Elliot smiled politely and said, “We shouldn’t associate with anyone.”

Then she reached for his armrest and squeezed his hand. She said, “Now’s our vacation. Our last leg together. The thrilling opposite of a honeymoon. Let’s go wild.”

These were the words of someone bold and daring, but Blair was none of that. The words belonged to someone else, to a composite of strong-willed people she knew or, now, only remembered. So as she said them, she looked remarkably timid.

Behind them, Rosie rehearsed her Mars-Earth performance speech, which made no sense and was unacceptable, since they were landing on the Moon.

Together they donned white spacesuits and crossed the white desert, which was almost blinding. They held hands, a child on one end of the long daisy chain and Blair on another. There was no particular path for tourists because tourists had stopped coming to the Moon long ago. Instead they walked between thick mechanical wireframes, passed workers. The Moon was not only airless, but forever low-gravity. The silence and slowness made the world seem profoundly dead.

There simply was nothing wild to do.

Two hours later they returned to the tarmac and boarded the same little ship. Rosie recommenced her Mars-Earth bit.

## Chapter 12: Final Life

“It’s a big one,” said Tabatha Youngblood as she looked through the window, across the backyard, through the fence and over the flattest flatlands of Oklahoma. Her view was interrupted by a yellow-green crate she identified as the Wal-Mart. Actually, everything out there, and in here, was yellow-green, tinted by the dust thrown up by the humongous tornado. The dust would fly for miles around.

Ms. Youngblood pushed the blinds back down. “Well,” she said, “time to wash the dishes.”

“You can’t wash the dishes,” said Harvard Youngblood from the family room.

“That’s right, I’ve got the arthritis.” She turned away from the window. “Blair!”

Voices carried in this one-floor house. Ms. Youngblood knew that Miss Youngblood could hear her even if she didn’t act like it. She moved to the guest room where Blair was staying until she got her bearings, and knocked on the doorframe. “It’s me, Blair,” she said. “Wash the dishes, I’ve got the arthritis.”

She was sitting by a window. She had her hand, palm and all, on the glass. She was spellbound and on the verge of opening it, dust and gale be damned.

Ms. Youngblood came in and tapped her shoulder. “Blair, yes, it’s beautiful, but can you wash the dishes, please?” she said.

Blair looked up at her, guilty. “Yes, of course,” she said. “You get worried, don’t you? We’ll find another place. As for jobs, I’m still looking.”

“Can you wash the dishes.”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “I’d like to talk to someone about the urban sprawl that’s springing up here. The whole neighborhood has changed. It’s amazing. I don’t like it.”



The rushing wind was starting to be audible.

Ms. Youngblood shuffled out. “Forget it!” she said to her husband a room away. “You do it!”

“I’m not doin’ it.”

“You do it, if you’re so worried about me and the...the arthri...”

She was distracted by the sight of Elliot, Mr. Elliot Schmidt, reading a newspaper in the parlor. That paper was the same one he’d had his nose in since that morning—he said he was studying the classifieds.

“It’s about time you put that down,” said Ms. Youngblood. She tried to say it sweetly. “Isn’t it.”

When Elliot glanced at her, he seemed to be frightened. Quickly he dove deeper into the paper.

She left. “Forget you too,” she said.

There were sounds of paper tearing in another room. A child’s voice said, “Mom?”