



The Martian Tragedy

A novel by Jacques Freydon

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ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your nephew, sir...”

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

“If I may,” said Mr. Patel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Force?"

"Armed force."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Eh? What's that?” asked the cabbie.

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

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

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