

Earthlight

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Wang An-feng stood there, looking out across the barren surface towards the earth, which rested low in the sky. Behind her, its dome-like skeletal form only faintly drawn in the darkness, was the massive frame of Tai Huo, the new city they were building.

It had been a long day. Things were happening. Even as she stood there, things were changing. At least, that was what she'd heard. The colonists had had enough. Now they were wresting the power from the hands of those who, like Fan Fa-liang, were not Mars born, but servants of the seven great Lords, back on Chung Kuo. Making Mars their own. Throwing off the shackles of the last eighty years.

If rumour could be trusted, Governor Fan was already dead, shot through the helmet by one of his own bodyguards while visiting the new oxygen-generation plant up in Biblis Patera. Whether it were true or not, it was significant that there even was a rumour. Mars had always been tightly governed. Treated more like a prison camp than the new frontier.

Yes, and if anyone knew the truth of that, it was Wang An-feng, for she had been here almost fifty years now. Part of the second wave that had turned a base camp into a Colony. One of the 'Old Hundred' who had crossed the dark of space to come to this desolate place. Perhaps the last of them.

Those had been hard times. Of the hundred who had come, only thirty were alive ten years later.

She glanced at the display lozenge at her wrist. Ninety eight and falling. She would need to get inside real soon, or freeze to death out here,

among the red sands. Besides, Kan Jiang would be waiting for her. Worrying about her safety.

Wang An-feng took one long, last look at it, the longing she always felt undiminished. Earthlight. How beautiful it was.

Kan Jiang leaned against the curved wall of the old deep-level access tunnel, listening to the noises up ahead, praying that the mob would pass them by.

There were three of them, there in the darkness. There had been four, but Wong had punctured his suit when he fell. They had tried to mend the breach but it was too late. He had died an awful death, his lungs coated with ice.

Kan shuddered. They had been mending one of the pipelines, out on the surface, beneath the blue-green light of earth, when it had begun. Two big explosions, to the south, and then another, closer, just up ahead of where they'd been working.

He had known at once what it was. There had been rumours about it for weeks now. And now here it was. The end of it all.

Or the beginning, as some were claiming. Only they were fools. Down there, on earth – in the levels of Chung Kuo – great damage could be done and it would make little difference in the long term. But out here, on Mars? No. They would be lucky to survive this. Any of them. That was, if it got out of hand.

Ch'en turned, looking back at them, his face lit up within his helmet. "Let's edge further round," he whispered, keeping his voice as low as he could. "There's a lock-in..."

Kan looked to Yuan, who was just across from him and got a nod. He turned back, looking to Ch'en. "Okay. But slowly... noise travels far in these tunnels."

He followed the others, stopping when they stopped, to listen and check that no one was heading their way, then moving on again, stretch

after stretch. And as they did, so the sound of the rioting mob dropped behind them.

Thank the gods.

“It’d make a good poem, neh?” Ch’en said, smiling back at him.

Maybe. Only he was in no mood for poetry right then. Survival was the key.

The thought made him wonder where Wang An-feng was at that moment. Whether she was inside, and who she was with. Whether she’d be safe...

Oh, gods, let her be safe!

He had been fine until that moment, but now the awfulness of it struck him. If she’d been there beside him, he’d have been fine. It was just the uncertainty. The not-knowing.

Kuan Yin protect her and let her survive this night. Kuan Yin protect us both.

The lock-in was not far now. Just up a bit and to the right, at the end of a short corridor, all of which had been built the best part of sixty years ago, by members of the second expedition. True pioneers. Brave men – and women – who had carved a living space out of the bare rock.

If they could get there they’d be safe. At least, until the morning.

Even in the tunnel it was cold now. Yes, even here, five meters below the surface. They needed to hope that the lock-in had been kept supplied by the maintenance crews. That there’d be a heater there among the other items.

Up ahead, Ch’en tensed, then raised a hand, signalling for them to stop. Something – *someone* – was up ahead. Kan could hear them now, breathing heavily, as if injured.

He wasn’t sure at first, but then he heard a tiny groan.

“Stay there,” he whispered, easing past them. “If things go wrong, lock yourself in. Okay?”

He could see neither of them liked that. They wanted to go with him. But it made no sense for all of them to be killed. That was, if it *was* an ambush.

“Give me a minute or two. If I need your help I’ll click my fingers, twice.”

Ch’en made to object, but Kan was gone, round to the left and on, the generator directly ahead of him now.

Kan saw it at once, a hunched bundle of rags which blocked the floor halfway along the straight run of tunnel. He slowed, looking beyond it, in case this was a trap, then went on.

He approached it slowly, tentatively, expecting it to move at any moment, to leap up and attack him. Only there was no possibility of that. Crouching over it, he caught his breath. It was a woman, the dark length of her hair crusted in ice, her neck and the front of her suit spattered with blood. There was no sign of her helmet, nor any reason why she would be here, in the old tunnels. But she was alive. He could see the shuddering rise and fall of her chest.

She groaned.

Kan leaned close whispered to her. “*Nu shi...* Can you hear me?”

Nothing. Kan looked about him, searching for any clues as to why she should be here. But again, there was nothing.

Okay. But he couldn’t stay here. Nor could he leave her. He’d have to drag her.

Kan reached beneath her, getting purchase under her arms, then straightened as much as he could and took a step backwards.

He couldn’t budge her. Couldn’t as much as begin to move her. *Too heavy*, he thought, and nearly laughed. More likely he was too old. He turned, facing back where he’d come from and clicked his fingers twice.

Two figures appeared from the darkness in an instant; saw at once what he was trying to do and joined him, the three of them moving the slumped woman easily, dragging her back to the entrance to the corridor.

They stopped, getting their breath, while Ch’en went and opened up the lock-in. He was back a moment later, to help once more with the unconscious woman. Glancing back, Kan could see, from the light in his helmet, how they’d left a trail of blood; a great smear that showed clearly against the whiteness of the tunnel’s floor.

Come and get us, he thought, wondering at the same time whether it might not be worth him coming back and clearing up after him. Only with what?

They got her inside and closed the hatch, then put the emergency lights on, pulling off their helmets as they did. Looking about him, in the sudden brightness, Yuan laughed. "There's a screen!" he said, pointing. "I wonder if it's patched in?"

Only Kan Jiang was more concerned with the woman. In the bright light of the lock-in she looked even worse off than he'd thought. Close to death. He made to unzip her suit and look at her more closely, when he realised... the bottom of the suit, about the crutch, had been ripped open, in all probability with a knife. Kan blinked, then understood. This was no accident. She'd been attacked. Beaten up and raped.

Kan Jiang groaned, appalled by what he saw. She couldn't have been more than in her early twenties. Just a child, really. Yes, and now that he could see her face, pretty too.

Only who was she and what was she doing here? Kan thought he knew just about everyone on Mars, but her he didn't know. "I've never seen this one before," he said, looking to where Ch'en was kneeling, getting the heater working.

"She might be new," he said, looking up at Kan. There was a flight in only last week with eight new colonists on board. She could be one of them."

That was possible. They had been sending them in in dribs and drabs these past few years. Women, mainly, which was no surprise, considering how men far outnumbered women on Mars. They had to prepare for the journey, of course, back on Chung Kuo, but, with the number of volunteers dropping, the rewards were high. Maybe that's what they'd attacked her for. Her money. Only that made no sense. You started spending stolen money on Mars and you'd be caught within the week.

Kan found the first aid kit, then came back. Ch'en was busy fitting up a camp bed, to help make her more comfortable, but Kan was beginning to wonder if that wasn't just a waste of time. Her breathing was very shallow now. She must have lost a lot of blood.

As Ch'en helped him get her onto the bed, Kan winced at her injuries. If they survived tonight, he would get whoever did this. Carve the little fucker up.

Taking the scissors from the box, he began to cut the suit off her, Ch'en helping him at every step, lifting an arm to make it easier for him. It was hard-going at first, the fine mesh in the suit making it hard to cut, but eventually they were done.

"Gods help us," Kan said, real anguish in his voice. "Look at the poor girl."

She'd been cut in at least twenty places in the neck and breasts and torso. Stabbed repeatedly, and bruised. Kan gestured towards the first aid box. "Ch'en... give me a swab or something. I want a semen sample. And then give her a shot of something to kill the pain and put her out."

Ch'en made to say something, then nodded and began to search the box.

Kan Jiang, meanwhile, was studying the wounds, trying to see if there was anything he could do. Not that there really was. The best they could do was staunch the bleeding and wait until morning, when they might try and find a doctor. Yes, and pray. If prayer meant anything on this godforsaken planet.

He set about his task, using lint and tape, covering her until she looked like a patchwork doll. She looked awful, especially her face, which, now that the ice in her hair had thawed, showed heavy bruising, especially the eyes and lips. The kind of bruising you'd get if you were punched consistently in the face.

I'll kill the little cunt. I'll absolutely kill him.

He stood, feeling weary, realizing, for the first time, that the screen was on, even if the sound was turned down.

"There's been major rioting in both the cities," Yuan said. "And cracking..."

"Cracking?" Kan looked appalled by the news. If the great domes cracked then they were done for as a colony.

"Yes... but they say they're busy repairing them. And the grid's still functioning. Oh, and they've sent in troops. To calm things down."

Yes, that'll work. Only for once he couldn't be too critical. He knew why they were rioting. You couldn't live on Mars and not know. But things had got out of hand.

He looked across the room. Ch'en was searching through the shelves.

"Is there anything to eat?"

Ch'en laughed, then hefted him a can. "Red Martian soup... with an added fifty per cent of dust!"

Wang An-feng ducked beneath the low lintel then stopped, identifying herself, hoping the guard would open up for her. Two cruisers had gone over, ten minutes back, heading south towards the open plains, which was risky to say the least in these conditions, but anyone with any sense was digging in. Finding somewhere safe and barricading themselves in.

Which was her plan, only...

"Go away!" a crackly voice said, the rime which covered the intercom unit just above where she was standing distorting the sound. "You can't stay here."

"Please," she pleaded, beginning to shiver in her suit, despite the heater. "It's Wang An-feng. I *work* here."

Either they didn't hear her, or were ignoring her, because there was no reply.

She took a long, frigid breath. Ten minutes. That's all she had left, at the very outside. Ten minutes and then she could say goodbye to it all. She turned slowly, looking back up the stone steps, wondering what she could do. Already there was a tingling in her toes and in her fingers. Any time now her body would start shutting down.

The frames, she thought. Maybe someone's in the frames. If so...

It was a risk, she knew, but it was no good waiting here to die. She had to make an effort, even if she got it wrong. She wasn't going to just give up.

Moving slowly now, each step making her heart pound faster, she climbed the steps and looked across. From where she stood the frames seemed empty, abandoned. Then again, the power had been cut an hour ago, so there'd be no apparent sign of life. The door, she knew, was on the far side, a couple of hundred meters at most.

She'd be lucky to make it.

Wang An-feng closed her eyes, praying to the gods, then launched herself out, half running now, feeling the cold wind bite into her side, making her moan. It was hard to move her legs now, they were so numb, and in moments she was stumbling, waiting for her feet to catch on a rock, or just to give way beneath her. Only she kept going, the blackened form of the frames looming out of the night at her. She slowed, following its wall round to the right, then back left. The doorway was somewhere up ahead, only she could barely get her breath now. The faceplate of her helmet was freezing over, and try as she did to clear it, the ice kept re-forming.

And then her feet went from under her. She fell, knocking the last breath from her, the pain making her cry out...

Dead. She knew it even before she settled. She hadn't made it. Her gamble had failed.

Only even as she rolled over and lay still, the pain in her legs and hips excruciating, so something seemed to swoop out of the darkness close by and gather her up.

For a moment she thought she was hallucinating. That this was a death dream. A visit by the God of Hell, to tease and torment her. Only suddenly her body, which had seemed to be weightless, floating of its own devices, took on weight again, while the air about her was suddenly not warm, but no longer chill.

Inside, she realized, even as she passed into unconsciousness. *Someone's carried me inside.*

While the others slept, Kan penned a poem.

In his younger days he had been quite profligate with his poetry, writing two, maybe three poems in a day. But recently the gift had abandoned him. The well had run dry, the voice fallen silent. Leaving him an ordinary man.

But tonight... well, tonight he remembered who he was.

It was a short thing, inspired by the wounded girl, who even now lay still, her chest rising and falling shallowly as Kan looked on, concerned. It was that concern that was the subject of his poem. The concern of one human being for another. It was not a big theme – not like some of his best poems. In fact, it was not really that good at all, only...

Only he'd had a sense, even as he wrote it, that it was not he but the gods who had written it this once, using him as a channel, a conduit you might say, through which to have their say.

"*Into The Dark*", he'd called it, surprising himself once more – for it seemed that that too was something he'd had imposed on him.

And then she woke.

He was sat there, his thoughts drifting back to olden days, when he realized that the sound in the room had changed. That the patterned web of breath had changed. He turned, seeing in the screen's light how she was watching him, her green, *Hung Mao* eyes bright and moist in the ever-changing play of light.

Impossible, he thought. He'd given her enough sedative in that last shot to put a patrol to sleep. But she *was* watching him.

He went across to her, crouching beside the camp bed. "*Nu Shi...*?"

She did not answer. Did not move or look away. Just stared at him. Was she in shock? Had her ordeal driven her mad?

He reached out, drawing her hair back from her face. As he did, she closed her eyes and seemed to sigh, like a child, soothed by his touch.

Kan stayed there a long while after that, letting the warmth of his hand comfort her. His mind seemed empty of thought, yet at the same time he was conscious of the ache in his bones, of the sheer, unabated tiredness that formed the constant backdrop to his days.

Death and dust. That was all it came down to in the end. Death and dust.

Wang An-feng turned, groaning. Her ankle was a blaze of pain, like a vivid scarlet gash in a field of purest white. The rest of her was numb.

Things came back to her slowly. Being picked up and carried through the dark. And then? Nothing. As if she had melted into the dark. A blackness that swayed and juddered and now and then tilted from side to side, while she was at the centre of it all, held fast by the tight-fitting straps, like a fly in a spider's web. And, at the back of it all, that incessant cacophony; a buzzing, humming, crackling sound, its fierce metallic nature threaded with the faintest trace of storm winds.

A door behind her opened. A head appeared. She gaped at it, then understood.

Osu...

She had not seen one in close to thirty years. Had thought them, possibly, extinct. But here one was.

"Are you alright, *Nai Nai*?"

Nai Nai. She had not been called that in a long while.

"My ankle..."

The big man came across, filling the space between her and the end wall. "It's broken", he said, in that matter-of-fact manner the *Osu* had. "We can't see to it until we get back. But I can get you something for the pain."

She nodded, her eyes thanking him.

Alone once more, she tried to reach down, to feel for herself what damage had been done, only the restraining straps stopped her. It was throbbing now, the pain quite unlike anything she had ever experienced. Broken, eh? How badly broken? From the feel of it, very badly indeed. But it was better than having been left there to be devoured by the cold.

Only... the *Osu*. What were the *Osu* doing so far north?

She closed her eyes, trying to ignore the throbbing pain, but it was impossible, and when the big man returned with the injector, she almost sighed with gratitude as he administered it.

"There," he said, smiling down at her, his broad black face like something from a dream. "That ought to make you sleep. Three hours and were home. We'll treat you then."

But she had already gone. Slipped back into the darkness once again.

Kan stood over Ch'en, shaking his fellow worker 'til he woke.

"Wha...?" he mumbled, bad tempered at being woken so rudely.

"Come on," Kan said, shaking him again, making sure he didn't slip back into sleep. "We've got to get her to a clinic."

Ch'en rubbed at his eyes, then sat up. He made to say something, then noticed the girl. "Is she...?"

"I think she's seen off the worst of it," Kan answered. "She's a tough cookie. But she needs treatment, and soon... She's lost a lot of blood."

Ch'en nodded, then realized Yuan wasn't there.

"I sent him ahead," Kan said, anticipating his question. "Whoever did this to her.... Well, I don't want to tip the bastard off. He probably thinks she's dead. No... Yuan's gone ahead to clear a bed for her somewhere we can keep guard over her, 'til I can get Security to help out."

"You think they're still in charge, Kan, after last night?"

Kan shrugged. "Maybe not. But let's assume they are."

Ch'en looked up at the screen. "No news on that thing, then?"

"It closed down two hours back. But things seemed quiet by then. One advantage, I guess, of having such cold nights."

Ch'en nodded, then got to his feet, looking to Kan Jiang again. "Let me piss, then we'll get moving."

"Okay," Kan said, smiling at his old friend, glad to have him there beside him. "And do one for me while you're there, eh?"

Wang lay there in the wavering candle light, her mind drifting as she dreamed of her first days on Mars; of the awful homesickness, and of her first husband, Sho, and her young son, Ze – both lost in that terrible accident . And of her first meeting with her darling Kan. All of it mixed and muddled by the drugs; one thing blurred with another in her head, like her past had been cut into a thousand pieces and re-cast.

Kan Jiang... his face came to her through a wash of returning pain. What a strange man he had seemed at first. So fierce and intense. So frighteningly perceptive.

“Please!” she called out, her ankle beginning to throb again. “*Please!*”

Kan had been on her team, out in the desert of the Tharsis Plains. Constructing one of the huge ten thousand *mu* frames. Working alongside her by day, their suits brushing against each other’s, their exhausted bodies lying alongside each other at night, in the warmth of the pressure tents.

Soft footsteps sounded on the nearby stone. As he came into her sight, Wang saw it was the one who had been on the craft with her. The big black man. The Osu.

“Is it wearing off, *Nai Nai*?”

She stared back at him for seconds, then, as the pain washed back, nodded, grimacing as she did. What in the gods’ names had she done to it?

He came round and knelt beside her, reaching down, one hand holding her leg just below the knee, while the other examined her ankle.

“*Aiya!*” he said softly. Which would have made her laugh – a black man using so Han an exclamation – were her ankle not so painful.

“What have I done?”

He met her eyes unflinching. “You’ve snapped it like a twig, *Nai Nai*. A clean break. But we can see to that, don’t worry.”

She nodded, grateful for his honesty. “Thank you. And my name is Wang. Wang An-feng.”

He smiled. A beautiful, whole-hearted smile. "And mine is Echewa. Ugoye Echewa. Son of Malawa."

She looked down a moment, then met his eyes again. "Tell me, Ugoye. What were you doing there? And just why did you stop to save me?"

"The gods were with you, *Nai Nai*." His smile grew wider momentarily. "By which I mean it was pure chance. I was heading for the ship when I saw you. You almost walked into me... and then you fell. I brought you here because... well, because it seemed the thing to do, I guess. To leave you there... it was unthinkable."

She stared at him, amazed not only by the look of him but by the moral certainty he displayed. *Unthinkable*. Yet any other would have hurried by and left her to die.

"Thank you. I..." She caught her breath, wincing as another jolt of pain arced through her.

"Wait here," Ugoye said, concern in his face now. "I'll return with the *Ndice*."

"The...?"

"The *Ndice*... our chief. I'll bring him..."

Ugoye turned away. In a moment he was gone. Gone like the shadow he surely was. Osu... how could she possibly have found herself among the Osu?

They were back in a moment, the old man's stubbly grey hair reminding her of Kan's, his face black to Kan's yellow, but otherwise...

"Wang An-feng," he said, smiling at her, even as he knelt to examine her ankle. "What are you doing so far from home?"

For a moment she mistook him, thinking he was talking of Earth, then she laughed. Despite the pain. "You should ask your son, Ugoye. He kidnapped me."

"And brought you here, to this hidden place, neh?"

His touch was firm but gentle. Wang waited; saw how he studied her injury then looked back at her. He had wise eyes. Again, like Kan's.

"The break looks clean," he said, smiling at her again, "but we'll need to secure it. To make the bone strong again." He paused, then. "You've

very lucky, Wang An-feng. Our surgeons are among the finest on Mars. It was one of my great-grandfather's greatest skills -and he passed it on to his sons... my uncles. But you will have to stay with us a while."

"I see..." She was about to say something more, but what was there to say? She had survived, and they would make her well again. But she would need to be patient. To wait here while the break healed. She was not a young woman any more, after all.

Wang An-feng nodded. "I am grateful, *Ndiche*..."

"Just call me Iwegbu..."

"Iwegbu?"

That ancient black face broadened in a smile once again. "It means 'Anger will not destroy'. In my young days I did not live up to it. And you, An-feng?"

She laughed. "Wang is Wang, Iwegbu. The most common of Old Hundred Names. But I should tell you... I was among the second settlers, my friend. Those who tried to destroy your kind."

"And yet here I am and there you are."

"Should I apologize to you, Iwegbu?"

He shrugged. "For what? For following your masters' orders? No. Things were as they were. It was not your fault, Wang An-feng. Mars tests those who come to it."

She nodded, agreeing with that. "Iwegbu... is it possible to get word to someone? To let them know I am alright?"

The old man hesitated then shook his head. "Not for some time, I'm afraid. We need to let things settle. Those in power will be looking this way for some time, trying to discern our presence. You see, it is still their intention to eradicate us."

That shocked her. That it was still going on, long decades after the Osu had fled the Martian cities. It didn't seem right.

And Kan Jiang? He would have to suffer not knowing what had happened to her. And that too would be a test – for both of them. She sighed, then looked to Iwegbu again, smiling at her savior through the pain.

"I am indebted to you, dear friend. If there is ever anything..."

But she could see he knew that. That he understood just who she was.

Kuei Ts'ai was relaxing on the bridge, enjoying a bowl of wine with his son, Cheng-fu, when the message came.

He read it once, then handed it across. Watched as the young man took in what had happened then looked up, his eyes pools of surprise.

"A rebellion?"

Admiral Kuei nodded. "That's what it says."

"And we..."

"Can do nothing," he finished for his son. "At least, not for the four months it'll take us to get to Mars. Mind... we have one great advantage."

"They don't know we're coming."

"Precisely."

Kuei Ts'ai held out his bowl for the servant to top up, then sipped at it again. "To say we'll surprise them is an understatement."

Too true, he thought, almost smiling at the picture that came into his head as, one by one, the twelve massive spacecraft that formed his fleet, dropped out of the darkness to re-take the Colony. But that was yet to come. Right now he had to do all he could to save the situation. Or, if not save it, then at least ameliorate it.

"Is there truly *nothing* we can do?" asked Cheng-fu, holding his own bowl up to be re-filled.

"We can notify our Masters, back on Chung Kuo," his father replied. He set his bowl down and stood, then walked across to where, beyond the thick glass, Mars could be seen as a small red dot against the star-spattered backdrop. "That said, this changes nothing. We might lose some good men... men loyal to the Seven ... but that was always likely. No. We shall proceed as instructed by our Masters. Our enemies have shown their hand too soon, and that can only make our task easier."

"Easier?"

Kuei Ts'ai turned slightly, noting how Cheng-fu sat there, his shoulders hunched defensively. The young man was not as confident as he. In fact, he had taken a great deal of persuading to join this expedition. And though he stood to gain much more than most, he was still of two minds as to this venture. Governor of Mars would look good on his record, only Cheng-fu worried whether he would survive long enough to benefit from that.

And who could blame him? Out here one felt exposed. Physically and psychologically. It took a genuinely hard breed of man – and woman – to live out here. As Kuei Ts'ai knew, for he had spent eight years on Mars when he was a much younger man. Had seen with his own eyes how unforgiving Mars could be.

In short, the boy would be tested to the limits. But that, Kuei Ts'ai felt, was good. Left at home, back on Chung Kuo, Cheng-fu, would have eventually succumbed to his weaker, softer side. Would have become what he himself detested. A sybarite. A wastrel of a son, addicted to wine, women and the gratification of his senses. But not out here. Out here he'd have to knuckle down or go under. There was no other option. Mars would shape Cheng-fu – hopefully for the better. Make him a stronger, more pragmatic man than he now was.

Hopefully.

He turned, facing Cheng-fu again.

"I say there is nothing we can do, but one thing that must *not* happen is for them to get notice of our impending arrival. From here on all communications with our contacts on Mars must be tightly screened. I want you to see to that personally, Cheng-fu."

The young man set his bowl aside, then stood, bowing low to his father, the Admiral. "It will be as you say, honoured father."

"Good. Now get some rest. We'll discuss this further on the morrow."

Alone once more, Kuei Ts'sai mulled things over. This venture – this fifth major expedition to Mars - was the culmination of twenty years of top secret planning, the last ten of which had involved him intimately. They had begun it back in 2083, working out what would be needed and designing these special craft – craft a good twenty or thirty times as large as those of earlier expeditions. The early prototypes had failed – spectacularly so in some cases - but they had persevered... and a good job too.

Manufactured in earth's orbit these last three years, these craft had been designed for one destination only. Mars. Twelve giant craft in all, with fifteen hundred men – and women - in each, the vast majority of them stacked in 'cold sleep' apartments, awaiting the day when they'd be woken. That alone was different from all previous expeditions, yet it was not the greatest innovation. That was the design of the craft, because these were not designed as fighting craft – though they could do a fair enough job of defending themselves if called on to do so – but as settlement vehicles, their perfectly rounded middle-sections, built of steel and extra-strength glass and designed - once the means of flight had been cut away - to be used as domes, the giant globes embedded in the Martian surface.

Twelve tiny cities. That's what they'd be to begin with. But those 'Cities' would in time form the hubs not only of bigger cities that would be built surrounding them, but of spaceports and reservoirs, generators and pumping stations. The infrastructure of a new and better Mars.

Admiral Kuei smiled at the thought. A new Mars. But first they'd have to forge a peace with the old. To harness its expertise and hard-won knowledge. Or, if that proved impossible, to crush it beneath his heels.

Yuan met them in the corridor outside the medical facility, hurrying to help them with the girl.

"What's up?" Ch'en asked, conscious, like Kan, that something must have happened to make Yuan so ill at ease.

"Inside!" he said in a harsh whisper, gripping her beneath the arms and backing towards the doorway as it began to iris open. "Quick now!"

Inside was chaos. The wounded lay or sat or stood all about them, some burned, some lain there, gasping for breath, some suffering more commonplace breaks and sprains. Yuan ignored them, pushing his way through, holding the girl with one hand while he used the other to move people aside, making no apology for his roughness.

There, on the far side of the crowded waiting room, in what had been an office, he had set up a makeshift treatment room. Calling in favours, no doubt. Straining, they lifted her up onto the trolley bed, then pulled a blanket over her.

"Well?" Kan asked. "What's happening?"

Yuan slammed the door shut, then turned to face them. "He was here. The one who did this to her."

"You know that?"

"I had the sample tested. It was a perfect match."

"So who is he?" Ch'en asked. "Anyone we know?"

Yuan nodded. "It was Yu Lai. You know, the Assessor's man."

The Assessor was the government official who calculated the cost of all projects and presented those figures to the Governor to act upon or otherwise. And his 'man' – Yu Lai – was his assistant, working with the teams – like their own – to produce those estimated figures.

"Are you sure?" Kan asked, knowing, even as he asked it, that it was a certainty. He had never trusted the man. Never liked him. Only Yu Lai wasn't a rebel. So what had he been doing running with the mob?

"One hundred per cent," Yuan answered. "Only I can't be certain who now knows that we know. To get the test done... I had to pass the specimen through various hands."

"We should go to the Assessor," Chen said, but Yuan just shook his head.

"We can't. He's dead."

"Then the Governor..."

"Also dead."

"Then who's in charge?"

Yuan's face answered that.

"Oh fuck!"

"It seems the coup was his idea. He didn't kill Fan-liang, not with his own hands, but he sure as hell orchestrated it. And now he's in charge... apparently. No news has come out of Kang Fen these past four hours." He paused, then. "They say they shot down one of the big Security cruisers as it was landing at the spaceport. Oh yes, and a whole swathe of settlers' domes were destroyed too, the seals broken, the air sucked out. There's thousands dead."

The news of that made Kan Jiang groan. It was quite possible that his darling Wang were among them, though with communications down there was no real way of knowing.

"What are we to do?" Yuan asked, looking to the other two anxiously. "Just wait here for him to come and take us?"

"You think he'll actually come after us?" Ch'en asked, looking to Kan Jiang for his lead. But Kan had no answers.

"Maybe we'll be lucky," he said. "Maybe he's too busy to see to this straight away. But I know one thing. *She* needs a transfusion. And she needs it now. So let's make that our priority, and then worry about Yu-lai later. If she dies..."

The words choked him. Is this what it had come to?

"Fan Fa-liang got what he deserved," he said. "He was a corrupt man. These new domes they're building – yes, and the generating plants, too – they cost a fortune to construct. Because of that, there's a lot of money flowing through their hands right now, and there are those among them who think they deserve a cut. We didn't see it before now, because there wasn't a great deal of investment coming in to Mars. But now it's different."

It was true what he'd said. Things *had* changed. It *felt* different. And the influx of money these past few years had fed that. Up 'til now, Mars had been a desert planet, beautiful but deadly. But that had changed.

They had been pioneers, building a new world on the very frontier of space. But those days had gone. The profiteers had arrived, and, like the

jackals they were, they were as like to strip them bare as share a single *fen* with those who did the work.

Only the irony was that the leader of the rebels was one of those jackals. Yes, and thanks to him, they were now directly in his sights.

“Let’s see to her,” Kan said, nodding, smiling at his two friends, as if to give them courage against the hours ahead. “Let’s sort her out first, and then we’ll worry about the other matter.”

Yu Lai looked about him and scowled. The opulence of the place had always revolted him, like the ostentation of its owner. But it was his now and he could do what he wished with its décor.

The Governor’s Mansion was set inside its own small dome, outside of Kang Fen city, the great house designed in the hacienda style of the first settlers. With Fan Fa-liang dead, he had taken it without a fight, Fan’s bodyguards, seeing which way the dust was blowing, bowing to him and kissing the ring he had personally hacked from Fa-liang’s finger to place upon his own.

Mars was his. And not just Mars, but all the people on it. His to do with as he wished. Free of the Seven and all of its meddling officials. Free of all the half-men – and women – they sent out across the void to rule them.

Not that that was how he would present it. No. Not for one moment would he set himself against the Seven. Quite the contrary. What had happened here was simply stated. The Martian Colonists had risen up, not against the Seven, but against their corrupt representatives, Governor Fan chief among them.

And his role in all of this?

His role had been to pacify Mars. To pour cold water on the flames. And afterwards to express his undying loyalty to the Seven... even as he made secret deals with those he knew back on Chung Kuo.

And they’d accept that. Accept it because there was nothing else to do but go along with him – either that or wait the full fifteen months it

would take them to send their ships – ships which they'd no doubt have to build from scratch.

While he would be busy strengthening his defences.

He looked out through the curved glass of the dome, seeing Chung Kuo, there, low down to the right of the vista. It would be hours before they learned what had happened. Days before they would meet to discuss just what to do. Months before they acted.

And all the while...

“Your Excellency!”

He turned, frowning at the interruption of his thoughts.

“What is it, man?”

The servant knelt, then bowed his head, one hand extended in front of him, holding out a sealed envelope.. “I have a message for you, my Lord. From your agent in the Ro Hui medical centre.”

Yu Lai ripped it from his hand impatiently and slit it open with his nail. What in the gods' names was this now?

He read it once, then once again, in the space between deciding that all those who'd seen this would have to die, the messenger included.

Yu Lai smiled and beckoned to the man to rise.

“Is there an answer, Master?”

He shook his head, acting as if the news had no great importance, then waved the man away. Alone again, however, his face took on a different shape. He swore beneath his breath, then forced himself to be still. To decide what was the best way to deal with this.

They all had to die, certainly. There was no way he would have this haunt his days. But how? Should he accuse them of being rebels? That would certainly be the most direct. Or perhaps he could have them have an accident. A faulty flier, maybe, or a sudden de-pressurization. Something which, in the chaos of these days, might be overlooked.

Even so, he blamed himself. How could he have been so stupid? Oh, he'd thought her wounds would kill her. Had enjoyed taunting her at the end. Only he should have cut her throat while he'd had the chance, not left her for some do-gooder to find and nurse back to life.

He crossed the room quickly and summoned his aide. As the young man bowed, he took his arm and led him aside, out of the view of the camera.

"The man who just came... I'm certain he's a rebel. Arrest him, now, before he gets a chance to escape, and throw him in the cells. I'll deal with him when I come back. Oh, and have the guards ready a cruiser for me."

"You're going somewhere, Master?"

"I am."

"Might I...?"

"Just get the cruiser ready," he said, angry now. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

Wang An-feng sat there, her leg stretched out before her in the chair, surprised by how quick, how pain-free the operation had been. Oh, it ached still, and it felt awkward where they had put the metal clips in to keep the bone straight and tight while it healed, but she could live with that.

Above her, through the thick but clear pane of curved protective glass she could see Mars' tiny moon, Deimos, drifting slowly eastward, its backdrop of stars unchanging. Earth had yet to rise, but it was strangely warm where she sat, as if they sat above some volcanic vent that tapped deep into the planet's crust.

They had left her alone there to recuperate, while they busied themselves doing whatever it was they were doing. But it seemed to her that something big, something important was happening among the Osu. Something to do, perhaps, with what was happening in the Colony itself.

Which brought her thoughts back to Kan Jiang and how he was. That was the worst of it: the not knowing where he was and whether he was well. Not to speak of the anxiety he must be feeling at *her* absence. Did he think her dead? Was he worrying even now at her failure to return?

She sat there, as the earthlight leeches into the world once again; a new day, longer than the days on earth, spinning into being.

Oddly it reminded her of her childhood and of the tiny rural village in China where she had lived. Of waking early to find her grandfather already up and about, collecting the eggs from the chicken coop, then sitting there, his pipe smoldering in his cupped left hand, sending out its distinctive smell into that chill, long-shadowed world, his plaited white beard glistening with dew at that early hour.

It was he who had first stirred her interest in the red planet. He who had told her it was called The Fire Star, or alternatively, Yinghou, or 'the shimmering planet', or by some 'the 'Punishment of Heaven'. So many names for a single star. Only it wasn't a star. It was a planet, like Chung Kuo, but unoccupied.

And she had wondered what it would be like to live there... so far away in the sky.

Wang An-feng sighed deeply. Her *Ye Ye* had died long ago, and Chung Kuo... Chung Kuo was nothing but a memory now, as distant as the earthlight that crossed the void between the two planets. And yet she could see herself, no more than six years old, sitting there on the wall beside him, watching as he lit his pipe. The memory as real to her as if it had happened yesterday.

Smoke rings and illusions. Some days she found herself wondering whether this world in which she lived was a world of *wu*, of 'non-being', or whether it had substance.

Kan Jiang, of course, believed it had both. But then he would. He had told her many times how light was made up of photons that, at one and the same time, behaved like particles *and* waves. How they lived in a discontinuous universe. A quantum space that didn't quite make sense.

Starlight and non-being. It was how things were. And how did the gods fit into that?

Wang An-feng sighed, then reached out to scratch her ankle, just above where they had operated. She should have been dead, Had Ugoye not found her she would have been. So was that chance or destiny? Or both?

She laughed, then grew more sober. *Be well, Kan Jiang my love. Be well.*

Kan Jiang stood there in the corridor outside, out of sight, getting his breath back. That was the trouble with getting old. One forgot how unfit one was, how the flesh could not live up to the mind's instructions.

But that was the least of his problems right now.

He had walked straight in, anxious to gather the others up and get out of there, using the hopper he'd commissioned. Only one glance had told him that things had changed for the worse. He couldn't see the face of the man who stood there on the far side of the room, he had his back to Kan Jiang, but he knew that voice.

Yu Lai. What in the God of Hell's name was he doing there?

Oh, he knew. Of course he knew. But he'd not expected him to come this soon. He'd thought they had some kind of breathing space in which to act. But he'd pre-empted them. And now they'd pay the price.

If he'd had a gun Kan Jiang would have walked back in and shot the bastard dead, and never mind the consequences. Only he hadn't. Yu Lai held all the aces. He could hear him now, that nasty, poisonous voice of his ordering people about, bullying and criticizing, making them do his will.

And Ch'en and Yuan?

Gunshots rang out. Two shots... another... and then two more.

Kan Jiang groaned. He should leave. Return to the hopper and get out of there fast. Only Yu Lai would come after him. Wherever he went, Yu Lai would pursue him. Wherever he tried to hide.

He stood there a moment longer, rent in two with indecision, then turned and fled. But he had gone barely a dozen steps when someone called him back, their voice husky, almost a whisper.

Kan Jiang whirled about, trying to see where the sound had come from, then saw the part open door of the store cupboard. In there?

He went across and, pulling back the door, looked inside.

“Aiya...”

It was her. The young woman he had saved. She was kneeling there, barely able to keep herself upright, her eyes pleading with him.

If he'd been twenty, even ten years younger he'd have tried to carry her. To help her get away. Only he wasn't. He'd tried once before to shift her and knew he didn't have the strength. He was an old man now.

He slipped inside, then closed the door behind him, putting his weight against it, facing her, less than an arm's length away in the darkness.

“Don't make a noise,” he whispered. *“Not a sound, okay?”*

“Okay,” she whispered back.

He reached out, taking her hands and squeezing them, feeling her squeeze them back, barely any strength in the gesture.

“We'll be okay,” he said, leaning closer so only she could hear it, feeling anything but certainty as he said the words. *“I promise you. We'll be alright.”*

Yu Lai was furious.

“Got away! How could she have fucking got away! The woman was in a fucking coma! She must be here somewhere...”

Only he was beginning to think otherwise. According to several of the witnesses he'd questioned, there had been three of them, aside from the woman – but they'd killed only two.

Yes, and that was a fucking mistake, too. They should have questioned them, wracked them and wrung out of them what they knew about the matter. But it was too late now, thanks to that trigger-happy moron of a guard.

Yes, and he'd make sure that bastard paid for his mistake.

“What about the hopper? Does that give us any clues?”

He knew already what the answer was. No. But his own guess was that that was a red herring. Something to put him off the scent. No. In all likelihood the other two had used sleds. Only then it all broke down,

because how could a comatose woman use a sand sled? And why hadn't all three of the men gone? Why had two of them stayed on at the clinic?

It didn't add up. Unless...

Unless someone else knew what he'd done. Some rival. That'd certainly explain how they had smuggled her away. But who? Who'd want to save the girl and use her evidence against him?

Once more he cursed himself for his own stupidity. For not covering his tracks. Even for leaving her there. No. A well-placed grenade would have done the job. Only he'd been caught up in the wildness of it all. The dark fun of it.

Right then, his aide returned. "The sleds have gone," he said, panting and bowing low. "No one knows where they went, but it seems they were taken only in the last hour or so."

"How many were there?"

"Four in all."

"And they've all been taken?"

"Yes. Along with provisions. Spare gas, water and general supplies. I'd say they were anticipating a long journey."

In which case they might yet pick up their trail...

Yu Lai considered things a moment, then nodded to himself. "Search this place again, top to bottom. If you find her, let me know at once. Only I think she's gone already. I'd say they've slipped away with her."

"*They*, Master?"

But Yu Lai was already working on that one. On whom it was who'd most benefit from this. And he thought he knew. Yes, the more he thought about it, the more certain he grew. The FFM, the Federation of Free Man, that's who. And that bastard Tom Holt. This had the feel of one of his stunts. Yes, there was nothing Holt would more like to do than discredit him in this fashion To drag his name through the dust.

Only Holt didn't know who he'd taken on this time.

Time stopped. In the chill dark, hope alternated with fear, as they heard the soldiers come and go, running this way and that, as if to some urgent summons. And then silence.

He sensed her lean closer to him. Felt her warm breath on his cheek.

"What's your name?"

Unseen, he smiled. It was what he himself had been thinking.

"Kan Jiang," he said, leaning closer, his cheek brushing against hers they were so close now.

"Like the poet?"

"Yes, like the poet... And you?"

"Faye... with an a-y-e."

He hesitated, then. *"I'm sorry..."*

"Sorry?"

"You've not been on Mars long, have you? It's not usually like this. And the man who did that to you... Yu Lai..."

"Yu Lai? Is that really his name?"

"Yes. And he's a dangerous man. If he gets hold of you again..."

He sensed her nod in the darkness. Then. *"I rebuffed him."*

"You...?"

"At a welcoming party. He made a pass at me and I told him where to stick it."

"And that's why...?"

"He was supposedly taking me to a safe place. Away from the rioting. I went ahead of him... that's when I got this..."

She took his hand and placed it on the gash on the back of her head. Kan Jiang winced. It was deeper than he remembered it.

"He thought that'd do the trick, no doubt. But I fought back. That's why he stabbed me. I wouldn't stop fighting him. Only then he knocked me unconscious. When I came to he was on top of me. Fucking me... I'm sorry, but..."

"That's okay. Use whatever words fit. He raped you, yes?"

"Yes. And I tried to fight back again, only I was very weak. I'd lost a lot of blood, I guess, and..."

She sighed, breathless suddenly. He took her hands again, squeezed them.

"I'll kill the bastard."

"Will you?" And her voice was strangely wondering. As if she was surprised at the strength of his words. At the fact that anyone would kill on her behalf.

"Yu Lai and his kind. They poison Mars."

She was silent for a moment, then. *"Do you think it's safe now? Do you think they've gone?"*

"I..." He stopped, listening. It had been quiet for a long time now. In all likelihood they *had* gone. After all, why *should* they stay?

"Do you want to risk it?" he asked her, realising that he was still holding her hands.

She gave the softest laugh. *"I guess we ought to. We can't stay here forever, can we?"*

He almost answered that. Almost said yes, they could. Only it was time to face the world again. To see what damage had been done.

"Come," he said, talking normally again. "Let's see what that bastard's left us."

They found them in the morgue, the two of them crammed in face to face in a single storage tray, their pale and naked bodies glued together by their own blood.

There were others there, too – victims of the night's violence – but none of it touched Kan quite as much as the sight of his two friends. Of all the ends to meet.

"Are these them?" Faye asked, supporting herself against him, looking down into the tray.

He nodded, too choked up for a moment to speak. Then. "That one, Yuan... he gave you the transfusion. And Ch'en... he helped me carry you. These two gave you life."

“Then I honour them,” she said, bowing to each, her hands pressed together.

He turned his head, looking at her, surprised that she was even standing after her ordeal. She was tough, this one. She would do well on Mars. That was, if she survived the next few days.

“What now?” she asked. “Where do we go?”

He almost shrugged. Almost told her what he most feared – that there was no place to go. Only... they had survived so far, and who was to say what the gods had in store for them?

Kan closed the tray, then turned to her. “Let’s get you a stick. Then let’s check out whether that hopper’s still where I left it. I can’t see how it would be, but the way our luck’s going...

She smiled. A beautiful smile, despite her injuries. “And then what? Find Yu Lai? Or do we keep our heads down and hide some place?”

His instinct was to hide. Only fuck it. He’d done with hiding. What he needed was to find himself a gun and blow that fucker’s head off. And if that wasn’t The Way, then fuck The Way this one time.

Kan Jiang smiled. Yes, and maybe he would write a poem about it. But first the hopper. First find some way out of here. The rest would take care of itself.

Wang An-feng stirred, then slowly sat up, the ache in her ankle reminding her where she was. Someone had knocked. Someone had called her name.

“Wang An-feng,” the voice came again. “Are you awake?”

“Ugoye... is that you?”

He came inside, into the cell that was her room. “How are you, *Nai Nai*?”

She smiled. “I’m well, Ugoye. Thanks to you.”

He waved that aside, then came across. “Do you think you could travel?”

She stared at him, surprised. “You mean...?”

“We’re going north. In an hour. And there’s a spare seat in the craft... if you want it.”

Want it? She almost hugged him with joy. “Are you sure, Ugoye?”

“We’ve unfinished business, *Nai Nai*...”

She knew better than to ask what that business was. “You mean to drop me home?”

“If that’s where you want to be.”

She laughed, delighted. “Oh, Ugoye... you can’t imagine...”

Kan Jiang checked the controls a third time, then turned to look into the back of the craft where Faye was strapped into her seat.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded. “Are you sure you can fly one of these?”

“It’s a long time since I did, but... yes. I think I can.”

“Oh good. Reassure me.”

He laughed. “Okay. Hold tight now. Things might be a little bumpy until I get the hang of it again.”

As the craft slowly lifted, responding to his touch, he found his mouth was dry. What if they’d booby-trapped the craft? What if they’d placed a tracking device somewhere?

Either way, they’d know soon enough. But so far so good.

It had surprised him to find the hopper still there, untouched. Not that they’d necessarily needed it if they had their own cruiser, but... He himself would have blown the hopper up. Just in case.

Then again, Yu Lai seemed like a man in a hurry. He might just have overlooked it. Or thought it unimportant. If so, that was a weakness in him.

“I’m going to head west,” he said, shouting over the noise of the engines. “To Tai Huo. I’ve a place there...”

“You don’t think we’d be flying in to a trap? Our friend Yu Lai... won’t he be there?”

Maybe he would, but Kan Jiang was determined to find out what had happened to Wang An-feng.

"I'll land to the south east," he answered her, half turning towards her as the hopper hovered in a steady balance over the complex. "On the far side of the caldera. He won't see us there."

"Then let's do that."

He smiled, touched by her trust in him. "Oh and if you need pain-killers, there are some in the box back there."

"No. I'm fine. Besides, they make me groggy."

"*Groggy?*" It was clearly an Earth word.

"Tired. Unfocused," she explained.

"Ah, right. But it'll take us a good hour to get back there. You should grab the chance to have a nap. Build up your energy."

She grinned. "You think I'll need it?"

If he were thirty years younger, he'd have thought she was flirting with him. He turned back, looking out across the windswept panorama towards Tai Huo, there over the curve of the world.

"Alright," he said quietly to himself. "Let's just hope we don't run into any storms."

Holt smiled at him as he came into the room. The kind of smile that sets alarm bells ringing in your head. If you knew the man, that was.

"Well look who it is. Yu Lai. The peacekeeper."

Yu Lai seethed inside at the suggestion of weakness, but kept his cool. This was Holt's territory, after all. He returned Holt's smile, mirroring his insincerity.

"Forgive me if I was wrong, *brother*, only I felt the situation was in great need of some diplomacy. An assassination or two certainly helps the cause, but beyond that... well... I'm perfectly happy being peacekeeper."

Tom Holt was a big man, in his forties now. A worker, in the Miner's Guild. He was part of a large, extended family, most of whom had been born on Mars and would die here. The question was, just when.

Holt opened his hands, as if conceding Yu Lai's point, but who knew what was in Holt's head. Probably the fact that Mars was his to be seized, if he wished it. But did he?

"Who's dead and who's still living?" he asked, as Yu Lai took a seat across from him. This was the governor's office, but Fan Fa-liang was dead. He'd been the very first victim of the night, killed by one of Holt's men – a 'sleeper' inside Fan's innermost circle.

That alone had impressed Yu Lai. Had made him re-evaluate the man. He'd thought him brash – a bit of a loudmouth – yet he knew his Sun Tzu. Knew when to act openly and when to be deceitful. And he knew he would do well to be wary of the man.

"The Seven's servants have been dealt with. Those that aren't dead are under lock and key, or have transferred their loyalties, just as I promised they would."

"You did well," Holt said, in a tone that was hard to read. "Your men were well briefed... yes, and well trained. Between us we carried the field."

Yes, but at what cost? Yu Lai thought, thinking of the damage that had been done. Much of that was down to Holt and his half-men. Holt had given them far too free a rein last night and now they'd count the cost. Mars had few enough resources as it was, and weakening its defences was an act of idiocy, considering that the Seven were likely to hit back in a year or two. But he said nothing of. He could raise such matters when he and Holt were on their own.

Yu Lai sat back a little, allowing himself to relax. If Holt had been going to kill him, he'd have done it already. No. Holt understood the situation – understood that they needed one another if this revolution was to work. Their brawn and his brains. Yes, and his network, too, to form a united Mars. Because division would only make them weak.

Everything was fragile right now. Everything could change in a moment. Like that business about the girl. Who'd have thought *that* would come back to haunt him. Only she couldn't keep hidden long – not with the injuries she'd suffered – and then he'd have her. Yes, And he'd silence her for good.

Holt leaned toward him. "You seem thoughtful, Yu Lai. Is anything the matter?"

Yu Lai met Holt's steel grey eyes, noting the cold calculation in them, then shook his head. "Why, nothing at all, comrade. Nothing at all."

Kan Jiang saw it as he circled in from the north-east and let out a groan of anguish.

"What is it?" Faye asked, leaning forward from the back. And then she saw. "Is that it? Is that where you lived?"

Kan Jiang had stilled the craft. It now hovered half a *li* away from where the wall of the caldera was burned black. There was every sign that there had been a fierce blaze there, and explosions, too, for bits of the volcanic wall had been blasted away and now lay fifty feet below, on the plain itself.

"That's it," he said in the smallest of voices. A voice completely devoid of hope.

She touched his shoulder gently. "Do you want to go?"

"Go where? This is it. This is where An-feng and I lived. Our tiny space on this world."

"Maybe she got out?"

"Yes?" Only he said it too harshly. Kan half turned. He had been crying.

"Let's set down," she said. "See what we can find out."

He hesitated, then did as she said, setting them down deep into the shadow of the volcano wall. Above them windows gaped into the open air, their frames burned black.

"How many people lived here?" she asked, sobered by the sight.

"Eighty... maybe a few more. Mainly childless couples, like An-feng and I. All of our friends, in effect. Our village, I guess you'd call it."

She was about to say something when Kan Jiang started, then, unstrapping himself, pointed into the shadow directly ahead. "Look!"

Faye looked where he was pointing. There, like a ghost amidst the shadows, was a suited figure. It moved slowly, awkwardly, like it was hurt... or very old. And there was something about the suit. It seemed old-fashioned, like something from the early days of space exploration.

"It's Yun Pe," he said quietly. Then, "Secure your helmet, Faye. I'm going to go out to meet him."

Again, there was something in his voice that, at one and the same time, brooked no argument even as it revealed Kan's deep, emotional turmoil.

Faye fastened her helmet, made sure her oxygen supply was working, then looked to Kan. "I'm ready."

Kan Jiang leaned forward, pressing the RELEASE button, then sat back. Ten seconds later, the hatch hissed open, letting in the chill Martian atmosphere.

"Stay here," he said to her. "Do not go anywhere until I come back. And rest... You really need to rest."

He eased across the narrow cabin, then turned and clambered down the steps, feeling the suit's heater cut in as his body temperature went down. But he was barely aware of it. His thoughts, his full attention were on the old man heading directly towards him.

"Yun Pe," he said, putting out his hands to the old man as he came close.

"Kan Jiang..."

They embraced. Standing back, Kan gestured toward the burned out apartments. "That is an ill sight, Yun Pe. Do you know what happened here?"

The old man leaned close so that their helmets touched at the forehead. "I was gone ten minutes. I came back and this had happened."

"Has anyone survived?"

"Apart from me?" He shook his head. "They've taken the bodies to the morgue. Not that there was much of anyone left after what they did. The Oven Man couldn't have done a better job!"

"The fire was bad?"

"It raged..."

Kan groaned. "The morgue, eh?"

"What's left of them."

Kan Jiang looked down. For a moment he was lost. Then the old man took his arm. "You want me to take you there? You want to see her?"

In truth it was the last thing he wanted.

He shook his head and groaned. "Please... take me there, Yun Pe." And, as the old man turned and began to make his way back to the gateway, Kan Jiang followed, like he was stumbling along in some awful nightmare, his legs leaden, his cheeks wet with tears.

The sight of the corpses, laid out on the trolleys, five or six 'corpses' on each trolley, each crisped to a wafer-thin blackness, was awful enough. But not knowing which she was... that was far worse.

Yun Pe, his wispy grey beard showing now that he had his helmet off, stood in the doorway. Nothing in heaven or earth would induce him to step beyond it.

"It was an imperial cruiser," the morgue assistant, Ching Ta-yun said, real anger in his voice. "They claimed we were all rebels. That bastard Fan..."

"I heard he's dead."

"You heard right. His man, Yu Lai's in charge now."

"In charge?"

"It was on the news half an hour back. Him and Holt... you know, the FFM leader... They've declared a curfew."

The politics of it didn't touch him for once. But that man, Yu Lai. He'd kill him before he himself drew his last breath. Guards or no guards he'd choke the life from him.

He turned to Ching Ta-yun and bowed. "Thank you, Master Ching." Then, knowing there was one last thing he needed to do before he got some rest, he hurried away, making his way back to the hopper.

Kan Jiang stood there, shocked, unable to take it in. The craft was gutted, and there was no sign of the young woman.

He had been gone half an hour at the most, and this had happened.

Kan looked about him, not knowing what to do. Someone had taken her. Yu Lai, probably. In which case, where would they have gone?

His guess was not very far.

Kan himself had planned to get her to the medical centre, where she'd at least be in broad sight, or some place similar - somewhere Yu Lai would be hesitant to act.

Only now she was gone. And if Yu Lai had taken her...

Kan Jiang swallowed drily. If Yu Lai *did* have her, then she was as good as dead. He'd not make the same mistake twice.

Of course, it was quite possible that Yu Lai himself hadn't been involved. That his men had stumbled upon her in investigating whose the hopper was. In which case she might yet be in transit. On her way to Yu Lai. Which gave him a little time. Yu Lai wouldn't just kill a woman in front of his aides. Not just like that. Would he?

The more he thought about it, the more sure he was that she was still alive, Captive, yes, but...

The thought came to him from nowhere. But as soon as it did he knew it was so. The Governor's mansion. That's where they'd take her. On the far side of the dome. In which case he could get there in thirty minutes – twenty if he really stretched his old muscles to the limit.

They said they had cells there, beneath the house itself. Places where a little quiet questioning could take place. Somewhere soundproofed. It was only a rumour, of course, but rumours always had a basis in fact.

There then. He'd go there. And damn the consequences. After all, what had he to lose?

Holt studied the woman a moment longer, then stepped away, closing the door behind him. So that was her. From the look of her

wounds, it was a wonder she was alive. Yu Lai had all but gutted her. And raped her, too, by all accounts.

He knew Yu Lai was looking for the girl, and that he'd kill her if he found out where she was. Only he wasn't going to let him. No. He'd hide her away and get her better, and then – when the time was right – he'd confront him with her.

Maybe he'd send her to the Osu to look after. To try and make things sweet with them again. He knew how they liked waifs and strays.

Outside, in the long elegant bathroom Fan Fa-liang had had built specially for his mistresses, he washed his hands thoroughly, then dried them on a big fluffy towel. Looking about him, he could see how such privilege could corrupt a man. Make him forget his purpose. Which was why he would have all of this ripped out. With Yu Lai's agreement, naturally.

He smiled, thinking of that. Of how he'd blunt the Han's ambitions. Because he knew how the man had designs on this place. Yu Lai might not have said it openly, but Holt had seen how he looked about him when he came here, with acquisitive eyes. Oh, he might play at being a revolutionary, but he was a greedy little shit-eater when it came to it.

For now, however, he would play at being Yu Lai's best friend, even as he watched his back carefully. Because the last thing he could do was trust Yu Lai.

As he emerged from the corridor, Jackson, one of his bodyguards, was hovering by the stairs, waiting for him.

"What is it, Mike?"

"We've a visitor. A strange one. Says he's looking for a missing woman."

"Go on," Holt said, intrigued now. "Who is it, and why have they come here?"

"It's our resident poet."

He laughed, incredulous. "What... Kan Jiang?"

"The very same. He's in a real lather. Says it's a matter of life and death."

And so it is, Holt thought. But how did Kan Jiang know about her?

“Okay... Give me a minute or two, then show him in... to the study. And check he’s not armed, okay? Just because he’s a poet...”

Jackson laughed. “It’s okay. I’ll frisk him myself.”

Three minutes later, Kan Jiang stepped into the room, clearly out of breath, and looking about him as if the God of Hell were about to appear from the air.

“Are you okay, Master Kan? Can I get you some water... or a bowl of wine, perhaps?”

“Where’s Yu Lai?”

Holt frowned. “Not here, obviously.”

“And the young woman?”

He paused, wondering how much he should tell. Then, “Tell me... what’s your interest in the girl?”

“I helped save her. Tended to her after the attack and got her a transfusion. He nearly killed her, you know that? If we’d not chanced on her...”

“Killed her? Who?”

“Yu Lai.”

Holt nodded, impressed by the old man. He had balls, accusing Yu Lai in this manner. And he’d be useful as a witness against Yu Lai if it ever came to that. Because people trusted Kan Jiang. Much more than they did Yu Lai.

“Killed her, you say?”

“And raped her. We had the semen specimen tested, and it matched.”

“You know who she was?”

Kan Jiang shrugged. “I... well, I know her name was Faye and she turned down his advances and... and she was new to Mars. Beyond that...”

“She was here to replace Yu Lai. To take over as the Assessors Assistant.”

That clearly made sense to the old man. “So that’s why...” He stopped, then met Holt’s eyes. “You have her, don’t you?”

Holt nodded. "I do. But that has to remain a secret. I mean her no harm, understand, only... I don't want Yu Lai finding out I have her. I want her strong and healthy, and capable of facing him."

Kan Jiang stared at him a long time after that. And then he nodded. "Okay. But can I see her?"

Holt smiled. "Of course. Come... I'll take you to see her right now."

They went downstairs, to the old, original part of the Mansion, which lay beneath the rest of it. There, in a tiny room that had been hacked from the rock, Faye lay on the bed, a simple white sheet spread over her.

Kan Jiang looked to Holt. "She looks restful. Have you sedated her?"

"I thought it for the best. The more rest she gets the better... I was thinking of sending her south... to some friends there... to look after her and keep her out of Yu Lai's hands."

"You mean to let that little shit-bag live, after what he did to her?"

"I do. In fact, I have to. I need his contacts, his network. Mine alone can't rule Mars. And we need to keep things stable, until we come to an agreement with the Seven, back on Chung Kuo."

Holt could see that Kan Jiang was unhappy with that. "I'm surprised, Kan Jiang. I thought you were an advocate of The Way."

Anger flared in the old man's eyes. "You've seen what he did to her?"

"I have."

"And you *want* that maniac sharing power with you?"

Holt grimaced. "I have no choice. Not right now, anyway. And the girl will have her day, I promise you. And don't worry. I'll send you an invitation, Kan Jiang. Yes, and give you my own knife to see to that fucker, see if I don't."

Kan Jiang almost smiled at that. Things could have been far worse. Only Yu Lai would live, and that clearly irked him. "I'll leave it to you, then, Mister Holt," he said, bowing to him in that ancient Chinese way the older generation did. "but I will not be satisfied until he's drowning in his own blood. And watch your back, while you're at it. Oh, and trust no one."

“No one?” Holt laughed as if he’d gone too far.

“No one,” the old man repeated, then turned and left the room.

There were just the four of them in the cabin of the craft - Achebe, Big Obi, Ugoye and herself – as they flew directly north, heading for the Cui Shan fortress. For a long time they were silent, and it felt to her like they were suspended in the air, unmoving. Then, suddenly, they banked sharply to the right.

Wang An-feng’s heart was in her mouth as they straightened up again, heading directly toward the tower, which she could see now over Obi’s shoulder. If they’d tracked them as in-coming, then they were flying down the throat of their cannons. Only the guns were pointing away from them.

Big Obi, the pilot, pulled sharply on the controls, bringing down their tail, dust swirling beneath them as they slowed, then slewed to the left... and touched down as neatly as she’d ever seen a craft set down.

“Okay,” Obi said, turning his huge bulk in his chair to look at his two fellows. “Go fetch our brother. Then we can deliver the lady home.”

Wang smiled. She hadn’t known Obi more than a couple of hours, but they were already the firmest of friends.

The captive brother they were risking their lives for, was Chima, Ugoye’s elder brother. He had been making a delivery – of what Wang An-feng did not ask – when he’d been taken prisoner.

Obi leaned forward suddenly. Laughed. “Look... there he is now!”

Three suited figures came toward them, the outer two holding up the central one. As they climbed into the craft, Obi reached down, taking Chima’s arm and hauling him up by brute force.

With everyone on board, Obi closed the hatch, lifted the craft in an instant, turned it in the air and accelerated off, heading north-east, toward the distant caldera of Tai Huo.

Wang watched as Ugoye examined his brother, surprised by how quickly they had rescued him. Chima had been beaten, she could see that for herself, but why hadn't they finished him off?

"What happened back there?"

"They just left him," Achebe explained. "Pumped him full of drugs and ran."

Obi laughed. "Wise men," he said.

She looked to him. "How so?"

It was Ugoye who answered her, his expression stern. "We have a certain ... *reputation*, let us call it. For looking after our own. To beat Chima... that is one thing. And not one we like. But to kill him..." Ugoye shook his head. "We may be few, but they fear us. They know we would not rest. Not until my brother was avenged."

Looking at him, Wang could easily believe that. They flew in silence for a time, the four men close, surrounding her in the cabin. In all her years she had never met their like. Never felt such moral certainty in anyone, unless it was her Kan.

She looked down, surprised to see that her hands were trembling. But why surprised? Just the thought of Kan Jiang filled her with trepidation. If he was lost to her...

Ugoye reached out, taking her gloved hand in his own. "We will be there in fifteen minutes, *Nai Nai*. Your Kan... I'm sure he'll be alright. He'll be pleased to see you, neh?"

"I don't know how to thank you..."

"There is no need to thank us. But if you must, thank Mother Sky. For sending me into your path the other evening."

She squeezed his hand. "It wasn't chance, Ugoye. It was kindness. Kindness beyond measure. If I can ever repay you..."

Ugoye shook his head. "There is no need, *Nai Nai*. I would feel shamed had I not acted. As would my brothers. See it as our duty to Mother Sky, Wang An-feng."

"She who sees all..." she said quietly, recalling what Kan Jiang had said about the Osu and Mother Sky.

Ugoye beamed, showing his perfect white teeth. "She who sees all."

They flew in silence for a time. Then Obi tensed. "*Aiya*," he uttered, then turned to look at Wang An-feng.

"What is it?" she said, frightened by the look in his face.

"Come," he said. "See for yourself."

The sight of it made her want to retch. About what had once been the window openings, the red of the caldera wall was scorched black, testifying to the fierceness of the blaze.

The four men stood close by, looking on, as Wang An-feng walked across the bright red sand toward the gateway.

Ugoye, his face filled with sorrow, had wanted to accompany her, to make sure she was safe, but she would not hear of it. "You must go from here," she said. "Now. While you can." And that was true. To stay put their lives in jeopardy. Yet common decency made them stay a while longer. To share her grief and honour her.

She went inside, the stench of burned bodies and charred walls filling her nostrils, even though she still had her helmet on. Again, it made her feel sick. Made her stagger almost, at her fear that her darling Kan had died here.

She stumbled on, down the long corridor, looking in at each door as she came to it, the familiar sight of her friends' apartments transformed to total ruin, total devastation. No one could have survived this. No one.

She walked on, the fear growing in her, until she stood there, in her own doorway, looking in.

Black. Everything was black. Everything burned. Of all their small, familiar items none remained. The wooden table they had bought from earth. The chairs. The rug. Their bed. All gone. All consumed by the flames.

And Kan?

She didn't dare think. Didn't dare to begin to imagine what fate he had suffered here. If this was where he was when this had happened.

She fell to her knees, the tears beginning to trickle down her cheeks as she prayed to Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, that Kan Jiang had not been here.

Give me this one small thing, she prayed. *Just let my Kan be well.*

Only she knew, even as she longed for it, that it could not be so. This was where he would have been. Waiting for her to come home. Oh and the goddess knew – knew for a certainty – just where she would have wished herself. Right here, beside him as he died. Her hand in his own as the flames consumed them both.

Only she had not. And now she never could.

Laughter, a warm, relieved laughter, sounded just behind her, and, for one brief moment, she thought she was losing her grip. Imagining things. She dared not turn. *Dared* not, lest it not be him.

“Wang An-feng...”

So gentle, that voice. So unmistakable. Even so, she had heard how the gods could trick one at such times. Plant voices in your head and toy with you. No. She dared not, *dared* not turn.

“Is that you, Kan Jiang?”

Two shuffling footsteps sounded, the crunch and crackling of burned debris underfoot convincing her that this was no ghost.

She turned, kneeling still, and looked. And caught her breath. It really *was* him.

“I knew you’d come,” he said, smiling, offering both hands to her.

Wang An-feng laughed, then grew sober again. “What happened, Kan? All our friends?”

“Dead,” he said, the light going out of his face for a moment. “All dead.”

“Ahhh....” That pained her, but the pain could not triumph over what she felt at him being alive. It felt like the gods had protected her. Had picked her up and set her aside, out of harm’s way. Yes, and Kan too.

“Kan Jiang,” she said, standing and taking his hands. “Come with me to the window.”

He frowned, but did as he was told. Out there, across the sands, a small black cruiser rested, near the gutted hopper he had come here in. Close by, four tall figures stood, looking back at them.

“Osu...” he said, surprised.

Wang looked at him. “How did you know?”

“Those suits... the way they stand. How do you know them, Wang An-feng?”

“They were my saviours. My ankle... I’ll show you later. They helped me. Brought me here...”

Kan Jiang nodded to himself, then, raising his arm, waved to the four men. A moment later they waved back. Wang, seeing that, began to wave too. A moment later, they turned away, ducking back inside the craft. There was a moment’s silence, then the engine started up. They watched it lift, then turn, heading south.

Wang An-feng turned back, looking to Kan Jiang again. “So tell me, husband. Where in the gods’ names have you been?”

In The Dark

Epilogue

Faye had died, hemorrhaging on the bed, even as they came to take her to the craft, to fly her to the Osu in the deep south, not an hour after Holt had spoken to Kan Jiang.

Holt, loath to tell Kan Jiang what had happened, had gone through with the pretense that she’d been sent, if only to prevent the old man from losing his life in a vain attempt to get even with Yu Lai.

And then, for four months, all went well. An Assembly was convened, and a code of laws drafted, including a basic constitution, even as Yu Lai bowed and scraped before their ‘Masters’ across the void, seeking to delay the Seven; to buy them time and give them the chance to

build Mars into an independent force. To make Mars strong and self-sufficient.

Only then, one day when nobody expected it, a great fleet appeared in Mars' thin, atmosphere. Twelve massive craft that circled the ancient planet, their Admiral sending down their demands before the first of them descended, landing at what would later be called Hsiang Se Spaceport.

A few of the natives tried to fight back, but it was a hopeless venture. The first ship alone contained a force of fifteen thousand troops. Loyal servants of the Seven. Yes, and a new kind of settler. There to change Mars forever.

And, in the course of the next eight days, Mars was taken back, the rebels rounded up and shot, without trial, the new Governor, Kuei Cheng-fu, signing the death warrants one after another, until all that was left of the rebellion was a stack of burning paper that had once been laws, and a great pit, filled with slow-decaying bodies.

It was a brutal end to things, yet there was one further, far more delicate thing that Kuei Cheng-fu brought to Mars.

Ten days after they'd first appeared in Mars' skies, with all twelve craft safely landed in their pre-allocated places, Kan Jiang and his wife Wang An-feng were summoned to the Governor's mansion. There, as Admiral Kuei and his son, and their twelve Majors looked on, dressed in their finest military regalia, the old man was presented with a bound leather book, printed – on facing pages – in Mandarin and English, of his *Poems*. A gift from the Seven to the most famous of the sons of Mars, signed on its faceplate by all seven of the great T'ang, who ruled Chung Kuo. Signed and 'chopped', in recognition of his outstanding contribution to their culture.

That evening, after the ceremony was over, Kan Jiang and his wife An-feng, walked out together, suited up against the encroaching cold, looking out across the barren redness of their world towards the Earth, from which they had come, seeing how it seemed embedded in the blackness of space; a blue-green jewel, decorated with a broad swirl of white.

“Home”, he said, clutching the book – inside its protective case - to his chest. “Home,” she agreed, echoing the word.

However far Mankind travelled, it would always be home. And there, right there, sat on those low rocks, looking out across the void, he wrote a poem – one of his last – the words forming in his head. A brief thing. His last offering before it all changed. A poem for the men like Tom Holt who had a different vision of Mars. Who saw it not as another province of Chung Kuo, but a new world, separate from the old.

A poem which, he knew, could never be published. Like those poems of the great Nai Liu which were apparently handed secretly about, in hand-written copies. Poems that abandoned elegance for sheer force of statement. A poem which, in its own strange way, was a revolution in itself. “Earthlight” he called it.

Some say he wrote it down and that it circulates still among the Martian colonists. Others say that the poem died with him, and that Wang An-feng alone heard it, that very evening, even as it came to him, even as he gave substance to the nothing. And, afterwards, there was the silence of forgetting. For, as he said elsewhere, everything is eventually forgotten. Even the words of Gods, lost in that vast Abyss that is Time.

Fifteen billion years. How could one *not* forget, given such vastness, such scale? Yet for that one brief moment he touched upon perfection. There, seated on the ancient rocks, the great swell of Mars’ surface lit by that distant light, he penned what he called the very best of his utterances.

And Yu Lai?

Yu Lai returned to Chung Kuo. Silver-tongued demon that he was, he was never punished for what he did to the girl. Never brought to account. Yet one evening, when he was strolling, back on earth, back in the uppermost levels of the great City the Han had built, he found his nemesis – a young man who, that very day, had been accused of a crime he did not commit. A young man so desperate, so broken, that he had snapped and, in a moment of utter nihilism, slit Yu Lai’s throat, thinking him someone else.

And so the bastard died, in a pool of his own blood. Un-mourned and un-loved. Even as, across the ocean of the night, in an irony noted by

none, Mars mourned its first son and his wife, who had died within hours of each other, leaving that cold, inhospitable world which had been their exile.