

## Down Flowers

Terry Dowling

One step through the front door of the New Mars Hotel does it to me every time. One moment there's the red sand of the Australian desert under your feet, the tired, dusty, ferric blood of the old, old land that has blown and stung and blinded you for as long as you can remember. The next – across that low raised E-scaled threshold – there's the other kind: an ultimate exuberance, the three hundred tonnes of sand brought down from Cydonia 61-12, lofted, carried between the worlds. Expense, distances, far-cycling orbits notwithstanding, the sand had been snatched down the gravity well and laid out red into red here at the New Mars Hotel, each handful reckoned a fortune. It never fails to work its magic.

One step takes you from desert to desert, Simpson to Cydonia. One step sets you on your way into the cool, dim interior, between pillars sleek with orichalk facings from Arisia, between the pressure cases and the totemic vac-suits of the famous dead. To reach the bar, you pass beneath gently turning fans whose blades are made from scorched and pitted lander panels, go among the Samplings, what many regard as the finest products of tribal life engineering, the Planetary Regulation Devices grown, groomed, sculpted at enormous cost to help the Pan-global Centuries Project bend Mars into the strange quiet dream lodged at their hearts. There are ten such devices, lifeforms, structures at the New Mars I hotel, and – as the name suggests – they represent the full range of what many still dismissively call "planet-thumpers".

Sometimes there are even spacemen at the bar among the PRDs: men, infrequently women, as sleek and coppery as the orichalk, as groomed, sculpted and fabulous as the Samplings, sometimes as scorched and pitted as the blades of the slowly turning fans.

Jofas Eld was such a man, a tribal veteran, forty-three years old and looking fifty-three from the hardside gragen treatments spacemen often elected to have. From his place at the bar he saw me approach, took me for a customer and gave his professional smile. I saw his dark tribal face shift by stages into recognition.

"Tom! I was hoping you'd arrive this morning! Thank you. Thank you for coming."

"What, Jofas? What's happened?"

Ile looked about him. Two other patrons were being served at their table by the waitress, Celia. There was no-one else at the bar. "This way."

He emerged from behind the counter with a bottle and some glasses, led me beyond the glossy turret of the Tharsis X-90 to a secluded corner booth at the back of a roped-off area.

Another spaceman waited there, a younger man, on active status. He was bald, as most tribal spacemen are, powerful-looking in his bodyforms, his scrap-jacket opened to reveal the birkin scars on his bare chest glistening through the skin treatments. The Ab'O spacemen, unlike the other Centuries Marslanders, are like men of glass, oiled and lean as if made to slip between the worlds. But where Jofas' once-smooth nahogany had crazed and pitted into "down flowers", a sign to all that he had failed at his chosen profession, this one looked new and ready. His eyes shone like black glass.

Jofas indicated the younger man. "This is Runner Pye. Third officer of the Jindawan."

"A Mars ship," I said, impressed. Runner Pye looked so young. "Yes," Jofas continued. "And Kurdaitcha."

The young man saw my frown. "Please, Captain. Sit with us. We need your help." I did so, then waited while Jofas poured drinks for us and gestured for Celia to look after the bar.

"Earlier this year," Runner Pye said, "there was a change of Towradji at

Arsia. Reckoning the orbits, coming sunwards from Mars, takes time, but two days ago, Bellin Say Jana, my kinsman and returning Towradji, came down here at Tinbilla. He left the aeromanker that rought him from Jindawan at 1146, then came over to the Hotel. I was his honour guard. Our tribal pick-up was delayed by bad wind outside Maldy. At 1420, he got up and headed for the door, presumably tired of waiting or these false Mars surroundings – who knows? Four metres from it he collapsed and died."

"Trauma?"

"None. Nothing evident. No signs at all, except possibly the slightest suggestion of' a smile. Corners of the mouth turning up." "But not a rictus?" "Nothing as definite. The barest hint. As I said, Captain, no Fatima."

"Autopsy?"

"Done upstairs by field medics." Which told me a lot. "Heartstop. But even that is dubious because of Jana's planetside treatments. The immune system itself is adjusted. We groom Martians even as we build Mars."

"So forensics give nothing?"

"Nothing conclusive."

"It couldn't be the treatments, could it?"

"It never has been. We lose very few – some accidents in the field, tech malfunctions, dirigibles going down in the Martian wind. That sort of' thing."

"So why me? What can I possibly do your own people can't?" "What I told him, Tom," Jofas added, "much as I want this solved. Runner Pye wanted you here."

I regarded the young man sitting opposite. "Runner?"

His dark eyes looked into mine. "Captain, I could say that this Hotel was originally meant as a National concession, a tourist venue in this part of Australia. It became shared tenure because of tribal patronage and the international agreement to try for Mars again, but it does technically require a representative from State of Nation."

"But?"

"It has to do with security, of course."

I saw the reason at once. "The tribes don't know! You have Jana's body upstairs. No-one else knows yet!"

Runner Pye hesitated before speaking. "Not until we have answers. The body remains here. The medics will tell no-one. The mank crews won't. The captain of the vessel sent to collect him has been told, has laid over at Maldy deliberately, pretending technical difficulties. They know the importance of this. The official story is that Jindawan is delayed."

"Surely scheduled approaches are monitored."

"Only when scheduled. Jindawan wasn't. Captain, this is the Towradji of Arsia who has died here, a great Clever Man of the Fair Chasda, who, so far from his people, learnt that his tribe was beaten in an engagement against the Sollave on Lake Air, and was to face them again. He left his chosen home of thirteen years, his work-of-the-heart, the very Project getting us all Mars again, and out of duty came back to replenish his tribe. He is not here three hours and he dies under such mysterious circumstances."

"You suspect Sollave intervention. An assassin sent to kill Jana here at the field before he could reach his kin."

"Possibility. You of all people, Captain, know..."

"Yes," I said, interrupting, thinking of mind-war: a dream knife sent plunging into Jana's mind, or a fierce dark wind blowing out his tiny flame of life – though that would not explain the smile. "And that would be a major offence. A Pan-tribal one given Jana's services off-world."

"It would mean terrible penalties against the Sollave, yes. Massive payback."

"Certainly worth a third party's interference; someone working to set feeling against the Sollave."

"You see how it is. We must have the truth." "So let me ask again. Why me?"

"First, you're a National. That protocol has been observed. second, you're a sensitive who has some access to tribal mindfields."

"You've faced a dream knife, read the wind. You may read things we miss. It's contingency..."

"But hardly a discreet choice at present. Third?" "Not yet."

The real reason was something else.

"It could be natural, of course," I said.

"It could. Of course it could. Despite the coincidence."

"Or suicide. Explaining the hint of a smile. It doesn't have to be murder."

The Kurdaitcha sipped his drink, carefully set the glass down. No, it doesn't. But why would he come all this way just to take his own life?"

"I agree. So what will happen on the Air? The Fair Chasda wer ebeaten, you said."

"In the first engagement of two. A year apart. It's the technicalities of the Air conflict which required his presence here now. The Prince was killed in the first contest. As blood kin, Jana could have led the fleet as Prince pro tem for the second engagement. Continued the battle."

"Then the Sollave have won."

"They have. But next year they will lose. Another tribe will even the score. How it always goes."

"He came home in vain."

"Left home in vain. Mars was his home. Centuries Towradji die in their postings, Captain. It's a life position. He left his work-of-the-heart to attend his people, to be Prince for a day and give them that: one more day on the Air. A great sacrifice. Gene samples are taken of all off-world personnel. Jana's personal contribution will not be lost."

"What of the replacement Towradji?"

"Not an issue. Jana appointed his own replacement; he chose to return."

"You're sure of this, Runner?"

The young tribesman nodded.

"Other people in the bar?"

"Jofas was here. Celia. Two other staff. All cleared. No other patrons at that hour. No-one saw it happen."

"Who knew Jana was returning?"

"The Fair Chasda Kutungurlu and Clever Men. The Arsia personnel. The crew of Jindawan. And they will be questioned. But that will be after Jana's death is announced and the forfeiture declared."

"If we rule out the coincidence of natural death, Sollave treachery or some other party's actions, what are we left with?"

His dark eyes never left mine. "What indeed?"

"The other reason I'm here. It's the Samplings, isn't it?" "You were at Trale. Go on, Captain."

I gazed out across the large main room at the orichalk pillars and slowly turning thus, at the tables and softly-lit booths, the potted plants and special displays, peered through the restful gloom at the looming chess-piece towers of the planetary regulation engines, what the Ab'O had brought to the taming of worlds and the Centuries Accord.

I could see five of the ten from where I sat: the Tharsis X-90 close by, like oil turned on a lathe, further out, five metres beyond, the flaking, burnt-copper chalice of the Chryse Dowager, then the hooded verdigris spire of the Clever Dustman. Standing beyond the bar, fluted, tapered, as cold as blue steel, was the sinister-looking spindle of a Nilosyrtis Ranger from Argyre, then a Stone Owl from the Hellas region, like sonic whorled and deeply-scoured megalith. Beyond the pillars stood the others: the heat-wounded, peeled-open, honey-glass Sandpot, the immense glittering revetment of the Mock Biel, the shadowy forms of the Cydonia Rex, the Druid Drum and the Quintain Decimante. One of each, dreaming there, vaguely, distantly alive, maimed and neutralised and wonderfully strange – though, from practical need, expedience, quickly, easily reduced to mere sculptures, exotic flourishes. You needed tech to read the life signals, the mentation indices; you had to be in the Hotel between 0100 and 0600 when the timers brought up the UV floods and special benediction lamps, poured out lifelight to feed the things.

Jana had been there at the very opposite of that: when the sluggish, diverted metabolisms barely lived, and the only mover of the bunch, the Quintain

Decimante, hung frozen, its scissoring upper parts caught in mid-closure. Only once, during a routine layover, had Jofas brought me down at 0300, the dead heart of the night, and let me see the taproom changed, lit with an eerie glare, the Quintain thumping away energetically in its corner, ministering to itself; making Mars in some dim part of what passed for its mind.

They did remind me of Trale, these PRDs, of course they did, the lonely sand-shores where the tribal biotects, in a less generous, less internationally minded time, had dumped their thiled life-experiments, where I had seen that vigorous discarded life fighting to survive, and more – to communicate with the only ones who could save it.

"What has this to do with Trale?" I asked.

"Possibly nothing," Runner Pye said. "But you solved a murder there and you came from it having made some kind of important communication."

Of course he would know that, being Kurdaitcha.

"These are far less cognate than the Trale relicts," I said. "They're hard-posting engines."

"Yes, but they must be intended to work near humans in some way."

"Then ask the designers at the life-houses."

"We will. But now we make do with what we have. We must make do. Jana's body is upstairs. The Jindawan-delayed story gives us till this afternoon. We must have this solved before the Sollave learn of it."

What to say? What to tell this determined, troubled third officer frying to save loss of face, to explain the loss of such a life?

I turned to Jofas, found him watching me, his eyes bright within he ice-crystal mask of the down flowers. "How long have the Samplings been here?"

"Close on a century," he said. "When the sand from 64-12 was authorised, and the other memorabilia, these regional selections were made part of the decor as well."

"A very costly part. Bringing back actual originals."

"It was appropriate. A lot of biotects made the crossing then, site-tuning the PRDs. Far more than you'll find on Centuries expeditions now. It was an easy extravagance and a necessary control sampling. Also a part of some ritual reciprocity with the new world."

"Have there been other deaths?"

Something shifted in Jofas's eyes. "I've been here eight years. This is the first."

I didn't believe him, so turned to Runner Pye. "Well?"

When the young Kurdaitcha hesitated, I granted there could be further fears and conflicts of interest, and so phrased it differently. "Any other unexplained deaths in this place?"

"Fourteen," he admitted, which changed everything, had to be part of the ultimate reason for this present investigation. The death of a Towradji, yes, the implications of that in terms of continuing Fair Chasda actions against the Sollave, crucially so, but far more significant: fourteen unexplained deaths in this taproom, in the vicinity of these bioforms, however curtailed their functions.

"All tribal deaths?"

Runner Pye nodded. "All tribal."

"We'll need full identity and forensic profiles on those deaths, and specifications for each of the Samplings. What each was designed to do. Then..."

Runner Pye held up three sheets of flag foil, not paper, not disk or mote, but self-destroying hard copy.

I took them, regarded the fourteen names, the inconclusive postmortem findings, other items of associated data. Attached was the Sampling list. Runner Pye let me start on that but clearly needed to speak. This Towradji had obviously commanded a personal loyalty from him. Kinsman, he'd called him earlier. Runner was Kurdaitcha, but perhaps kinship was still involved.

"You know the shaping process, Captain?"

"In general tennis, Runner. I've never seen the Centuries data."

"We accepted the gift of beginning it. Our part in the great work. The first phase involved again contriving a greenhouse effect to warm the planet. The original atmosphere was mainly carbon dioxide with traces of carbon monoxide water vapour, sonic inert gases. We introduced fluorine, chlorine, bromine, other gases to absorb the sun's heat, raised the temperature to where water vapour and more carbon dioxide were released from the polar caps and surface deposits. Earlier versions of the first three engines listed there assisted in that. Whether Martian gravity can hold such a thickened atmosphere still remains to be seen. Those same planet-thumper PRDs are now engaged in stage two. As well as tailored lichens and algae converting the CO2 Samplings 1 to 5 are scattered in their thousands over the Martian surface, feeding on that COD, giving out Oxygen, matching that to the production of greenhouse gases. There are other functions, you understand, but they're still the main ones. These units here continue to survive this way, but with a more pronounced phototropism. They've been modified and are, in effect, self-modifying."

"But essentially solar-powered there too."

"Light-powered. Like plants, yes. On Mars, sunlight on the oxygen-enriched mantle has increased the ozone layer vital for absorbing the harmful] radiation. Samplings 6 and 7 have additional ozone-forming capabilities in that regard."

"So now I imagine a lightning storm in the Towradji's heart, his nervous system shorting out."

Rumanner" Pye took me seriously. "There would be clear signs for that. Trauma."

"Certainly not a smile. So what remains?"

"Units 8 and 9 are principally nitrogen-producing engines, working with nitrogen-fixing properties in the other classifications to help build the biosphere, with back-up functions involving O<sub>2</sub>, and ozone production."

"Number 10 is blank."

"The Druid Drum, yes."

"Why, Runner?"

"I do not know."

"You've asked?"

"Many of us have. The biotects guard their secrets of those early days, even from the Accord Authority, I'm sure. Their briefs are on record; their solutions are confidential, ritually protected. Part of the Accord."

"Your actions are ritually protected. Kurdaitcha do not have to ask."

It was the first time I'd seen Runner Pye smile, and, mystery within mystery, I read the Kurdaitcha by it.

"Let me guess. The third officer of Jindawan has only recently been appointed Kurdaitcha. He has not yet told his superiors about this. Operating alone, he has simply accessed existing records. He means to solve this crime--all the deaths here at the New Mars Hotel - though I suspect not just to advance himself He has taken a great risk to do it. Runner Pye is now Pan-tribal Kurdaitcha. You mentioned kinship. May I ask if he remains a fully sworn Fair Chasda?"

Again the smile, the hesitation, and this time a nod.

"I have exceeded my authority, yes. I was Fair Chasda. I must find out if this is murder: all these deaths, but Jana's in particular. If it's Sollave action, I will expose that and therefore myself - and be sung for it. But Jana will be avenged."

The few patrons had departed, I noticed, and Celia was nowhere to be seen.

"Can I examine the body?"

"I'm sorry. The medics have sealed it away. You think I've lied about the lack of trauma? About the smile?"

"No, Runner. I don't. Tell me, what is the distribution ratio for these units?"

"You mean placement? I'm not sure."

"Numerical will do."

"The distribution you see here. Groupings of ten. Parts of an interconnected net."

"One Druid Drum to one each of the other nine?"

"I believe so."

I gazed out at the shapes, imagined their interlocking nets spread across the planet – dotting the planitiae, littering the floors of the great fossae, set up on the slopes of Pavonis Mons, Ascraeus and the rest, strange totems working to end the terrible cold, seal out the radiation, bring different skies and fairer days.

I stood, walked out into the large cool space, moved among the Samplings, considering first the Tharsis X-90, an oxygen-maker Runner had said, so the brief confirmed, with nitrogen-fixing and ozone-making secondary functions, then the rusty-looking Chryse Dowager, flaring like some worn and impoverished Grail – the same profile as the Tharsis, according to Runner's list.

The hooded spire of the Clever Dustman stood beyond that, another O2, maker, with – as its name suggested – ancillary functions specifically tailored to soil improvement and moisture collection. Reading the brief; it seemed to be more versatile if less robust than the X-90 and the Dowager PRDs, and now stood like a funerary totem in the dim light, exotic and unfathomable, like something wrested from the bottom of the sea.

I crossed to the other side of the bar, stood before the fluted, tapered Nilosyrtris Ranger, another atmosphere-changer. Somewhere in its tall, blue-steel workings sat a spark of sentience, a singular purpose, the yearning to snatch at CO2 draw it in, give forth oxygen and ozone, small breaths of' nitrogen. This cold-looking spindle from the Argyre Basin looked murderous and unfeeling enough, but surely humans did not – could not – register on perceptions geared to gas tables and atomic weights, calibrated to the long slow work of eons.

Which probably gave me the first inklings of a useful purpose for the Druid Drum, though right then it was all still elusive, no more than bits of intuition pushing through.

Behind me, off through the gloom, Runner Pye and Jofas Eld were probably discussing my progress, possibly sitting quietly, watching as I moved away from the Ranger to the pitted grey megalith of the Stone Owl, its whorled frontal palettes and long lateral grooves set with glittering sensors. According to the foil transcript it seemed to duplicate the Ranger, the Dustman and the others I'd visited so far. Off to its left stood the swollen, peeled-open, falling-amber column of' the Sandpot and its dramatic-looking companion, the horned palisade of the Mock Biel, which loomed like an inverted portcullis of black glass. Both were primarily ozone-makers but again had ancillary functions that helped form back-ups in the net.

From the Mock Biel's looming mass, I started back towards the front of the Hotel, to where the E-sealed doorway made a framework of harsh desert light. Through it, a small section of' the Tinbilla field was visible.

It meant turning past the motionless Quintain Decimante, starved of light in its corner, its mighty arms locked and still, and crossing before the Cydonia Rex, the other vested nitrogen-maker, its Intricate combs, dorsal fans and sensor spines reaching almost to the ceiling. At last I reached the overlapping red-glass gourd-and-shell tower of the Druid Drum. I laid a hand on its smooth vitreous surface, imagined H felt something of its life deep within, then returned to the Tharsis, began the circuit all over again.

Only once did Jofas come up to me, catch me looking out the open doorway into the blazing afternoon, watching the field where the aeromankers shimmered against their launch towers.

"Tom, what? What is it?"

"My cafard, Jofas. My melancholy. Same as at Trale. More than ever, I'm an outsider again now. I have to see these PRDs as more than interesting artefacts, more than parts of' a theme decor. I have to remember they're not only living, but that they've never had a chance to be all that they were meant to be. It's like not letting a bird fly.

Everything made for flight, but thwarted."

"These? You said it yourself, Toni. They're hardly cognate. You can't..."

"No, Runner's right. These would have been designed to work with humans. I can sense it. Somehow I just can. That's the level we have to come in at. It's like the life experiments at Trale. These are unfulfilled too. In their own strange terms, they have failed. Are failing."

"Haven't been allowed to fly."

"Exactly."

"Tom, there's more. This Towradji was Runner's father."

"I'd wondered. Only close, immediate kinship would make him break such oaths."

Jofas stayed a while longer, gazing with me out at the day, at what Jana saw as he crossed that floor of Martian sand. Then he touched my arm, went without speaking back to where Runner Pye waited in the gloom, and I began my next circuit, this time touching all the bioforms, making myself reach out and touch each one, forcing them to be real. They spoke in voices too coarse, too strange, for easy knowing, had been designed by humans to be elsewhere, yet at the same time to be with humans. Humans changed and changing by the very things that gave the

PRDs their purpose. Kinship, tenuous and remote. But changing. Growing.

And slowly it came, in bits and inklings, the understanding of what it might have been, what it had to be, a suspicion that grew and grew as I stood once more before the delicate, many-shelled form of the Druid Drum.

"Deliberately not listed," I murmured, studying the blank space on the page, and was startled when Runner Pye said: "Yes" there at my shoulder. I had been concentrating, had not heard Jofas and Runner approach. They moved in next to me.

I turned to the Kurdaitcha. "Terraforming and settling Mars was fever the real task, you understand," I told him, told Jofas and most of all myself, needing to speak it out. "Mars was a place where life could be adopted to specific tasks. A new chance. Restitution for past abuses and neglect. Since Mars lacked life, life became the challenge. But justify the effort, the expense, the largesse by having it serve the tribal ethos. Make a devotion. Something to mark the time."

It was as if Runner Pye was only now letting himself understand. We will get it someday. We can make it work."

"But the original designers had to build with the same philosophical integrity as the mankin tects and belltree factors. Biotects are rarely cynical."

"A century ago, yes," Runner said. "Assume that."

"The other deaths? When?"

"All during the first twenty-five years. When personnel rotation was more frequent. Not like now. It's only Jana dying which makes all is significant now. The prospect of Sollave treachery..."

"These other victims - these subjects from before. They were biotects committed to the Centuries Project, yes? All of them?" Runner took the notes from me, scanned them, though he had to know the answer already. "Probably. The PRDs were their creations. they all had to be involved in the program."

"What does 'involved' mean?"

"It doesn't say. But assume they were chosen for the task becauseDown Powers 41

they had a vision for Mars. As you say, they were not as cynical then. I believe they competed for the privilege. The cutbacks and True Lifer reactions had not yet started."

"Were these other deaths going or coming?"

"What's that?"

"Leaving for Mars or returning? Or both?"

Again Runner consulted his sheets, his lips moving on the details. "All returning. Like Jana, they were here awaiting rehabilitation." That word. And worse. Forced rehabilitation.

"Runner, you are third officer on Jindawan. Describe Jana's state of mind on the return voyage. He was leaving home, you said before."

"He was - resigned. Accepting, but sad, melancholy. He hated leaving. But he was determined and accepting."

"I'm sure he was. You came with him to the hotel, you said. His honour guard."

"I left him here. He asked me to go."

"Yes, but how was he when you left him? Still desolate?" "I wouldn't say desolate, Captain."

"Of course not. He was an experienced and disciplined man. See I beyond his discipline. How was he really when you left him?"

Runner kept his secret, did not mention the kinship bond. "Resigned.

Accepting. Determined."

"Inwardly? Secretly?"

"Sad. Homesick. All right, desolate. Despairing."

"Jofas? How did Jana seem to you?"

The barman, the failed spaceman, shrugged. "Despairing, yes. But under control."

"I'm sure. Runner, the Sollave did not do this." I reached out and touched the smooth vitreous surface of the Druid Drum. "I think you'll find this killed Jana and the others."

Runner Pye actually stepped back from the bioform. "Captain, how?"

"The Samplings are exactly that - they represent the range of what would ever be needed to build Mars and groom the Project humans who would someday be Martians." I indicated the foil pages in Runner's hand. "That is a list of lifeforms produced by biotects covering themselves in the event of failure or project abandonment. It gives only primary and secondary functions, largely for the initial planet-thumping, start-up phase. Who would admit to more? Who would dare? It would be premature. But what would the functions of these PRDs be when the biosphere was self-regulating, assuming that could be achieved?"

"The lists give nothing."

"They wouldn't. The Centuries personnel in stage two certainly would not know. But the designers would have built for an all-contingency future. An Ab'O future. A settled, terraformed Mars on the one hand, an abandoned Mars with some kind of life continuing on the other. That mindset. They might never get the chance again."

"What then?" Jofas asked.

"I would assume a psychoactive role, a custodian and nurturing role for humans cut off from their first home. And while all the fury of the planet-thumping was underway, one strain of PRD would have been given that job up front - designed, as you said before, to work near humans, to ease the pining spirit, to serve in time of distress and cafard."

"And poor Jana triggered its function."

"Yes, poor Jana. And poor biofbrm as well, left among all these humans who give it no point of connection, no task, no purpose. Left in this light, this constant betrayal. Suddenly there's a biotect here, a Towradji aching for vistas other than these, pining, yearning, desolate, his work-of-the-heart abandoned. This Sampling knows nothing of Fair Chasda actions against the Sollave. It has little practice, little finely tuned skill, insufficient power, yet it must ease the pain. It too has been torn away from the place it was meant for. It reaches out blindly, coarsely, and turns off the heart, eliminates the distress the only way it can. Jana was killed by an act of utter kindness."

"An electrical charge?"

"A mental command, I'd say, with an accompanying image. A very important image. One that would make him smile. He was a Martian, after all. At the moment when he died he was a Marslander, a Centuries Martian. And going out that door, he was going home."