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There were three Empresses of Mars.

The first one was a bar at the Settlement. The second was the lady who ran the bar; though her title was strictly informal, having been bestowed on her by the regular customers, and her domain extended no further than the pleasantly gloomy walls of the only place you could get beer on the Tharsis Bulge.

The third one was the Queen of England.

ONE: THE BIG RED BALLOON

What were the British doing on Mars?

For one thing, they had no difficulty calculating with metric figures. For another, their space exploration effort had not been fueled primarily by a military industrial complex. This meant that it had never received infusions of taxpayers' money on the huge scale of certain other nations, but also meant that its continued existence had been unaffected by the inconvenient disappearance of enemies. Without the necessity of offworld missile bases, the major powers' interest in colonizing space had quite melted away. This left plenty of room for the private sector.

There was only one question, then: was there money on Mars?

There had definitely been money on Luna. The British Lunar Company had done quite well by its

stockholders, with the proceeds from its mining and tourism divisions. Luna had been a great place to channel societal malcontents as well, guaranteeing a work force of rugged individualists and others who couldn't fit in Down Home without medication.

But Luna was pretty thoroughly old news now and no longer anywhere near as profitable as it had been, thanks to the miners' strikes and the litigation with the Ephesian Church over the Diana of Luna incident. Nor was it romantic anymore: its sterile silver valleys were becoming domesticated, domed over with tract housing for all the clerks the BLC needed. Bureaucrats and missionaries had done for Luna as a frontier.

The psychiatric Hospitals were filling up with unemployed rugged individualists again. Profit margins were down. The BLC turned its thoughtful eyes to Mars.

Harder to get to than Luna, but nominally easier to colonize. Bigger, but on the other hand no easy gravity well with which to ship ore down to Earth. This ruled out mining for export as a means of profit. And as for low-gravity experiments, they were cheaper and easier to do on Luna. What, really, had Mars to offer to the hopeful capitalist?

Only the prospect of terraforming. And terraforming would cost a lot of money and a lot of effort, with the successful result being a place slightly less hospitable than Outer Mongolia in the dead of winter.

But what are spin doctors for?

So the British Arian Company had been formed, with suitably orchestrated media fanfare. Historical cliches were dusted off and repackaged to look shiny-new. Games and films were produced to create a public appetite for adventure in rocky red landscapes. Clever advertising did its best to convince people they'd missed a golden opportunity by not buying lots on Luna when the land up there was dirt cheap, but intimated that they needn't kick themselves any longer: a second chance was coming for an even better deal!

And so forth and so on.

It all had the desired effect. A lot of people gave the British Arian Company a great deal of money in return for shares of stock that, technically speaking, weren't worth the pixels with which they were impressively depicted in old-engraving style. The big red balloon was launched. Missions to Mars were launched, a domed base was built, and actual scientists were sent out to the new colony along with the better-socially-adapted inhabitants of two or three Hospitals. So were the members of an incorporated clan, as a goodwill gesture in honor of the most recent treaty with the Celtic Federation. They brought certain institutions the BAC officially forbade, like polluting industries and beast slavery, but conceded were necessary to survival on a frontier.

So all began together the vast and difficult work of setting up the infrastructure for terraforming, preparing the way for wholesale human colonization.

Then there was a change of government, which coincided with the BAC discovering that the fusion generators they had shipped to Mars wouldn't work unless they were in a very strong electromagnetic field, and Mars, it seemed, didn't have much of one. This meant that powering life support alone would cost very much more than anyone had thought it would.

Not only that, the lowland canyons where principal settlement had been planned turned out to channel winds with devastating velocity. Only in the Tharsis highlands, where the air was thinner and colder, was

it possible to erect a structure that wouldn't be scoured away by sandstorms within a week. The BAC discovered this after several extremely costly mistakes.

The balloon burst.

Not with a bang and shreds flying everywhere, exactly; more like a very fast leak, so it sort of dwindled down to an ignominious little lopsided thing without much air in it. Just like the dome of the Settlement Base.

So a lot of people were stuck up there without the money to come home, and they had to make the best of things. Under the circumstances, it seemed best to continue on with the job.

* * * *

Mary Griffith woke alone that morning, though she did not always do so. She lay for a while in the dark, listening to the quiet, which was not the same thing as silence: low hum of the jenny and a few snores drifting from the other lofts tucked in under the curve of the dome like so many swallows' nests. No coughing. No quarreling. No fretful clunking to tell her that Three Tank needed its valves unblocked yet again.

Smiling to herself, she rolled out of her bedclothes and tossed the ladder over the side, so descending nimbly to meet the day. She was a compactly built and muscular little woman of a certain age. Her ancestors, most of them coal miners, had passed along with other hardy genetic characteristics a barrel chest, which gave her considerable bosom a certain massive foundation, and Martian gravity contributed in its own way to make Mother Griffith's Knockers famous throughout the Settlement.

Having sent the ladder back up on its reel and tied off the line neat as any sailor, she set the stove to heating and pumped a kettle of water. The water came up reluctantly, as it always did, rust-colored, strangling and spitting slush from the pipe, but it boiled clear; and as she sat and sipped her tea Mary watched the steam rise like a ghost in the dry cold air.

The visible phantom ascended and dissipated, reaching the lofts and sending its message to the other sleepers, who were pulled awake by its moistness as irresistibly as though it was the smell of eggs and bacon, were they back on Earth. Soon she heard them tossing in their blankets, heard a racking cough or a whispered exchange. She sighed, bidding goodbye to the last bit of early-morning calm. Another day begun.

She got up and rolled back the shade on the big window, and the sullen purple dawn flared in and lit her house.

"Oh, my, that's bright," said someone plaintively, high up in the shadows, and a moment later Mr. Morton came down on his line, in his long black thermals looking uncommonly like a hesitant spider.

"Good morning, Mr. Morton," said Mary, in English because his panCelt was still halting, and "Good morning, Ma'am," said he, and winced as his bare feet hit the cold sanded floor. Half-hopping he picked his way to the stove and poured his tea, inhaling the steam gratefully; brought it back to the long stone table and seated himself, wincing again as his knees knocked into the table supports. He stirred a good lump of butter into the tea and regarded Mary through the steam, looking anxious.

"Er ... what would you like me to do today?" he inquired.

Mary sighed and summoned patience.

He was nominally her employee, and had been so since that fateful afternoon when he, like so many others, had realized that his redundancy pay did not amount to half the fare back to Earth.

“Well, you didn't finish the scouring on Five Tank yesterday, did you?” she said.

“No,” he agreed sadly.

“Then I think perhaps you had better do that, Mr. Morton.”

“Okay,” he said.

It was not his fault that he had to be told what to do. He had spent most of his adult life in Hospital and a good bit of his childhood too, ever since (having at the age of ten been caught reading a story by Edgar Allan Poe) he had been diagnosed as Eccentric.

Mind you, it wasn't all jam and tea in Hospital. Even the incurably twisted had to be of some use to society, and Mr. Morton had been brilliant at the chemistry, design and fabrication of cast-stone structures for industrial use. That was why he had been recruited by the BAC, arriving on Mars with a single black duffel containing all he owned and a heart full of dreams of romantic adventure.

Having designed and fabricated all the structures the BAC needed, however, he had been summarily fired. He had gone wandering away through the Tubes and wound up at the Empress, his white thin face whiter still for shock, and sat at a dark table drinking batch for eight hours before Mary had asked him if he was ever going home, and then he had burst into tears.

So she had given him a job. Mary had been fired, herself. Not for redundancy, though, really; for being too Ethnic.

“Five Tank, yes, and in the afternoon we can get brew another pale ale,” she decided, “Or maybe a good oatmeal stout, what do you think?” and Mr. Morton brightened at that.

“Have we got any oats?” he inquired.

“If She provides them,” Mary said, and he nodded sagely. Mr. Morton wasn't an Ephesian himself, but he was willing to concede that there was Somebody out there responsive to human prayer, and She certainly seemed to hear Mary's.

“Something will turn up,” he said, and Mary nodded.

And when the day had well and truly begun—when the lodgers had all descended from their alcoves and gone trudging away down the Tubes to their varied employments, when Mary's daughters and their respective gentlemen callers had been roused and set smiling or sullen about the day's tasks, when the long stone counter had been polished to a dull shine and the heating unit under One Tank was filling the air with a grateful warmth, and Mary herself stood behind the bar drawing the first ale of the day, to be poured into the offering basin in the little shrine with its lumpy image of the Good Mother herself, dim-lit by her little flickering votive wire—even in that moment when the rich hoppy stuff hit the parched stone and foamed extravagantly, for Co2 is never lacking on Mars—even just then the Lock doors swung open and in came the answer to prayer, being Padraig Moylan with a hundredweight sack of Clan Morrigan oats and two tubs of butter in trade.

Mr. Moylan was thanked with grace and sincerity, the clan's bar tab recalculated accordingly. Soon he was settled in a cozy alcove with a shot of red single malt and Mona, the best listener amongst Mary's children. Mary, having stashed the welcome barter in a locker, set about her slow eternal task of sweeping the red sand from her tables. She could hear Mr. Morton singing as he worked with his scouring pads, his dreamy lyric baritone echoing inside Five Tank, reverberating *Some Enchanted Evening*.

Mary ticked him off her mental list of Things to be Seen To, and surveyed the rest of her house as she moved down the length of the table.

There was Alice, her firstborn, graceful as a swan and as irritable too, loading yesterday's beer mugs into the scouring unit. Rowan, brown and practical, was arranging today's mugs in neat ranks behind the bar. Worn by scouring, the mugs had a lovely silkiness on them now, shiny as pink marble, dwindling to a thinness and translucency that meant that soon they'd be too delicate for bar use and more would have to be cast. (Though when that happened, the old ones could be boxed up and sent out to the souvenir store in the landing port, to be sold as Finest Aerean Porcelain to such guests as came to inspect the BAC public facilities.)

Over behind Four Tank, the shadows had retreated before a little mine-lamp, and by its light Chiring and Manco had a disassembled filtering unit spread out, cleaning away the gudge with careful paddles. The gudge too was a commodity, to be traded as fertilizer, which was a blessing because it accumulated with dreadful speed in the bottom of the fermentation tanks. It was a combination of blown sand, yeast slurry and the crawly stuff that grew on the ceiling and it had a haunting and deathless smell, but mixed with manure and liberally spread over thin poor Martian soil, it defied superoxidants and made the barley grow.

And everyone agreed that getting the barley to grow was of vital importance.

So Chiring and Manco sang too, somewhat muffled behind recyclable cloth kerchiefs tied over their mouths and noses, joining the last bit of *Some Enchanted Evening* in their respective gruff bass and eerie tenor. A tiny handcam whirred away at them from its place on the table, adding footage to Chiring's ongoing documentary series for the *Kathmandu Post*. Mary nodded with satisfaction that all was well and glanced ceilingward at the last member of her household, who was only now rappelling down from the lowest of the lofts.

"Sorry," said the Heretic, ducking her head in awkward acknowledgment of tardiness and hurrying off to the kitchen, where she set about denting pans with more than usual effort to make up for being late. Mary followed after, for the Heretic was another problem case requiring patience.

The Heretic had been an Ephesian sister until she had had some kind of accident, about which few details were known, but which had left her blind in one eye and somehow gotten her excommunicated. She had been obliged to leave her convent under something of a cloud; and how she had wound up here on Mars was anybody's guess. She stammered, jittered and dropped things, but she was at least not the proselytizing kind of heretic, keeping her blasphemous opinions to herself. She was also a passable cook, so Mary had agreed to take her on at the Empress.

"Are you all right?" asked Mary, peering into the darkness of the kitchen, where the Heretic seemed to be chopping freeze-dried soy protein at great speed.

"Yes."

“Don't you want the lights on? You'll cut off a finger,” said Mary, turning the lights on, and the Heretic yelped and covered her good eye, swiveling the ocular replacement on Mary in a reproachful kind of way.

“Ow,” she said.

“Are you hung over?”

“No,” said the Heretic, cautiously uncovering her eye, and Mary saw that it was red as fire.

“Oh, dear. Did you have the dreams again?”

The Heretic stared through her for a moment before saying, in a strange and breathless voice, *"Out of the ground came scarlet flares, each one bursting, a heart's beacon, and He stood above the night and the red swirling cold sand and in His hand held up the Ace of Diamonds. It burned like the flares. He offered it forth, laughing and said: Can you dig it?"*

“Okay,” said Mary, after a moment's silence.

“Sorry,” said the Heretic, turning back to her cutting board.

“That's all right,” said Mary. “Can you get luncheon on by eleven?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, good,” said Mary, and exited the kitchen.

Lady, grant me an ordinary day, she begged silently, for the last time the Heretic had said something bizarre like that, all manner of strange things had happened.

Yet the day rolled on in its accustomed groove as ordinary as you please. At noon the luncheon crowd came in, the agricultural workers from the clan and contract laborers from the Settlement, who were either Sherpas like Chiring or Inkas like Manco; few English frequented the Empress of Mars, for all their Queen might smile from its sign.

After noon, when the laboring men and women went trooping back to their shifts through the brown whirling day, and the wind had reached its accustomed hissing howl, there was too much to do to worry. There were plates and bowls to be scoured, there was beer to brew, and there was the constant tinkering necessary to keep all the machines running, lest the window's forcefield fail against the eternal sandblast, among other things.

So Mary had forgotten all about any dire forebodings by the time the blessed afternoon interval of peace came round, and she retired to the best of her tables and put her feet up.

“Mum.”

So much for peace. She opened one eye and looked at Rowan, who was standing there gesturing urgently at the communications console.

“Mr. Cochevelou send his compliments, and would like to know if he might come up the Tube to talk about something,” she said.

“Hell,” said Mary, leaping to her feet. It was not that she did not like Mr. Cochevelou, clan chieftain (indeed, he was more than a customer and patron); but she had a pretty good idea what it was he wanted to discuss.

“Tell him Of Course, and then go down and bring up a bottle of the Black Label,” she said. She went to fetch a cushion for Mr. Cochevelou's favorite seat.

Cochevelou must have been waiting with his fist on the receiver, for it seemed no more than a minute later he came shouldering his way through the Tube, emerging from the airlock beard first, and behind him three of his household too, lifting their masks and blinking.

“Luck on this house,” said Cochevelou hoarsely, shaking the sand from his suit, and his followers mumbled an echo, and Mary noted philosophically the dunelets piling up around their boots.

“Welcome to the Empress, Mr. Cochevelou. Your usual?”

“Bless you, Ma'am, yes,” said Cochevelou, and she took his arm and led him away, jerking a thumb at Mona to indicate she should take a broom to the new sand. Mona sighed and obeyed without good grace, but her mother was far too busy trying to read Cochevelou's expression to notice.

Between the beard and the forge-soot, there wasn't much of Cochevelou's face to see; but his light eyes had a shifting look to them today, at once hopeful and uneasy. He watched Mary pour him a shot of Black Label, rubbing his thick fingers across the bridge of his nose and leaving pale streaks there.

“It's like this, Ma'am,” he said abruptly. “We're sending Finn home.”

“Oh,” said Mary, filling another glass. “Congratulations, Mr. Finn.”

“It's on account of I'm dying without the sea,” said Finn, a smudgy creature in a suit that had been buckled tight and was still too big.

“And with the silicosis,” added Cochevelou.

“That's beside the point,” said Finn querulously. “I dream at night of the flat wet beach and the salt mist hanging low, and the white terns wheeling above the white wave. Picking dulse from the tidepools where the water lies clear as glass—”

There were involuntary groans from the others, and one of them booted Finn pretty hard in the ankle to make him stop.

“And, see, he goes on like that and drives the rest of us mad with his glass-clear water and all,” said Cochevelou, raising his voice slightly as he lifted his cup and saluted Mary. “So what it comes down to is, we've finally saved enough to send one of us home and it's got to be him, you see? Your health, Ma'am.”

He drank, and Mary drank, and when they had both drawn breath, she said:

“What's to happen to his Allotment?”

She had cut straight to the heart of the matter, and Cochevelou smiled in a grimacing kind of way.

Under the terms of the Mutual Use Treaty, which had been hammered out during that momentary thaw in relations between England and the Celtic Federation, every settler on Mars had received an Allotment of acreage for private terraforming. With the lease went the commitment to keep the land under cultivation, at the risk of its reverting to the BAC.

The BAC, long since having repented its rash decision to invite so many undesirables to settle on Mars, had gotten into the habit of grabbing back land it did not feel was being sufficiently utilized.

“Well, that's the question,” said Cochevelou. “It's twenty long acres of fine land, Ma'am.”

“Five in sugar beets and fifteen in the best barley,” said Finn.

“With the soundest roof ever built and its own well, and the sweetest irrigation pipes ever laid,” said Cochevelou. “You wouldn't mind drinking out of them, I can tell you.”

Mary became aware that dead silence had fallen in her house, that all her family were poised motionless with brooms or trays of castware to hear what would be said next.

Barley was the life of the house. It was grown on cold and bitter Mars because it would grow anywhere, but it didn't grow well on the wretched bit of high-oxidant rock clay Mary had been allotted.

“What a pity if it was to revert to the BAC,” she said noncommittally.

“We thought so, too,” said Cochevelou, turning the cup in his fingers. “Because of course they'd plough that good stuff under and put it in soy, and wouldn't that be a shame? So of course we thought of offering it to you, first, Ma'am.”

“How much?” said Mary at once.

“Four thousand punts Celtic,” Cochevelou replied.

Mary narrowed her eyes. “How much of that would you take in trade?”

There was a slight pause.

“The BAC have offered us four grand in cash,” said Cochevelou, in a somewhat apologetic tone. “You see. But we'd much rather have you as a neighbor, wouldn't we? So if there's any way you could possibly come up with the money...”

“I haven't got it,” said Mary bluntly, and she meant it too. Her small economy ran almost entirely on barter and goodwill.

“Aw, now, surely you're mistaken about that,” said Cochevelou. “You could take up a collection, maybe. All the good workers love your place, and wouldn't they reach into their hearts and their pockets for a timely contribution? And some of your ex-BACs, haven't they got a little redundancy pay socked away in the bottom of the duffel? If you could even scrape together two-thirds for a down, we'd work out the most reasonable terms for you!”

Mary hesitated. She knew pretty well how much her people had, and it didn't amount to a thousand punts even if they presold their bodies to the xenoforensic studies lab. But the Lady might somehow provide, might She not?

“Perhaps I ought to view the property,” she said.

“It would be our pleasure,” said Cochevelou, grinning white in his sooty beard, and his people exchanged smiles, and Mary thought to herself: *Careful*.

But she rose and suited up, and fitted her mask on tight, and went for a stroll through the airlock with Cochevelou and his people.

* * * *

The Settlement was quite a bit more now than the single modest dome that had sheltered the first colonists, though that still rose higher than any other structure, and it did have that lovely vizio top so its inhabitants could see the stars, and which gave it a rather Space-Age Moderne look. It wasted heat, though, and who the hell cared enough about two tiny spitspeck moons to venture out in the freezing night and peer upward at them?

The Tubes had a nice modern look too, where the English maintained them, with lots of transparencies that gave onto stunning views of the Red Planet.

To be strictly accurate, it was only a red planet in places. When Mary had come to live there, her first impression had been of an endless cinnamon-colored waste. Now she saw every color but blue, from primrose-curry-tomcat-ochre to flaming persimmon-vermilion through bloodred and so into ever more livery shades of garnet and rust. There were even greens, both the subdued yellowy olive khaki in the rock and the exuberant rich green of the covered acreage.

And Finn's twenty long acres were green indeed, rich as emerald with a barley crop that had not yet come into its silver beard. Mary clanked through the airlock after Cochevelou and stopped, staring.

“The Crystal Palace itself,” said Finn proudly, with a wave of his hand.

She pulled off her mask and inhaled. The air stank, of course, from the methane; but it was rich and wet too, and with a certain sweetness. All down the long tunnel roofed with industrial-grade vizio, the barley grew tall, out to that distant point of shade change that must be sugar beet.

“Oh, my,” she said, giddy already with the oxygen.

“You see?” said Cochevelou. “Worth every penny of the asking price.”

“If I had it,” she retorted, making an effort at shrewdness. It was a beautiful holding, one that would give her all the malted barley she could use and plenty to trade on the side or even to sell...

“No wonder the English want this,” she said, and her own words echoed in her ears as she regarded the landscape beyond the vizio, the low-domed methane hell of the clan's cattle pens, the towering pipe-maze of Cochevelou's ironworks.

“No wonder the English want this,” she repeated, turning to look Cochevelou in the eye. “If they own this land, it divides Clan Morrigan's holdings smack in two, doesn't it?”

“Too right,” agreed Finn, “And then they'll file actions to have the cowshed and the ironworks moved as nuisances, see and—ow,” he concluded, as he was kicked again.

“And it's all a part of their secret plot to drive us out,” said Cochevelou rather hastily. “You see? They've gone and made us an offer we can't refuse. Now we've broke the ground and manured it for them, they've been just waiting and waiting for us to give up and go home, so they can grab it all. The day after we filed the papers to send Finn back, bastardly Inspector Baldwin shows up on our property.”

“Didn't his face fall when he saw what a nice healthy crop we had growing here!” said Finn, rubbing his ankle.

“So he couldn't condemn it and get the lease revoked you see?” Cochevelou continued, giving Finn a black look. “Because obviously it ain't abandoned, it's gone into our collective's common ownership. But it wasn't eight hours later he came around with that offer of four thousand for the land. And if we take it, yes, it's a safe bet they'll start bitching and moaning about our cattle and all.”

“Don't sell,” said Mary. “Or sell to one of your own.”

“Sweetheart, you know we've always thought of you as one of our own,” said Cochevelou soupily. “Haven't we? But who in our poor clan would ever be able to come up with that kind of money? And as for not selling, why, you and I can see that having the BAC in here would be doom and destruction and (which is worse) lawsuits inevitable somewhere down the road. But it isn't up to me. Most of our folk will only be able to see that big heap of shining BAC brass they're being offered. And they'll vote to take it, see?”

“We could do a lot with that kind of money,” sighed Matelot, he who had been most active kicking Finn. “Buy new generators, which we sorely need. More vizio, which as you know is worth its weight in transparent gold. Much as we'd hate to sell to strangers...”

“But if you were to buy the land, we'd have our cake and be able to eat it too, you see?” Cochevelou explained.

Mary eyed him resentfully. She saw, well enough: whichever way the dice fell, she was going to lose. If the Clan Morrigan acreage shrank, her little economy would go out of balance. No barley, no beer.

“You've got me in a cleft stick, Cochevelou,” she told him, and he looked sad.

“Aren't we both in a cleft stick, and you're just in the tightest part?” he replied. “But all you have to do is come up with the money, and we're both riding in high cotton, and the BAC can go off and fume. Come on now, darling, you don't have to make up your mind right away! We've got thirty days. Go on home and talk it over with your people, why don't you?”

She clapped her mask on and stamped out through the airlock, muttering.

* * * *

Mary had been accustomed, all her life, to dealing with emergencies. When her father had announced that he was leaving and she'd have to come home from University to take care of her mother, she had coped. She'd found a job, and a smaller apartment, where she and her mother had lived in an uneasy state of truce until her mother had taken all those sleeping pills. Mary had coped again; buried her mother, found a still smaller apartment, and taken night University courses until she'd got her doctorate in xenobotany.

When Alice's father had died, Mary had coped. She'd summoned all her confidence, and found a prestigious research and development job that paid well enough to keep Alice out of the Federation

orphanage.

When Rowan's father had deserted, she'd still coped, though he'd waltzed with most of her money; two years' hard work taking extra projects had gotten her on her feet again.

When Mona's father had decided he preferred boys, she had coped without a moment's trouble to her purse if not her heart, secure in her own finances now with lessons hard-learned. And when the BAC headhunters had approached her with a job offer, it had seemed as though it was the Lady's reward for all her years of coping.

A glorious adventure on another world! The chance to explore, to classify and enshrine her name forever in the nomenclature of Martian algae! The little girls had listened with round eyes, and only Alice had sulked and wept about leaving her friends, and only for a little while. So they'd all set off together bravely and become Martians, and the girls had adapted in no time, spoiled rotten as the only children on Mars.

And Mary had five years of happiness as a valued member of a scientific team, respected for her expertise, finding more industrial applications for *Cryptogametes gryffyuddi* than George Washington Carver had found for the peanut.

But when she had discovered all there was to discover about useful lichens on Mars (and in five years she had pretty much exhausted the subject), the BAC had no more use for her.

The nasty interview with General Director Rotherhithe had been both unexpected and brief. Her morals were in question, it had seemed. She had all those resource-consuming children, and while that sort of thing might be acceptable in a Celtic Federation country, Mars belonged to England. She was known to indulge in controlled substances, also no crime in the Federation, but certainly morally wrong. And the BAC had been prepared to tolerate her, ah, *religion* in the hopes that it would keep her from perpetuating certain other kinds of immorality, which had unfortunately not been the case—

“What, because I have men to my bed?” Mary had demanded, unfortunately not losing her grasp of English. “You dried-up dirty-minded old stick, I'll bet you'd wink at it if I had other women, wouldn't you? Bloody hypocrite! I've heard you keep a Lesbian Holopeep in your office cabinet—”

Academic communities are small and full of gossip, and even smaller and more full of gossip under a biodome, and secrets cannot be kept at all. So *Julie and Sylvia Take Department Lessons From Ms. Lash* had been giggled at, but never mentioned out loud. Until now.

General Director Rotherhithe had had a choking fit and gone a nice shade of lilac, and Sub-Director Thorpe had taken over to say that It was therefore with infinite regret, et cetera...

And Mary had had to cope again.

She hadn't cared that she couldn't afford the fare home; she loved Mars. She had decided she was damned if she was going to be thrown off. So, with her final paycheck, she'd gone into business for herself.

She'd purchased a dome from the Federation colonists, a surplus shelter originally used for livestock; and though the smell took some weeks to go away even in the dry thin air, the walls were sound and warm, and easily remodeled with berths for lodgers.

Chiring, who had had his contract canceled with the BAC for writing highly critical articles about them

and sending the columns home to the *Kathmandu Post*, came to her because he too had nowhere else to go. He was a decent mechanic, and helped her repair the broken well pump and set up the generators.

Manco Inka, who had been asked to leave the BAC community because he was discovered to be a (sort of) practicing Christian, brought her a stone-casting unit in exchange for rent, and soon she'd been able to cast her five fine brewing tanks and ever so many cups, bowls and dishes. Cochevelou himself had stood her the first load of barley for malting.

And once it was known that she had both beer and pretty daughters, the Empress of Mars was in business.

For five years now it had stood defiantly on its rocky bit of upland slope, the very picture of what a cozy country tavern on Mars ought to be: squat low dome grown all over with lichen patches most picturesque, except on the weather-wall where the prevailing winds blasted it bald with an unceasing torrent of sand, so it had to be puttied constantly with red stonecast leavings to keep it whole there. Mary swapped resources with the clan, with the laborers, with even a few stealthy BAC personnel for fuel and food, and an economy had been born.

And now it was threatened, and she was going to have to cope again.

“Holy Mother, why is it always *something*?” she growled into her mask, kicking through drifts as she stormed back along the Tube. “Could I count on You for even one year where nothing went wrong for once? I could not, indeed.

“And now I'm expected to pull Cochevelou's smoky black chestnuts out of the fire for him, the brute, and where am I to come up with the money? Could You even grant me one little miracle? Oh, no, I'm strong enough to cope on my own, aren't I? I'll solve everyone's problems so they needn't develop the spine to do it themselves, won't I? Bloody hell!”

She came to a transparency and glared out.

Before her was Dead Snake Field, a stretch of rock distinguished by a cairn marking the last resting place of Cochevelou's pet ball python, which had survived the trip to Mars only to escape from its terrarium and freeze to death Outside. Initial hopes that it might be thawed and revived had been dashed when Finn, in an attempt at wit, had set the coiled icicle on his head like a hat and it had slipped off and fallen to the floor, shattering.

There in the pink distance, just under the melted slope of Mons Olympus, was the sad-looking semicollapsed vizio wall of Mary's own few long acres, the nasty little Allotment she'd been granted almost as a nose-thumbing with her redundancy pay. Its spidery old Aeromotors gave it a deceptively rural look. With all the abundant freaky Martian geology to choose from, the BAC had managed to find her a strip of the most sterile clay imaginable; and though she was unable to farm it very effectively, they had never shown any inclination to snatch it back.

“There's another joke,” she snarled. “Fine fertile fields, is it? Oh, damn the old purse-mouth pervert!”

She stalked on and shortly came to the Tube branch leading to her allotment, and went down to see how her own crops were doing.

Plumes of mist were leaking from the airlock seal; now that needed replacing too, something *else* broken she couldn't afford to fix. There were tears in her eyes as she stepped through and lowered her mask, to

survey that low yellow wretched barley, fluttering feebly in the oxygen waves. The contrast with Finn's lush fields was too much. She sat down on an overturned bucket and wept, and her tears amounted to one scant drop of water spattering on the sere red clay, fizzing like peroxide.

When her anger and despair were wept out, she remained staring numbly at the fast-drying spot. The clay was the exact color of terracotta.

“I wonder,” she said, “whether we could make pots out of the damned stuff.”

She didn't need pots, of course; she could stonecast all the household vessels she needed out of Martian dust. What else was clay good for?

Sculpting things, she thought to herself. Works of art? Useful bricabrac? Little tiles with SOUVENIR OF MARS stamped into them? Though she had no artistic talent herself, maybe one of her people had, and then what if they could get the Export Bazaar to take pieces on consignment? The Arean Porcelain sold pretty well.

“What the hell,” she said, wiping her eyes, and standing up she righted the bucket and fetched a spade from the tool rack. She dug down a meter or so through the hardpan, gasping with effort even in the (comparatively) rich air, and filled the bucket with stiff chunks of clay. Then she put on her mask again and trudged home, lugging the latest hope for a few pounds.

In her house her family might have been frozen in their places from the moment she'd left, and on her entry came to shamefaced hurried life again, resuming their various household chores as though they'd been hard at work ever since she'd left and not standing around discussing the clan's offer.

Mr. Morton came stalking up to her, knotting his fingers together.

“Er—Ma'am, we've been talking, and—”

“Here, Mama, that's too heavy for you,” said Manco, scuttling close and relieving her of the bucket. “You sit down, huh?”

“Very kind, I'm sure,” Mary said sourly, looking around. “I'll bet not one of you started the oatmeal stout brewing like I asked, have you? Take that out to the ball mill,” she added to Manco, pointing at the bucket. “As long as we've got all this damned clay, let's put it to good use and make something out of it.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Here, you sit down—” Mr. Morton gestured her toward a chair with flapping motions of his long arms.

“I can't sit down! I have too much to do. Holy Mother, Alice, that heating unit should have been turned on an hour ago! Do I have to see to everything around here?”

“Water's heating now, Mum,” Alice cried, running back from Tank Three.

“Well, but I wanted to tell you about our ideas—if it would be all right—” said Mr. Morton.

“I'm sure it will be when I'm not so busy, Mr. Morton,” said Mary, grabbing a push broom and going after the sand again. “Rowan, did you and Chiring reinstall the filter the new way we discussed?”

“Yes, Mum, and—”

“See, I thought we might raise four thousand pounds easily if we put on a sort of cabaret in here,” Mr. Morton continued earnestly. “Like a dinner show? I could sing and do dramatic recitals, and—”

“What a very nice idea, Mr. Morton, and I’m sure I’ll think about it, but in the meanwhile I need you to get that sack of oats out of the storage locker.”

“And I thought I could do a striptease,” said Mona.

Three broom-pushes before the meaning sank in, and then:

“Striptease?” Mary shouted. “Are you mad? When the BAC already sees us as a cesspit of immorality and substance abuse? That’d really frost the cake!”

Mona pouted. “But you said when you were at University—”

“That was a long time ago and I needed the money, and—”

“And we need the money now! We *never* have any money!”

“Ladies, please—” said poor Mr. Morton, his face pink for once.

“The oats, Mr. Morton. Mona, you will keep your clothes on until you come of age and that’s all that will be said on the subject, do you understand?”

“What’s this?” said Manco, emerging from the utility area and holding out something in his hand. He had an odd look on his face. “This was in the bottom of the bucket. The clay cracked apart and—”

“It’s a rock,” said Mary, glancing at it. “Pitch it out.”

“I don’t think it’s a rock, Mama.”

“He’s right,” said Chiring, squinting at it. “It looks more like a crystal.”

“Then put it on the back bar with the fossils and we’ll ask one of the geologists about it. What was that?” Mary looked up suspiciously. “Who’s that? Who just threw up?”

“It was me,” said Alice miserably, emerging from behind the bar, and Rowan ran to her with a bar towel.

Mary ground her teeth. “Food poisoning. Just what we all needed. That devil-worshipping looney—” She started for the kitchen with blood in her eye, but was stopped in her tracks as Rowan said quietly:

“It’s not food poisoning, Mum.”

Mary did an about-face, staring at her daughters. There was a profound moment of silence in which she continued staring, and the three men present wondered what was going on, until Alice wailed:

“Well, I didn’t think you could *get* pregnant on Mars!”

* * * *

So in all the excitement the crystal was stuck on the back bar and forgotten until that evening, when the Brick came in from his polar run.

The Brick was so named because he resembled one. Not only was he vast and tall and wide in his quilted Hauler's jumpsuit, he was the color of a brick as well, though what shade he might be under years of high-impact red dust was anybody's guess.

There was red grit between his teeth when he grinned, as he did now on emerging from the airlock, and his bloodshot red eyes widened in the pleasant evening darkness of the Empress. He lifted his head and sucked in air through a nose flattened as a gorilla's from years of collisions with fists, boots, steering wheels and (it was rumored) Hospital orderlies' foreheads. He had been on Mars a long, long time.

"Damn, I love that smell," he howled in English, striding to the bar and slapping down his gauntlets. "Beer, onions and soygold nuggets frying, eh? Give me a Party Platter with Bisto and a pitcher of Foster's."

"I'm afraid we don't have Foster's, sir," dithered Mr. Morton. Mary elbowed him.

"It's what we call the Ares Lager when he's in here," she murmured, and Mr. Morton ran off at once to fill a pitcher.

"How's it going, Beautiful?"

"Tolerably, Mr. Brick," said Mary, sighing.

He looked at her keenly and his voice dropped a couple of decibels when he said, "Trouble over something? Did the BAC finally get that warrant?"

"What warrant?"

"Oh, nothing you need to know about right now," he said casually, accepting his pitcher of beer and drinking from it. "Not to worry, doll. Uncle Brick hears rumors all the time, and half of 'em never pan out. As long as the Ice Haulers want you here, you'll stay here."

"I suppose they're trying to get me closed down again," said Mary. "Bad cess to them, and what else is new? But I have other problems today."

She told him about the day's occurrences and he listened, sipping and nodding meanwhile, grunting occasionally in agreement or surprise.

"Congratulations, m'dear," he said. "This'll be the first human child born on Mars, you know that? Any idea who the father is?"

"She knows who she hasn't been with, at least," said Mary. "And there'll be tests, so it's not as though we'll be in suspense for long. It's only a baby, after all. But where am I going to get four thousand punts, I'd like to know?"

Brick rumbled meditatively, shaking his head.

"Only a baby', she says. You know they're not having 'em Down Home any more, don't you?"

“Oh, that's certainly not true. I had three myself,” said Mary indignantly.

“The birth rate's dropping, all the same,” said the Brick, having another sip of his beer. “That's what I hear. Funny thing for a species to do when it's colonizing other planets, isn't it?”

Mary shrugged. “I'm sure it isn't as bad as all that,” she said. “Life will go on somehow. It always does. The Goddess provides.”

“I guess so,” agreed Brick, and his voice rose to a genial roar as he hailed the Heretic, shuffling out from the kitchen with his Party Platter. “Hey, sweetheart! You're looking gorgeous this evening.”

The Heretic blinked at him and shuffled closer. “Hi,” she said, offering him the food. He took it in one hand and swept her close for a kiss on the forehead.

“How've you been?”

“I saw the living glory burning. A bright tower in the icy waste,” she said.

“That's nice. Can I get just a little more Bisto on these fries?”

“Okay.”

The Heretic went back to the kitchen and fetched out a little saucepan of gravy-like substance, and as she larded Brick's dinner, Mary went on:

“If you could see that twenty acres! It was as rich as pudding, probably from our very own sewage we sold them, and green as anything on Earth. Where I'm going to get the cash for it I simply do not know. Chiring makes forty punts a week from his column in the *Kathmandu Post*, of which he has kindly offered me ten per week toward the land, but I've only got a month. If one of my people was a brilliant artist we might sell some folk art out of clay, but all of them protested they're quite talentless, so bang goes another good idea, and I'm running out of good ideas. Just when I thought everything had settled down to some kind of equilibrium—”

“What's that new thing on the back bar?” inquired Brick, slightly muffled because his mouth was full.

“Oh. That? Wait, you were a mineralogist, weren't you?” Mary paused, looking over her shoulder at him as she fetched the crystal down.

“I have been many things, m'dear,” he informed her, washing down his mouthful with more beer. “And I did take a degree in Mineralogy at the University of Queensland once.”

“Then you have a look at it. It was in some clay I dug up this afternoon. Maybe quartz with some cinnabar stain? Or more of the ever-present rust? It's a funny old thing.” She tossed it over and he caught it in his massive hand, peered at it for a long moment.

Then he unflapped his transport suit, reached into the breast and brought out a tiny spectrometer mounted in a headset. He slipped it on with one hand, holding the crystal out to the light with the other. He stared through the eyepiece for a long moment.

“Or do you think it's some kind of agate?” said Mary.

“No,” Brick replied, turning and turning the crystal in his hand. “Unless this gizmo is mistaken, sweetheart, you've got yourself a diamond here.”

* * * *

Nobody believed it. How could something that looked like a lump of frozen tomato juice be worth anything? *A diamond?*

Whatever it turned out to be, however, everyone agreed that the BAC must not be told.

Cochevelou offered to trade the glorious twenty acres for the rock outright, and in fact proposed to Mary. Smiling, she declined. But terms of sale for the land were worked out and a deposit of ten punts was accepted, and the transfer of title was registered with the BAC by Mr. Morton, who as a Briton seemed less likely to annoy the authorities.

And on the appointed day the rock was sewn into the lining of Finn's thermal suit, and he was seen off to the spaceport with much cheer, after promising faithfully to take the diamond straight to the best dealers in Amsterdam immediately on arriving Down Home.

The next they heard of him, however, was that he was found drowned and smiling on the rocks at Antrim not three weeks after his homecoming, a bottle still clutched in his hand.

Mary shrugged. She had title to the land, and Cochevelou had ten punts a week from her. For once, she thought to herself, she had broken even.

TWO: THE RICHEST WOMAN ON MARS

It was the Queen's Birthday, and Mary was hosting the Cement Kayak Regatta.

Outdoor sports were possible on Mars. Just.

Not to the extent that the famous original advertising holo implied (grinning man in shirtsleeves with football and micromask, standing just outside an airlock door, captioned: “This man is actually **STANDING** on the **SURFACE** of **MARS!**” though without any mention of the fact that the holo had been taken at noon on the hottest day in summer at the equator and that the man remained outside for exactly five seconds before the shot was taken, after which he leaped back inside and begged for a bottle of Visine), but possible nonetheless, especially if you were inventive.

The cement kayaks had been cast of the ever-present and abundant Martian grit, and fitted at one end with tiny antigravity units. These, like so many other things on Mars, did not work especially well, but enabled the kayaks to float about two feet above the ground. Indoors they bobbed aimlessly in place, having no motive power; once pushed out an airlock they were at the mercy of the driving winds.

But it was possible to deflect or direct the wind with big double-bladed paddles made of scrap pipe and sheet metal, salvaged from the BAC's refuse tip. It was then possible to sail along through the air, if you wore full Outside kit, and actually sort of steer.

So Cement Kayaking had become a favorite sport on Mars, indeed the only outdoor sport. An obstacle course had been set up in Dead Snake Field, and four kayaks lurched about in it now, fighting the wind and each other.

“Competitive sport and the pioneer spirit,” Chiring was announcing into his handcam, a solemn talking head against a background of improbable action. “Anachronisms on Earth, do they fulfill a vital function here on the final frontier? Have these colonists fallen back on degrading social violence, or is cultural evolution an ongoing process on Mars?” Nobody answered him.

The Tube was blocked with spectators, crowding around the transparencies to watch. They were also shouting, which dried their throats nicely, so the beer was selling well.

“LEFT, RAMSAY!” howled Cochevelou, pointing vainly at the hololoop of Queen Anne waving that served as the mid-point marker. “Oh, you stupid little git, LEFT!”

“A Phobos Porter for you, Cochevelou?” Mary inquired cheerily. “On the house?”

“Yes please,” he growled. Mary beckoned and the Heretic trudged back along the line. She turned to display the castware tank she bore in its harness on her back, and Mary selected a mug from the dangling assortment and drew a pint with practiced ease.

Cochevelou took it, lifted his mask and gulped it down, wiping the foam from his moustache with the back of his hand.

“Very kind of you, I'm sure,” he said bitterly. “Given the amount I'm losing today. YOU'RE A DISGRACE TO FLUFFY'S MEMORY!” he bellowed at Ramsay. Fluffy had been the python's name.

“*We buried evil on Mars,*” said the Heretic in a dreamy little voice, and nobody paid any attention to her.

“It's not really his fault,” said Mary. “How can the poor man hope to compete with our Manco? It's all those extra blood vessels in his fingertips, you know, from being born in the Andes. Gives him better control of the paddles. Selected by Nature, as it were.”

“You must have bet a packet on him,” said Cochevelou, staring as Manco swung round Fluffy's Cairn and sent Ramsay spinning off to the boundary with an expert paddle-check.

“Bet? Now, dear Mr. Cochevelou, where would I get the money to do that?” said Mary, smiling wide behind her mask. “You're getting every penny I earn for Finn's Field, so you are.”

Cochevelou grimaced.

“Speak no ill of the dead and all, but if I could ever get my hands on that little bastard's neck—” he said.

“Beer please,” said one of the BAC engineers, shouldering through the crowd.

“A pint for the English!” Mary announced, and he looked around guiltily and pulled up the hood of his suit. “How nice of you to come down here to our primitive little fete. Perhaps later we can do some colorful folk dancing for your amusement.” She handed him a mug. “That'll be one punt Celtic.”

“I heard you'll take air filters,” said the engineer in an undertone.

“What size, dear?”

“BX3s,” replied the engineer, drawing one from the breast of his suit and displaying it. Mary inspected it

critically and took it from him.

“Your gracious patronage is always appreciated,” she said, and handed it to the Heretic, who tucked it out of sight. “Enjoy your beer. You see, Cochevelou? No money in my hands at all. What's a poor little widow to do?”

But Cochevelou missed the sarcasm, staring over her head down the tunnel.

“Who's this coming?” he said. “Did they bring a passenger on the last transport up?”

Mary turned and saw the newcomer, treading gingerly along in the cat-step people walked with before they became accustomed to Martian gravity. He was tall, and wore a shiny new thermal suit, and he carried a bukecase. He was peering uncertainly through his goggles at the crowd around the transparencies.

“That's a damned solicitor, that's what that is,” said Cochevelou, scowling blackly. “Five'll get you ten he's come to see you or me.”

Mary's lip curled. She watched as the newcomer studied the crowd. He swung his mask in her direction at last, and stared; then walked toward her decisively.

“It's you, eh?” said Cochevelou, trying not to sound too relieved as he sidled away. “My sympathies, Mary darling.”

“MS. GRIFFITH?” inquired the stranger. Mary folded her arms.

“I am,” she replied.

“ELIPHAL DE WIT,” he said. “I'VE HAD QUITE A TIME FINDING YOU!”

“TURN YOUR SPEAKER DOWN! I'M NOT DEAF!”

“OH! I'M sorry,” said Mr. De Wit, hurriedly twiddling the knob. “Is that better? They didn't seem to know who you were at the port office, and then they admitted you were still resident but unemployed, but they wouldn't tell me where you lived. Very confusing.”

“You're not from the BAC, then?” Mary looked him up and down.

“What?” Mr. De Wit started involuntarily at the crowd's roar of excitement. The English kayaker had just swung past the midway marker. “No. Didn't you get my communication? I'm from Polieos of Amsterdam.”

“WHAT?” said Mary, without benefit of volume knob.

“I'm here about your diamond,” Mr. De Wit explained.

* * * *

“And to think of all the dreadful things I said about poor dear Finn, when I thought he'd failed in his sacred trust! And I thought you were a solicitor at first!” Mary babbled, setting down a pitcher of batch and two mugs.

“Actually, Ms. Griffith, I am one,” said Mr. De Wit, gazing around at the inside of the Empress. “On permanent retainer for Polieos, to deal with special circumstances.”

“Really?” Mary halted in the act of reaching to fill his mug.

“And I’m here as your counsel,” he explained carefully. “There has really been no precedent for this situation. Polieos feels it would be best to proceed with a certain amount of caution at first.”

“Don’t they want to buy my diamond, then?” Mary demanded.

“Absolutely, yes, Ms. Griffith,” Mr. De Wit assured her. “And we would prefer to buy it from you. I’m here to determine whether or not we can legally do that.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Well—” Mr. De Wit lifted his mug and paused, staring down at the brown foam brimming. “Er—what are we drinking?”

“It’s water we’ve put things in, because you wouldn’t want to drink Mars water plain,” said Mary impatiently. “No alcohol in it, dear, so it won’t hurt you if you’re not a drinking man. Cut to the chase, please.”

Mr. De Wit set his mug aside, folded his hands and said:

“In a minute I’m going to ask you how you got the diamond, but I’m going to tell you a few things first, and it’s important that you listen closely.

“What you sent us is a red diamond, a true red, which is very rare. The color doesn’t come from impurities, but from the arrangement of the crystal lattice within the stone itself. It weighs 306 carats at the present time, uncut, and preliminary analysis indicates it has remarkable potential for a modified trillion cut. It would be a unique gem even if it hadn’t come from Mars. The fact that it did makes its potential value quite a bit greater.”

He took the buke from its case and connected the projector arm and dish. Mary watched with suspicion as he completed setup and switched it on. After a couple of commands a holo-image shot forth, hanging in the dark air between them, and Mary recognized the lump she’d entrusted to Finn.

“That’s my diamond!”

“As it is now,” said Mr. De Wit. “Here’s what we propose to do with it.” He gave another command and the sullen rock vanished. In its place was an artist’s conception of a three-cornered stone the color of an Earth sunset. Mary caught her breath.

“Possibly 280 carats,” said Mr. De Wit.

“What’s it worth?”

“That all depends,” Mr. De Wit replied. “A diamond is only worth the highest price you can get for it. The trick is to make it *desirable*. It’s red, it’s from Mars—those are big selling points. We’ll need to give it a fancy name. At present,” and he coughed apologetically, “it’s being called the Big Mitsubishi, but the marketing department will probably go with either the War-God’s Eye or the Heart of Mars.”

“Yes, yes, whatever,” said Mary.

“Very well. And Polieos is prepared to cut, polish and market the diamond. We can do this as your agents, in which case our fee will be deducted from the sale price, or we can buy it from you outright. *Assuming*,” and Mr. De Wit held up a long forefinger warningly, “that we can establish that you are, in fact, the owner.”

“Hm.” Mary frowned at the tabletop. She had a pretty good idea of what was coming next.

“You see, Ms. Griffith, under the terms of your Allotment lease with the BAC, you are entitled to any produce grown on the land. The terms of your lease do not include mineral rights to the aforesaid land. Therefore—”

“If I dug it up on my Allotment, it belongs to the BAC,” said Mary.

“Exactly. If, however, someone sold you the diamond,” and Mr. De Wit looked around at the Empress again, his gaze dwelling on the more-than-rustic details, “say perhaps some colorful local character who found it somewhere else and traded it to you for a drink—well, then, not only is it your diamond, but we have a very nice story for the marketing department at Polieos.”

“I see,” said Mary.

“Good. And now, Ms. Griffith, if you please: how did you come into possession of the diamond?” Mr. De Wit sat back and folded his hands.

Mary spoke without pause. “Why, sir, one of our regulars brought it in! An Ice Hauler, as it happens, and he found it somewhere on his travels between poles. Traded it to me for two pints of my best Ares Lager.”

“Excellent.” Smiling, Mr. De Wit shut off the buke and stood. “And now, Ms. Griffith, may I see the Allotment where you didn't find the diamond?”

* * * *

As they were walking back from the field, and Mr. De Wit was wiping the clay from his hands, he said quietly:

“It's just as well the land isn't producing anything much. When the diamond becomes public knowledge, you can expect the BAC to make you an offer for the Allotment.”

“Even though I didn't find the diamond there?” said Mary warily.

“Yes. And I would take whatever they offer, Ms. Griffith, and I would buy passage back to Earth.”

“I'll take what they offer, but I'm not leaving Mars,” said Mary. “I've hung on through bad luck and I'm damned if good luck will pry me out. This is my home!”

Mr. De Wit tugged at his beard, unhappy about something.

“You'll have more than enough money to live in comfort on Earth,” he said. “And things are about to change up here, you know. As soon as anyone suspects there's real money to be made on Mars, you

won't know the place.”

“I think I'd do smashing, whatever happens,” said Mary. “Miners drink, don't they? Anywhere people go to get rich, they need places to spend their money.”

“That's true,” said Mr. De Wit, sighing.

“And just think what I can do with all that money!” Mary crowed. “No more making do with the BAC's leftovers!” She paused by a transparency and pointed out at the red desolation. “See that? It's nobody's land. I could have laid claim to it any time this five years, but what would I have done with it? It's the bloody BAC has the water and the lights and the heating and the vizio I'd need!

“But with *money* ...”

By the time they got back to the Empress she was barreling along in her enthusiasm with such speed that Mr. De Wit was panting as he tried to keep up. She jumped in through the airlock, faced her household (just in from the field of glorious combat and settling down to a celebratory libation) flung off her mask and cried: “Congratulate me, you lot! I'm the richest woman on Mars!”

“You did bet on the match,” said Rowan reproachfully.

“I did not,” said Mary, thrusting a hand at Mr. De Wit. “You know who this kind gentleman is? This is my extremely good friend from Amsterdam.” She winked hugely. “He's a *gem* of a man. A genuine *diamond* in the rough. And he's brought your mother very good news, my dears.”

Stunned silence while everyone took that in, and then Mona leaped up screaming.

“*The diamond the diamond the diamond!* Omigoddess!”

“How much are we getting for it?” asked Rowan at once.

“Well—” Mary looked at Mr. De Wit. “There's papers and things to sign, first, and we have to find a buyer. But there'll be more than enough to fix us all up nicely, I'm sure.”

“Very probably,” Mr. De Wit agreed.

“We finally won't be POOR anymore!” caroled Mona, bounding up and down.

“Congratulations, Mama!” said Manco.

“Congratulations, Mother,” said Chiring.

Mr. Morton giggled uneasily.

“So ... this means you're leaving Mars?” he said. “What will the rest of us do?”

“I'm not about to leave,” Mary assured him. His face lit up.

“Oh, that's wonderful! Because I've got nothing to go back to, down there, you know, and Mars has been the first place I ever really—”

“What do you MEAN we're not leaving?” said Alice in a strangled kind of voice. “You're ruining my life *again* , aren't you?”

She turned and fled. Her bedchamber being as it was in a loft accessible only by rope ladder, Alice was unable to leap in and fling herself on her bed, there to sob furiously; so she resorted to running away to the darkness behind the brew tanks and sobbing there.

“...felt as though I belonged in a family,” Mr. Morton continued.

* * * *

Alice might weep, but she was outvoted.

Rowan opted to stay on Mars. Mona waffled on the question until the boy-to-girl ratio on Earth was explained to her, after which she firmly cast her lot with the Red Planet. Chiring had no intention of leaving; his *Dispatches from Mars* had doubled the number of subscribers to the *Kathmandu Post* , which was run by his sister's husband, and as a result of the Mars exposes he looked fair to win Nepal's highest journalism award.

Manco had no intention of leaving either, since it would be difficult to transport his life's work. This was a shrine in a grotto three kilometers from the Empress, containing a cast-stone life-sized statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe surrounded by roses sculpted from a mixture of pink Martian dust and Manco's own blood. It was an ongoing work of art, and an awesome and terrible thing.

The Heretic, when asked if she would like to return to Earth, became so distraught that her ocular implant telescoped and retracted uncontrollably for five minutes before she was able to stammer out a refusal. She would not elaborate. Later she drank half a bottle of Black Label and was found unconscious behind the malt locker.

“So, you see? We're staying,” said Mary to the Brick, in grim triumph.

“Way to go, Beautiful,” said the Brick, raising his breakfast pint of Ares Lager. “I just hope you're ready to deal with the BAC, because this'll really get up their noses. And I hope you can trust this Dutchman.”

“Here he is now,” said Chiring *sotto voce* , looking up from the taphead he was in the act of changing. They raised their heads to watch Mr. De Wit's progress down from the ceiling on his line. He made it to the floor easily and tied off his line like a native, without one wasted gesture; but as he turned to them again, he seemed to draw the character of Hesitant Tourist about him like a cloak, stooping slightly as he peered through the gloom.

“Good morning, sir, and did you sleep well?” Mary cried brightly.

“Yes, thank you,” Mr. De Wit replied. “Er—I was wondering where I might get some laundry done?”

“Bless you, sir, we don't have Earth-style laundries up here,” said Mary. “Best you think of it as a sort of dry-cleaning. Leave it in a pile on your bunk and I'll send one of the girls up for it later.” She cleared her throat. “And this is my friend Mr. Brick. Brick is the, ahem, *colorful local character* who sold me the diamond. Aren't you, dear?”

“That's right,” said the Brick, without batting an eye. “Howdy, stranger.”

“Oh, great!” Mr. De Wit pulled his buke from his coat. “Would you be willing to record a statement to

that effect?"

"Sure," said the Brick, kicking the bar stool next to him. "Have a seat. We'll talk."

Mr. De Wit sat down and set up his buke, and Mary drew him a pint of batch and left them talking. She was busily sweeping sand when Manco entered through the airlock and came straight up to her. His face was impassive, but his black eyes glinted with anger.

"You'd better come see something, Mama," he said.

* * * *

"I went to replace the old lock seal like you told me," he said, pointing. "Then I looked through. No point now, huh?"

Mary stared at her Allotment. It had never been a sight to rejoice the eye, but now it was the picture of all desolation. Halfway down the acreage someone had slashed through the vizio wall, and the bitter Martian winds had widened the tear and brought in a freight of red sand, which duned in long ripples over what remained of her barley, now blasted and shriveled with cold. Worse still, it was trampled: for someone had come in through the hole and excavated here and there, long channels orderly cut in the red clay or random potholes. There were Outside-issue bootprints all over.

She said something heartfelt and unprintable.

"You think it was the BAC?" said Manco.

"Not likely," Mary said. "They don't know about the diamond, do they? This has *Clan Morrigan* written all over it."

"We can't report this, can we?"

Mary shook her head. "That'd be just what the BAC would want to hear. 'Vandalism, is it, Ms. Griffith? Well, what can you expect in a criminal environment such as what you've fostered here, Ms. Griffith? Perhaps you'd best crawl off into the sand and die, Ms. Griffith, and stop peddling your nasty beer and Goddess-worshipping superstitions and leave Mars to decent people, Ms. Griffith!' That's what they'd say."

"And they'd say, 'What were people digging for?' too," said Manco gloomily.

"So they would." Mary felt a chill. "I think I must speak with Mr. De Wit again."

"What should I do here?"

"Seal up the vizio with duct tape," Mary advised. "Then get the quaddy out and plough it all under."

"Quaddy needs a new air filter, Mama."

"Use a sock! Works just as well," said Mary, and stamped away back up the Tube.

Manco surveyed the ruined Allotment and sighed. Resolving to offer Her another rose of his heart's blood if She would render assistance, he wrestled the rusting quaddy out of its garage and squatted to inspect the engine.

* * * *

Mr. De Wit and the Brick were still where Mary had left them, deep in conversation; the Brick seemed to be regaling Mr. De Wit with exciting tales of his bipolar journeys for carbon dioxide and water ice. Mr. De Wit was listening with his mouth slightly open.

Mary started toward him, intent on a hasty conference, but Rowan stepped into her path.

“Mum, Mr. Cochevelou wants a word,” she said in an undertone.

“Cochevelou!” Mary said, turning with a basilisk glare, and spotted him in his customary booth. He smiled at her, rubbing his fingertips together in a nervous kind of way, and seemed to shrink back into the darkness as she advanced on him.

“Eh, I imagine you've come from your old Allotment,” he said. “That's just what I wanted to talk to you about, Mary dearest.”

“Don't you Mary Dearest me!” she told him.

“Darling! Darling. You've every right to be killing mad, so you do. I struck the bastards to the floor with these two hands when I found out, so I did. ‘You worthless thieving pigs!’ I said to them. ‘Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?’ I said. ‘Here we are in this cold hard place and do we stick together in adversity, as true Celts ought? Won't the English laugh and nod at us when they find out?’ That's what I said.”

“Words are all you have for me, are they?” said Mary icily.

“No indeed, dear,” said Cochevelou, looking wounded. “Aren't I talking compensation? But you have to understand that some of the lads come of desperate stock, and there's some will always envy another's good fortune bitterly keen.”

“How'd they know about my good fortune?” Mary demanded.

“Well, your Mona might have told our DeWayne,” said Cochevelou. “Or it might have gone about the Tube some other way, but good news travels fast, eh? And there's no secrets up here anyway, as we both know. The main thing is, we're dealing with it. The clan has voted to expel the dirty beggars forthwith—”

“Much good that does me!”

“And to award you Finn's Field free and clear, all further payments waived,” Cochevelou added.

“That's better.” Mary relaxed slightly.

“And perhaps we'll find other little ways to make it up to you,” said Cochevelou, pouring her a cup of her own Black Label. “I can send work parties over to mend the damage. New vizio panels for you, what about it? And free harrowing and manuring that poor tract of worthless ground.”

“I'm sure you'd love to get your boys in there digging again,” Mary grumbled, accepting the cup.

“No, no; they're out, as I told you,” said Cochevelou. “We're shipping their raggedy asses back to Earth

on the next flight.”

“Are you?” Mary halted in the act of raising the cup to her lips. She set it down. “And where are you getting the money for that, pray?”

Cochevelou winced.

“An unexpected inheritance?” he suggested, and dodged the cup that came flying at him.

“You hound!” Mary cried. “They’ll have an unexpected inheritance sewn into their suits, won’t they? Won’t they, you black beast?”

“If you’d only be mine, all this wouldn’t matter,” said Cochevelou wretchedly, crawling from the booth and making for the airlock with as much dignity as he could muster. “We could rule Mars together, you know that, don’t you?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, but pulled his mask on and fled through the airlock. Mary nearly pitched the bottle after him too and stopped herself, aware that all her staff, as well as Mr. De Wit and the Brick, were staring at her.

“Mr. De Wit,” she said, as decorously as she could, “May I have a word with you in private?”

* * * *

“That was sooner than I expected,” said Mr. De Wit, when she’d told him all about it.

“You expected this?” Mary said.

“Of course,” he replied, tugging unhappily at his beard. “Have you ever heard of the Gold Rush of 1849? I don’t know if you know much American history, Ms. Griffith—”

“Gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill,” Mary snapped.

“Yes, and do you know what happened to Mr. Sutter? Prospectors destroyed his farm. He was ruined.”

“I won’t be ruined,” Mary declared. “If I have to put a guard on that field every hour of the day and night, I’ll do it.”

“It’s too late for that,” Mr. De Wit explained. “The secret can’t be kept any longer, you see? More Martian settlers will be putting more red diamonds on the market. The value will go down, but that won’t stop the flood of people coming up here hoping to get rich.”

And he was right.

* * * *

For five years there had been one shuttle from Earth every three months. They might have come more often; technological advances over the last couple of decades had greatly trimmed travel time to Mars. There just hadn’t been any reason to waste the money.

The change came slowly at first, and was barely noticed: an unaccustomed distant thunder of landing jets at unexpected moments, a stranger wandering wide-eyed into the Empress at odd hours. More lights glinting under the vizio dome of BAC headquarters after dark.

Then the change sped up.

More shuttles, arriving all hours, and not just the big green BAC ships but vessels of all description, freelance transport services competing. More strangers lining the bar at the Empress, shivering, gravity-sick, unable to get used to the smell or the taste of the beer or the air but unable to do without either.

Strangers wandering around outside the Tubes, inadequately suited, losing their sense of direction in the sandstorms and having to be rescued on a daily basis by some opportunistic Celt who charged for his kindness: “Just to pay for the oxygen expenditure, see?” Strangers losing or abandoning all manner of useful odds and ends in the red desolation, to be gleefully salvaged by the locals. Mary's back bar became a kind of shrine to the absurd items people brought from Earth, such as a digital perpetual calendar geared to 365 days in a year, a pair of ice skates, a ballroom dancing trophy, and a snow globe depicting the Historic Astoria Column of Astoria, Oregon.

“I can't think why you advised me to leave,” Mary said to Mr. De Wit, as he sat at the bar. “We've never done so well!”

Mr. De Wit shook his head gloomily, staring into the holoscreen above his buke. “It's all a matter of timing,” he said, and drained his mug of Ares Lager.

“Let me pour you another, sweetheart,” said Alice, fetching away the empty. Mary watched her narrowly. To everyone's astonishment but Alice's, Mr. De Wit had proposed marriage to her. As far as Mary had been able to tell, it had happened somehow because Alice had been the one delegated to collect his laundry, and had made it a point to personally deliver his fresh socks and thermals at an inappropriate hour, and one thing had led to another, as it generally did in the course of human history, whether on Earth or elsewhere.

He accepted another mug from her now with a smile. Mary shrugged to herself and was about to retreat in a discreet manner when there was a tremendous crash in the kitchen.

When she got to the door, she beheld the Heretic crouched in a corner, rocking herself to and fro, white and silent. On the floor lay Mary's largest kettle and a great quantity of wasted water, sizzling slightly as it interacted with the dust that had been tracked in.

“What's this?” said Mary.

The Heretic turned her face. “*They're coming,*” she whispered. “*And the mountain's on fire.*”

Mary felt a qualm, but said quietly: “Your vision's a bit late. The place is already full of newcomers. What, did you think you saw something in the water? There's nothing in there but red mud. Pick yourself up and—”

There was another crash, though less impressive, and a high-pitched yell of excitement. Turning, Mary beheld Mr. De Wit leaping up and down, fists clenched above his head.

“We did it,” he cried, “We found a buyer!”

“How much?” Mary asked instantly.

“Two million punts Celtic,” he replied, gasping after his exertion. “Mitsubishi, of course, because we aimed all the marketing at them. I just wasn't sure—I've instructed Polieos to take their offer. I hope that meets with your approval, Ms. Griffith? Because, you know, no one will ever get that kind of money for a Martian diamond again.”

“Won't they?” Mary was puzzled by his certainty. “Whyever not?”

“Well—” Mr. De Wit coughed dust, took a gulp from his pint and composed himself. “Because most of the appeal was in the novelty, and in the story behind your particular stone, and—and timing, like I said. Now the publicity will work against the market. Those stones that were stolen out of your field will go on sale at inflated prices, you see? Everyone will expect to make a fortune.”

“But they won't?”

“No, because—” Mr. De Wit waved vaguely. “Do you know why they say *A diamond is forever*? Because it's murder to unload the damned things, in the cold hard light of day. No dealer ever buys back a stone they've sold. It took a fantastic amount of work to sell the Big Mitsubishi. We were very, very lucky. Nobody else will have our luck.”

He stooped forward and put his hands on her shoulders. “Now, please. Follow my advice. Take out a little to treat yourself and put the rest in high-yield savings, or very careful investments.”

“Or I'll tell you what you could do,” said a bright voice from the bar.

They turned to see the Brick in the act of downing a pint. He finished, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said: “You could sink a magma well up the hill on Mons Olympus, and start your own energy plant. That'd really screw the BAC! And make you a shitload of money on the side.”

“Magma well?” Mary repeated.

“Old-style geothermal energy. Nobody's used it since Fusion, because Fusion's cheaper, but it'd work up here. The BAC's been debating a plant, but their committees are so brain-constipated they'll never get around to it!” The Brick rose to his feet in his enthusiasm. “Hell, all you'd need would be a water-drilling rig, to start with. And you'd need to build the plant and lay pipes, but you can afford that now, right? Then you'd have all the power you'd want to grow all the barley you'd want *and* sell it to other settlers!”

“I suppose I could do that, couldn't I?” said Mary slowly. She looked up at Mr. De Wit. “What do you think? Could I make a fortune with a magma well?”

Mr. De Wit sighed.

“Yes,” he said. “I have to tell you that you could.”

* * * *

The only difficult part was getting the drilling rig.

Cochevelou looked uncertainly at Mona, who had perched herself on one of his knees, and then at Rowan, who was firmly stationed on the other with her fingers twined in his beard.

“Please, Mr. Cochevelou, my dear dearest?” Mona crooned.

Mary leaned forward and filled his glass, looking him straight in the eye.

“You said we might rule Mars together,” she said. “Well, this is the way to do it. You and me together, eh, pooling our resources as we’ve always done?”

“You staked claim to the whole volcano?” he said, incredulous. “Bloody honking huge Mons Olympus?”

“Nothing in the laws said I couldn’t, if I had the cash for the filing fee, which being the richest woman on Mars now I had of course,” Mary replied. “Nothing in the tiniest print said I was even obliged to tell the BAC. I had my fine lawyer *and* nearly-son-in-law Mr. De Wit file with the Tri-Worlds Settlement Bureau, and they just said Yes, Ms. Griffith, here’s your virtual title and good luck to you. Doubtless sniggering in their First World sleeves and wondering what a silly widow woman will do with a big frozen cowpat of a volcano. They’ll see!”

“But—” Cochevelou paused and took a drink. His pause lost him ground, for Mary shoved Mona out of the way and took her place on his knee, bringing her gimlet stare, and her bosom, closer.

“Think of it, darling man,” she said. “Think how we’ve been robbed, and kept down, and made to make do with the dry leavings while the English got the best of everything. Haven’t we always triumphed by turning adversity to our own uses? And so it’ll be now. Your ironworks and your strong lads with my money and Mary’s own hot heart itself beating for us in a thunderous counterpoint to our passion!”

“Passion?” said Cochevelou, somewhat dazed but beginning to smile.

* * * *

“She’s got him,” Chiring informed the others, who were lurking in the kitchen. Mr. Morton gave a cheer, which was promptly shut off as Manco and the Heretic clapped their hands over his mouth. Chiring put his eye to the peephole again.

“They’re shaking hands,” he said. “He just kissed her. She hasn’t slapped him. She’s saying ... something about Celtic Energy Systems.”

“It’s the beginning of a new world!” whispered Mr. Morton. “There’s never been money on Mars, but—but—now we can have Centres for the Performing Arts!”

“We can have a lot more than that,” said Manco.

“They could found a whole other city,” said Chiring, stepping back. “You know? What a story this is going to be!”

“We could attract artistes,” said Mr. Morton, stars in his eyes. “*Culture!*”

“We could be completely independent, if we bought vizio and water pumps, and got enough land under cultivation,” Manco pointed out. A look of shock crossed his face. “I could grow *real* roses.”

“You could,” Chiring agreed, whipping out his jotpad. “*Interviews with the Locals: What Will Money Mean to the New Martians?* By your News Martian. Okay, Morton, you’d want performing arts, and you’d develop Martian horticulture.” He nodded at Manco and then glanced over at the Heretic. “How about you? What do you hope to get out of this?”

“A better place to hide,” she said bleakly, raising her head as she listened to the rumble of the next

shuttle arriving.

* * * *

It was still possible to ride an automobile on Mars, though they had long since become illegal on Earth and Luna.

A great deal of preparation was necessary, to be sure: one had first to put on a suit of thermals, and then a suit of cotton fleece, and then a suit of bubblefilm, and then a final layer of quilted Outside wear. Boots with ankle locks were necessary too, and wrist-locked gauntlets. One could put on an old-fashioned-looking aquarium helmet, if one had the money; people at Mary's economic level made do with a snugly-fitting hood, a face mask hooked up to a back tank, and kitchen grease mixed with UV blocker daubed thickly on anything that the mask didn't cover.

Having done this, one could then clamber through an airlock and motor across Mars, in a rickety CeltCart 600 with knobbed rubber tires and a top speed of eight kilometers an hour. It was transportation neither dignified nor efficient, since one was swamped with methane fumes and bounced about like a pea in a football. Nevertheless, it beat walking, or being blown sidelong in an antigravity car. And it really beat climbing.

Mary clung to the rollbar and reflected that today was actually a fine day for a jaunt Outside, considering. Bright summer sky overhead like peaches and cream, though liver-dark storm clouds raged far down the small horizon behind. Before, of course, was only the gentle but near-eternal swell of Mons Olympus, and the road that had been made by the expedient of rolling or pushing larger rocks out of the way.

"Mind the pit, Cochevelou," she admonished. Cochevelou exhaled his annoyance so forcefully that steam escaped from the edges of his mask, but he steered clear of the pit and so on up the winding track to the drill site.

The lads were hard at work when they arrived at last, having had a full hour's warning that the Cart was on its way up, since from the high slide of the slope one could see half the world spread out below, and its planetary curve too. There was therefore a big mound of broken gravel and frozen mudslurry, industriously scraped from the drillbits, to show for their morning's work. Better still, there was a thin spindrift of steam coming off the rusty pipes, coalescing into short-lived frost as it fell.

"Look, Mama!" said Manco proudly, gesturing at the white. "Heat *and* water!"

"So I see," said Mary, crawling from the car. "Who'd have thought mud could be so lovely, eh? And we've brought you a present. Unload it, please."

Matelot and the others who had been industriously leaning on their shovels sighed, and set about unclamping the bungees that had kept the great crate in its place on the back of the CeltCart. The crate was much too big to have traveled on a comparative vehicle on Earth without squashing it, and even so the Cart's wheels groaned and splayed, though as the men lifted the crate like so many ants hoisting a dead cricket the wheels bowed gratefully back. The cords had bit deep into the crate's foamcast during the journey, and the errant Martian breezes had just about scoured the label off with flying grit, but the logo of Third Word Alternatives, Inc. could still be made out.

"So this is our pump and all?" inquired Padraig, squinting at it through his goggles.

"This is the thing itself, pump and jenny and all but the pipes to send wet hot gold down the mountain to

us,” Cochevelou told him.

“And the pipes've been ordered,” Mary added proudly. “And paid for! And here's Mr. Morton to exercise his great talents building a shed to house it all.”

Mr. Morton unfolded himself from the rear cockpit and tottered to his feet, looking about with wide eyes. The speaker in his mask was broken, so he merely waved at everyone and went off at once to look at the foundations Manco had dug.

“And lastly,” said Mary, lifting a transport unit that had been rather squashed under the seat, “Algemite sandwiches for everybody! And free rounds on the house when you're home tonight, if you get the dear machine hooked up before dark.”

“Does it come with instructions?” Matelot inquired, puffing as he stood back from the crate.

“It promised an easy-to-follow holomanual in five languages, and if one isn't in there we're to mail the manufacturers at once,” Mary said. “But they're a reputable firm, I'm sure.”

“Now, isn't that a sight, my darling?” said Cochevelou happily, turning to look down the slope at the Tharsis Bulge. “Civilization, what there is of it anyhow, spread out at our feet like a drunk to be rolled.”

Mary gazed down, and shivered. From this distance the Settlement Dome looked tiny and pathetic, even with its new housing annex. The network of Tubes seemed like so many glassy worms, and her own house might have been a mudball on the landscape. It was true that the landing port had recently enlarged, which made it more of a handkerchief than a postage stamp of pink concrete. Still, little stone cairns dotted the wasteland here and there, marking the spots where luckless prospectors had been cached because nobody had any interest in shipping frozen corpses back to Earth.

But she lifted her chin and looked back at it all in defiance.

“Think of our long acres of green,” she said. “Think of our own rooms steam-heated. Lady bless us, think of having a hot *bath* !”

Which was such an obscenely expensive pleasure on Mars that Cochevelou gasped and slid his arm around her, moved beyond words, and they clung together for quite a while on that cold prominence before either of them noticed the tiny figure making its way up the track from the Empress.

“Who's that, then?” Mary peered down at it, disengaging herself abruptly from Cochevelou's embrace. “Is that Mr. De Wit?”

It was Mr. De Wit.

By the time they reached him in the CeltCart he was walking more slowly, and his eyes were standing out of his face so they looked fair to pop through his goggles, but he seemed unstoppable.

“WHAT IS IT?” Mary demanded, turning her volume all the way up. “IS SOMETHING GONE WRONG WITH ALICE?”

Mr. De Wit shook his head, slumping forward on the Cart's fender. He cranked up his volume as far as it went and gasped, “LAWYER—”

“YES!” Mary said irritably, “YOU'RE A LAWYER!”

“ *OTHERLAWYER!*” said Mr. De Wit, pointing back down the slope at the Empress.

Mary bit her lip. “YOU MEAN—” she turned her volume down, reluctant to broadcast words of ill omen. “There's a lawyer from somebody else? The BAC, maybe?”

Mr. De Wit nodded, crawling wearily into the back seat of the Cart.

“Oh, bugger all,” growled Cochevelou. “Whyn't you fight him off then, as one shark to another?”

“Did my best,” wheezed Mr. De Wit. “Filed appeal. But you have to make mark.”

Mary said something unprintable. She reached past Cochevelou and threw the Cart into neutral to save gas. It went bucketing down the slope, reaching such a velocity near the bottom that Mr. De Wit found himself praying for the first time since his childhood.

Somehow they arrived with no more damage done than a chunk of lichen sheared off the airlock wall, but they might have taken their time, for all the good it did them.

The lawyer was not Hodges from the Settlement, whose particular personal interests Mary knew to a nicety and whom she might have quelled with a good hard stare. No, this lawyer was a Solicitor from London, no less, immaculate in an airlock ensemble from Bond Street and his white skullcap of office. He sat poised on the very edge of one of Mary's settles, listening diffidently as Mr. De Wit (who had gone quite native by now, stooped, wheezing, powdered with red dust, his beard lank with facegrease and sand) explained the situation, which was, to wit:

Whereas, the British Ares Company had operated at an average annual loss to its shareholders of thirteen per cent of the original estimated minimum annual profit for a period of five (Earth) calendar years, and

Whereas, it had come to the attention of the Board of Directors that there were hitherto-unknown venues of profit in the area of mineral resources, and

Whereas, having reviewed the original Terms of Settlement and Allotment as stated in the Contract for the Settlement and Terraforming of Ares, and having determined that the contractment of any and all allotted agricultural zones was contingent upon said zones contributing to the common wealth of Mars and the continued profit of its shareholders, and

Whereas, the aforesaid Contract specified that in the event that revocation of all Leases of Allotment was determined to be in the best interests of the shareholders, the Board of Directors retained the right to the exercise of Eminent Domain,

Therefore, the British Ares Company respectfully informed Mary Griffith that her lease was revoked and due notice of eviction from all areas of Settlement would follow within thirty (Earth) calendar days. She was, of course, at full liberty to file an appeal with the proper authorities.

“Which you are in the process of doing,” said Mr. De Wit, and picked up a text plaquette from the table. “Here it is. Sign at the bottom.”

“Can she read?” the solicitor inquired, stifling a yawn. Mary's lip curled.

“Ten years at Mount Snowdon University says I can, little man,” she informed him, and having run her eye down the document, she thumbprinted it firmly. “So take that and stick it where appeals are filed, if you please.” She handed the plaquette to the solicitor, who accepted it without comment and put it in his briefcase.

“Hard luck, my dear,” said Cochevelou, pouring himself a drink. “I’ll just quell my thirst and then edge off home, shall I?”

“Are you a resident of the Clan Morrigan?” the solicitor inquired, fixing him with a fishy eye.

“I am.” Cochevelou stared back.

“Then, can you direct me to their current duly-elected chieftain?”

“That would be him,” said Mary.

“Ah.” The solicitor drew a second plaquette from his briefcase and held it out. “Maurice Cochevelou? You are hereby advised that—”

“Is that the same as what you just served *her* with?” Cochevelou demanded, slowly raising fists like rusty cannon balls.

“In short, sir, yes, you are evicted,” replied the solicitor, with remarkable sangfroid. “Do you wish to appeal as well?”

“Do you wish to take a walk Outside, you little—”

“He’ll appeal as well,” said Mary firmly, and, grabbing the second plaquette, she took Cochevelou’s great sooty thumb and stamped the plaquette firmly. “There now. Run along, please.”

“You can tell your masters they’ve got a fight on their hands, you whey-faced soy-eating little timeserver!” roared Cochevelou at the solicitor’s retreating back. The airlock shut after him and Cochevelou picked up a mug and hurled it at the lock, where it shattered into pink fragments.

“We’ll burn their Settlement Dome over their heads!” he said, stamping like a bull in a stall. “We’ll drive our kine through their spotless tunnels, eh, and give ‘em methane up close and personal, won’t we just!”

“We will not,” said Mary. “We’ll ruin ‘em with lawsuits, won’t we, Mr. De Wit?”

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to do either,” said Mr. De Wit, sagging onto a bench. “They’ve already found new tenants to work the land, you see. The Martian Agricultural Collective will be coming up soon. Very much more the kind of people they would rather see living up here. And the BAC itself is dissolving. The Board of Directors will be running the whole operation from Earth now, under the corporate name ARECO. I told you things would change.”

“The cowards,” growled Cochevelou. “So they’ll evaporate into mist when we swing at them, will they?”

“Then what’s the point of appealing?” Mary asked.

“It will buy you time,” Mr. De Wit replied, raising his gray exhausted face. Alice brought him a cup of

hot tea, setting it before him. She began to massage his bowed shoulders.

“Of course,” she said quietly, “We *could* all go home again.”

“This is my home,” said Mary, bristling.

“Well, it isn't mine,” said Alice defiantly. “And it isn't Eli's, either. He's only staying up here to help you because he's kind. But we *will* go back to Earth, Mum, and if you want to see your grandchild, you'll have to go too.”

“Alice, don't say that to your mother,” said Mr. De Wit, putting his face in his hands.

Mary looked at her daughter stone-faced.

“So you're playing that game, are you?”

“I'm not playing any game! I just—”

“Go back to Earth, then. Be happy there, if you're capable of being happy. Neither you nor anybody else alive will call my bluff,” said Mary, not loudly but in tones that formed ice around the edges of Mr. De Wit's tea. He groaned.

“And what'm *I* to do?” said Cochevelou, looking horrified as the full impact hit him. “Mine will call for a vote. Three votes of no-confidence for a chieftain and there's a new chieftain.”

“Overwhelm them with persuasion, man,” Mary told him. “Spin them a tale about our glorious new future up the slope in—in—”

“Mars Two,” said Mr. De Wit, staring into his teacup.

THREE: THE SHINING CITY ON THE HILL

Cochevelou survived the vote. That was one good thing. Another was that Celtic Energy Systems got its pumping station built and online. Though the easy-to-follow assembly holo was indeed in five languages, they turned out to be Telugu, Swahili, Pashto, Malayalam and Hakka. Fortunately, most of the orderlies in the Hospital where Mr. Morton had grown up had spoken Swahili, and he had picked up enough to follow assembly directions.

Of course, the pipes hadn't arrived from Earth yet, so there was no way to send water, heat or steam anywhere; but Mr. Morton had fabricated an elegant little neoGothic structure to house the pumping station, a sort of architectural prototype, as he explained, for the Edgar Allen Poe Memorial Cabaret, and he was already happily designing the Downtown Arts Plaza and Promenade.

* * * *

“It's the backlash,” said the Brick gloomily, nursing his beer. “Too many freaks up here for the BAC to cope with, so they'll just scrap the whole Settlement and ship up their own hand-picked squares. Have you seen any of these guys from the Martian Agricultural Collective?”

“I have not,” said Mary, looking over his head to count the house. Three booths occupied, and only two seats at the bar; not good, for a Friday night. “They're not drinkers, seemingly.”

“They're not drinkers,’ the Brick affirmed. “Their idea of fun is singing anthems to Agrarian Socialism, okay? Bunch of shaven-headed humorless bastards.”

“Oh, dear,” said Mary. “No beer, is it? And are they monkish as well?”

“No,” said the Brick, shuddering. “They got their own ladies. They shave their heads too. Seriously political.”

“So they won't be inclined to stop by for a chat,” said Mary thoughtfully. “How's your job security, then, under the new regime?”

The Brick grinned. “They can round up all the other loonies and ship ‘em home, but they'll still need Ice Haulers, right? And we've got the Bipolar Boys and Girls Union. They mess with us, we'll drive a dozen six-ton flatbeds through Settlement Dome and Mars ‘em.”

Marsing was a local custom. It resembled mooning, but was uglier.

“I'm sure they won't dare mess with you, Mr. Brick,” said Mary.

“Hey, let ‘em,” said the Brick, waving a massive hand. “I like a good fight.”

Wreathed in an air of pleasant anticipation and carbon dioxide, he downed the last of his beer and headed out, pausing by the airlock to mask up. As he exited, two other people came in from the Tube.

They removed their masks and stared around at the Empress. Their gazes dwelt with approval a moment on the votive shrine to the Mother, in its alcove; traveled on and grew somewhat cold looking on the great brewtanks that loomed at the back of Mary's domain. They were both pear-shaped women, one elderly and one youngish, and Mary wondered what the hell they were doing on Mars.

“Are you perhaps lost, ladies?” she inquired in English.

“Oh, I don't think so,” said the elder of the two. She advanced on the bar, closely followed by her associate. Somewhere in the gloom behind Mary, there was a gasp and the clang of a dropped skillet.

“You must be Mary Griffith,” said the elder. “I am Mother Glenda and this is Mother Willow. We're with the Ephesian Mission.”

“Indeed? How nice,” said Mary. “Visiting from Luna, then?”

“Oh, no,” said Mother Glenda. “We've come to stay. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be,” Mary echoed, feeling slightly uneasy as she looked into Mother Glenda's face, which was pink-cheeked and jolly-smiling, though there was a certain hard glint in her eyes.

“The Church felt it was time to bring the Goddess to this desolate place,” said Mother Willow, who had a high breathless voice. “Especially with all these desperate people seeking their fortunes here. Because, there are really hardly any red diamonds up here after all, are there? So they'll need spiritual comfort when the vain quest for worldly riches fails them. And besides, it's *Mars*. ”

“Mythologically the planet of war and masculine brutality,” explained Mother Glenda.

“Ah,” said Mary.

“And the Martian Agricultural Collective are all atheists, you see, so it's an even greater challenge,” said Mother Willow earnestly. “You can imagine how pleased we were to learn that there was already a Daughter resident up here. And how outraged we were to hear that you have been the victim of paternalist oppression!”

“I wouldn't say I've been a victim,” Mary replied, grinning. “I'd say I've given as good as I've got, and I'm still here.”

“*Goodanswer*,” said Mother Glenda. “Holy Mother Church has followed your struggle with some interest, daughter.”

“Really,” said Mary, not much liking the sound of that.

“And, of course, one of the first things we want to do is offer our support,” Mother Willow assured her. “Holy Mother Church will help you fight your eviction. Our legal and financial resources are practically unlimited, you know, and we have publicists who would love to tell your story. The Goddess cares for Her own, but most especially for those who have suffered persecution in Her name!”

Mary caught her breath. She thought of the Diana of Luna affair, that had cost the British Luna Company millions of pounds and kilometers of real estate. And now the Church must be looking to duplicate that success here...

“Oh, my, what a lovely thought,” she said dreamily. “This might be ever so much fun. Please, allow me to offer you a nice mug of—er—tea.”

* * * *

Everyone in three worlds knew the story: how, in the early days of Luna's settlement, a devout Ephesian named Lavender Dragonsbane had found a solid silver statue of the Goddess buried on the moon. The British Lunar Company claimed that what she had found was, in fact, a vaguely woman-shaped lump of nickel ore. It was given to archaeologists to study, and then other parties (including MI5) had stepped in to demand a look at it, and somehow it had mysteriously vanished in transit from one set of experts to another.

The Ephesian Church had sued the BLC, and the BLC had sued back. Lavender Dragonsbane had a vision wherein the Goddess told her to build a shrine on the spot where she had found the statue. The BLC claimed that the statue had been deliberately planted by the Ephesians on that spot because it happened to be valuable real estate they wanted.

However, in calling what had been found a *statue*, the BAC had contradicted their earlier statement that it had been nothing but a curiously shaped bit of rock. The Tri-Worlds Council for Integrity found for the Ephesian Church on points. Now the Church owned half the Moon.

“...and *you* could be our next Lavender Dragonsbane, daughter,” said Mother Willow, setting aside her tea.

“Well, that would spoke the BAC's wheels and no mistake,” said Mary giddily. “Or Areco or whatever they're calling themselves now.”

“The perennial oppressors,” said Mother Willow, smiling, “brought to their knees by the simple faith of one woman. Blessed be!”

“Blessed be!” Mary echoed, visions of sweet revenge dancing through her head.

“Of course, you understand there will have to be some changes,” said Mother Glenda.

“Yes, of course,” said Mary, and then: “Excuse me?”

Mother Willow coughed delicately. “We have been given to understand that your staff is nearly all male. We can scarcely present you as Her defender on Mars when you perpetuate hiring bias, can we, daughter? And Holy Mother Church is *very* concerned at rumors that one of your employees is a ... Christian.”

“Oh, Manco!” said Mary. “No, you don't understand. He really worships Her, you see, only it's just in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And everybody knows that's some kind of Red Indian flower goddess really, and nothing to do with paternalist oppressors or anything like that and after all he's a, er, Native American, isn't he? Member of a viciously oppressed ethnic minority? And he's built Her a big shrine and everything in a sacred grotto hereabouts.”

Mother Willow brightened. “Yes, I see! That makes it an entirely different matter. I expect our publicists could do very well with that.” She pulled out a jotpad and made a few brief notes. “One of Her faithful sons escaping to Mars from the brutal lash of Earth prejudice, yes...”

“And as for the rest of ‘em being male,” said Mary, “Well, I have to take what I can get up here, don't I? And they're not bad fellows at all. And anyway, out of the whole Settlement, there's only—” She had been about to say, *There's only the Heretic wanted a job*, but caught herself and went on—“Er, only so many women on Mars, after all.”

“That's true,” said Mother Willow graciously.

“And we *quite* understand you have been placed in a position where it was necessary to fight the enemy with his own weapons,” said Mother Glenda. “However, all of that—” and she pointed at the brewtanks, “must stop, immediately.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Mary.

“There is to be no more traffic in controlled substances,” said Mother Glenda.

“But it's only beer!” Mary cried. “And it's not illegal in the Celtic Federation, anyway, of which I am a citizen, see? So I'm not doing anything wrong.”

“Not under the statutes of *men*, ” said Mother Glenda. “But how can you feel you are doing Her will by serving a deadly toxin like alcohol to the impoverished working classes of Mars? No, daughter. Holy Mother Church wants to see those tanks dismantled before she grants her aid.”

“But what would I serve my regulars?” Mary demanded.

“Herbal teas and nourishing broths,” suggested Mother Willow. “*Healthfuldrinks*.”

Mary narrowed her eyes. Perhaps sensing an explosion imminent, Mother Willow changed the subject

and said delicately:

“And there is one other matter...”

“What's that?” said Mary stonily.

“There was an unfortunate incident on Luna,” said Mother Willow. “Tragic, really. One of our faithful daughters was injured in an accident. The poor creature was confused—we're certain now there was brain damage—but it would appear that, in her dementia, she said certain things that were interpreted in entirely the wrong way. Misunderstandings will happen ... but Holy Mother Church seeks now to bring her child home.”

“We understand she works for you here,” said Mother Glenda.

“Er,” said Mary. “Well. She has done, but ... you must know she's a bit unreliable. I never know when she'll turn up. I thought she was a heretic, anyway.”

“She doesn't know what she's talking about,” said Mother Glenda quickly. “She ought to be in— that is, on medication for her condition.”

“You mean you want to put her in Hospital,” said Mary.

“Oh, no, no, no!” Mother Willow assured her. “Not one of those dreadful state-run homes at all. The Church has a special place for its afflicted daughters.”

I'll just bet you do, Mary thought. She sat mulling over the price tag on her future for a long moment. At last she stood up.

“Ladies, I think you'd best go now.”

* * * *

When they had left at last, when the flint-edged smiles and veiled threats and sniffs of mutual disapproval had been exchanged, Mary drew a deep breath. “Missionaries,” she muttered. Then she made her way back into the stygian blackness of her kitchen.

She found the Heretic at last, wedged behind the pantry cupboard like a human cockroach, by the sound her ocular implant was making as it telescoped in and out.

“They're gone now,” Mary informed her.

“Can't come out,” the Heretic replied hoarsely.

“You don't want to go back to Earth with them?”

The Heretic didn't answer.

“You'd get lots of nice drugs,” Mary pointed out. The Heretic shifted, but was still mute.

“Look, they're not going to hurt you. This is modern times, see? They even hinted your excommunication might be revoked. Wouldn't you like that?”

“No,” said the Heretic. “They think He'll talk for them. But He won't.”

“Who won't talk for them?” Mary asked, settling back on her heels. “Your, er, sort of god thing?”

“Yes.”

“Why would they want him to talk to them?”

There was a silence, filled gradually with the sound of the cupboard rattling and the whirring noise of the Heretic's eye. Finally she controlled her trembling and gasped:

“Because of what He said when I was in the House of Gentle Persuasion. He told them—something was going to happen. And it happened just like He said.”

“You mean, like a prophecy?”

“Prophecies predictions can't let this get out! Bad press Goddess knows false field day for the unbelievers paternalist voodoo conspiracies wait! We can use her!” The Heretic's voice rose in a shriek like a rusty hinge coming unhinged. *“Stop that now or you'll put your other eye out!”* But He was there. Held down His hand from the red planet and said *Come to me!* Showed me the open window and I left. Showed me a cargo freighter and I signed on. And I am here with Him and I will never go back now.”

Mary stared into the shadows, just able to make out one sunken red-rimmed eye in a pale face.

“So they think you can do predictions, is that it?”

There was silence again.

“And that's why the Church wants you back,” said Mary grimly.

The blur in the darkness might have nodded.

* * * *

There were rumors.

Mary heard that Areco had no interest in the terraforming project, that its intention was to strip-mine for red diamonds, which were much more valuable than anyone had thought, and it had signed no real lease with the MAC.

At the same time, she heard that the red diamond rush had played out completely and that Areco was committed to backing the Martian Agricultural Collective, because terraforming was the only way anyone would ever make money on Mars.

She heard that General Director Rotherhithe had been called home in disgrace and seemed to be dying of emphysema. He was also rumored to be in perfect health and Areco's principal stockholder, calling the shots from some sinister high desk on Earth.

She heard that the Church was encountering unheard-of resistance from the MAC. She heard that the Church had signed a mutually profitable agreement with the MAC and that the new mission complex—temple, administrative offices and all—was being built even now on the other side of the

settlement.

And her appeal was certain to be rejected, and her appeal was certain to succeed. Any day now.

Nothing happened. Life went on.

Then everything happened at once.

* * * *

It was difficult to organize a baby shower on Mars, but Rowan had managed, on the very day before Mr. De Wit and Alice were scheduled to return to Earth.

Alice's baby had been determined to be a girl, which was fortunate for the purposes of party décor, as most of the household ware was already pink. The Heretic had been coaxed out from under the refrigeration unit long enough to bake a cake, which rose like a pink cloud and stayed that way, thanks to Martian gravity, and while there was nothing but a tin of Golden Syrup to pour over it, the effect was impressive.

The problem of presents had been overcome as well. Rowan had commandeered Mr. De Wit's buke to catalog-shop, and simply printed out pictures of what she had ordered. The images were blurry, gray, and took most of a day to print out, but once she had them she painted them with red ochre and pink clay.

“See? Virtual presents,” she said, holding up a depiction of a woolly jumper. “You don't even have to worry about luggage weight on the shuttle. This set's from me. It comes with matching booties and a cap.”

Alice blotted tears and accepted it gratefully. Beside her, Mona gazed at the heap of pictures—receiving blankets, bassinet, more woolly jumpers—and squeaked, “Oh, I can't *wait* to have a baby of my own!”

“Yes you can, my girl,” Mary told her, standing to one side with Mr. De Wit, who seemed rather stunned.

“I can't imagine what my neighbors will think when all this stuff starts arriving,” he said, giggling weakly. “I've been a bachelor so many years...”

“They'll get over it,” said Alice, and blew her nose. “Oh, Eli, darling, *look* ! An Itsy Witsy Play Set with a slide and a sandbox!”

“That's from me,” said Mary, somewhat stiffly. “If the little thing has to grow up on Earth, at least she'll be able to play outdoors.”

There was a sizzling moment wherein Alice glared at her mother, and Mr. Morton broke the silence by clearing his throat.

“I, er, I hope you won't mind—I prepared something.” He stepped forward and offered Alice a text plaque. “In honor of your name being Alice, I thought it would be nice—there's this marvelous old book, proscribed of course, but I recorded as much as I could remember of the poems—perhaps she'll like them...”

Alice thumbed the switch and the screen lit up, and there was Mr. Morton in miniature, wringing his

hands as he said: “Ahem! Jabberwocky. By Lewis Carroll. ‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimbal in the wade...”

“My, is it in Old English?” Alice inquired politely. “How nice, Mr. Morton!”

“Well, it—”

“This is from me.” Manco stepped forward, and drew from his coat a little figurine, cast from the most delicately rose-colored grit he could find. The Virgen de Guadalupe smiled demurely down at the businesslike little seraph who held her aloft on a crescent moon. “The Good Mother will look after her. You’ll see.”

“It’s lovely! Oh, but I hope it doesn’t get confiscated going through Earth customs,” Alice cried.

“Just point to the crescent horns and tell ‘em it’s Isis,” Mary advised.

Chiring stepped forward and laid a black cube on the table.

“This is a holoalbum,” he said. “Candid shots of the whole family and a visual essay on the Martian landscape, you see? So she’ll know where she’s from. She’ll also get a lifetime subscription to the *Kathmandu Post*.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” said Alice, not knowing what else to say. “Thank you, Chiring.”

“Ma’am? There’s somebody in the airlock,” said Mr. Morton.

“That’ll be Lulu and Jeannemarie from the clan, I expect,” said Rowan.

It wasn’t.

“Ma’am.” Matelot stood stiffly, twisting his air mask in his hands. Pdraig Moylan and Gwil Evans flanked him, staring at the floor.

“What’s this, gentlemen?” said Mary.

Matelot cleared his throat and looked from one to the other of his companions, clearly hoping one of them would speak. When neither showed any evidence of opening their mouths for the rest of eternity, he cleared his throat again and said:

“Himself sends word to say that, er, he’s been made an offer he can’t refuse to drop our appeal against eviction. And that even if he could refuse it, the clan has voted to accept.”

“But there’s still Celtic Energy Systems, my dears,” said Mary, into the thunderous silence that had fallen.

“Well, that’s not piped up to anything yet, you know ... but it’s not that, Ma’am,” said Matelot, looking up into Mary’s eyes and looking away quickly. He gulped for air and went on: “Areco wants the fruit of our labors. The ironworks and the cattle sheds and fields and all. Areco’s buying ‘em for a princely sum and giving us a golden rocket back to Earth, plus company shares. Every one of us rich enough to retire and live like gentry the rest of our lives. And so Himself sends you four thousand punts Celtic as compensation for Finn’s fields and hopes you will consider emigration as well.”

Padraig Moylan extended a banking plaquette in a trembling hand.

The silence went on and on. Was anyone breathing? After a moment Mary reached out and took the plaquette. She glanced at it before looking back at the clansmen.

“I see,” she said.

“And we'll just be going, then,” said Matelot. Mary's voice hit him like an iron bar as she said:

“Is he selling *all* the fixtures?”

“What?” said Matelot weakly.

“I want to buy all your antigrav units,” said Mary, handing the plaquette back. “I want them in my house by tomorrow morning. And I'll make a preemptive bid, look you, for your last harvest. Go now and tell him so.”

“Yes'm,” said Matelot, and collided with his fellow clansmen as they all three attempted to get out the airlock at once.

When they had gone, Mary sank down on a settle. The rest of her household stared at her. Nobody said anything until Rowan came and crouched beside her.

“Mum, it doesn't matter. Maybe Areco will make us an offer too—”

“We're not waiting to see,” said Mary.

“You're going back to Earth?” asked Alice, too shocked for triumph. Mr. De Wit shook his head in silence, a sick expression in his eyes.

“I am not,” said Mary. “I said I won't be driven out and I meant it.”

“Good for you!” cried Mr. Morton, and blanched as everyone turned to stare at him. Then he drew a breath and said: “She's right! We—we don't need the clan. We've got our pumping station and all that land up there. We can make a *new* place! Our own settlement, for people like us. We've already got plans for the theaters. We can expand into a hotel and restaurant and—who knows what else?” He spread out his hands in general appeal.

“Where are we going to get the people?” asked Manco.

“Well, er—you can advertise in the *Kathmandu Post*, can't you?” Mr. Morton turned to Chiring. “Tell the Sherpas all about the great job opportunities now being offered at, ah, Griffith Energy Systems! Tell them we're making a wonderful place up here where people will be free and there'll be Art and exciting adventure and, and no corporate bad guys running their lives!”

Chiring had already pulled out his jotpad before Mr. Morton had stammered to his conclusion, and was busily making notes.

“I think we can get Earth's attention,” he said.

Alice sighed, gazing at her mother. She looked down at the bright pictures scattered at her feet.

“We'll stay and give you all the help we can,” she said. “Won't we, Eli?”

“No.” Mary got to her feet. “You're going back to Earth. No sense wasting perfectly good tickets. You can be my agents there. I'll be buying a lot of things for the new place; I want them shipped properly. And Mr. De Wit can handle all of the *thousand* lawsuits I plan to file much more effectively if he's on Earth, can't you, Mr. De Wit?”

Mr. De Wit bowed slightly. “Your servant, Madam.” He coughed. “I think it might be worth your while to inquire whether Polieos is interested in buying shares in Griffith Energy Systems.”

“I will, by Goddess!” Mary began to pace. She swung one arm at her available complement of men. “You lot go over to the clan now and start collecting those antigrav units. If the old bastard won't sell, tell him we're just borrowing them, but collected they must be.”

“Yes, Mama.” Manco picked up a crowbar and looked significantly at Chiring, Morton and De Wit. They headed all together for the airlock.

“Girls, start packing. Everything's to be closed down and strapped in. Disconnect everything except Three Tank. Mona, you go out to the Ice Depot and let the Haulers know I'm giving away beer tonight.”

“Right away, Mum!” Mona grabbed her air mask.

As Alice and Rowan hurried away to pack, Mary strode into her kitchen.

“Did you hear all that?” she called. There was a rustle from the shadows in the pantry. Finally the Heretic sidled into sight.

“Yes,” she said, blinking.

“Will it work, do you think? Can we tell them all to go to hell and start our own place?” Mary demanded.

The Heretic just shrugged, drooping forward like an empty garment; then it was as though someone had seized her by the back of the neck and jerked her upright. She fixed a blazing red eye on Mary, and in a brassy voice cried:

“For the finest in Martian hospitality, the tourist has only one real choice: Ares' premiere hotel The Empress of Mars in Mars Two, founded by turn-of-the-century pioneer Mary Griffith and still managed by her family today. Enjoy five-star cuisine in the Empress's unique Mitsubishi Room, or discover the delights of a low-gravity hot spring sauna!”

Mary blinked. “Mars Two, is it to be? As good a name as any, I suppose. That's a grand picture of the future, but a little practical advice would be appreciated.”

The strange voice took on a new intonation, sounded sly:

“All-seeing Zeus is lustful, can never be trusted; His son has a golden skull. But Ares loves a fighter.”

“I don't hold with gods,” said Mary stiffly. “Especially not a god of war.”

Someone else smiled, using the Heretic's face. It was profoundly unsettling.

"All life has to fight to live. There's more to it than spears and empty rhetoric; she who struggles bravely has His attention."

Mary backed out of the kitchen, averting her eyes from the red grin.

"Then watch me, whoever you are, because I'm going to give Areco one hell of a fight," she muttered. "And if my cook's still in there, tell her to get to work. I'm throwing a party tonight."

* * * *

By the time the sullen day dawned, the Haulers were still drunk enough to be enthusiastic.

"Jack the whole thing up on ag units, yeah!" roared the Brick. "Brilliant!"

His fellow Haulers howled their agreement.

"And just sort of walk it up the slope a ways, we thought," said Mary. "So it'll be on my claim, see."

"No, no, no, babe—" a Hauler named Tiny Reg swayed over her like a cliff about to fall. "See, that'll never work. See. Too much tail wind. Get yer arse blowed down to Valles Marinerisis. You nona let—wanna let us—"

"Tow my house all the way up there?" asked Mary artlessly. "Oh, I couldn't ask!"

"Hell yeah!" said the Brick. "Just hook it up an' go!"

"Fink I got my glacier chains inna cabover," said a Hauler named Alf, rising from a settle abruptly and falling with a crash that sent a bow wave of spilled beer over Mary's boots. When his friends had picked him up, he wiped Phobos Porter from his face and grinned obligingly. "Jus' nip out an' see, shall I?"

"Oh, sir, how very kind," said Mary. She put out an arm and arrested Mr. Morton's flight, for he had been in the process of running to refill mugs from a pitcher. "Can we do it?" she demanded of him *sotto voce*. "You understand these things. Will the house take the stresses, without cracking like half an eggshell?"

"Er—" Mr. Morton blinked, stared around him for the first time with professional eyes. "Well—it will if we brace the interior cantilevers. We'd need, ah, telescoping struts—which we haven't got, but—"

"Where can we get them?"

"They're all in the construction storage shed on the Base..." Mr. Morton's voice trailed off. He looked down at the pitcher he was carrying. Lifting it to his mouth, he drank the last pint it contained and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I know the code to get the shed door open," he said.

"Do you?" Mary watched him closely. His spine was stiffening. He put down the pitcher, flexed his long arms.

"Yes, I do," he said. "I'll just go off and see an oppressive corporate monolithic evil entity about a dog, shall I?"

“I think that would be a good idea,” said Mary. Mr. Morton strode to the airlock, put on his mask, and paused as though to utter a dramatic exit line; then realized he should have delivered it before putting his mask on. He saluted instead, with a stiff perfect British salute, and marched away down the Tube.

“Mum?”

Mary turned and beheld Alice, swathed extravagantly for the trip Outside. Mr. De Wit stood beside her, a carry-on in each hand and under either arm.

“The tickets say to get there three hours before flight time for processing,” said Alice hesitantly.

“So you'd best go now,” said Mary. Alice burst into tears and flung her arms around her mother's neck.

“I'm sorry I haven't been a good daughter,” cried Alice. “And now I'm going to feel like a deserter too!”

“No, dearest, of course you're not a deserter,” said Mary automatically, patting her on the arm. She looked over Alice's shoulder at Mr. De Wit. “You're going to go away with this nice man and bear me a lovely granddaughter, see, and perhaps someday I'll come visit you in my diamond-encrusted planet shuttle, yes?”

“I hope so,” said Alice, straightening up, for her back ached. Mother and daughter looked at one another across all the resentments, the dislike, the grudges, the eternal intractable *issues* of their lives. What else was there to say?

“I love you, Mum,” said Alice at last.

“I love you too,” said Mary. She went to Mr. De Wit and stood on tiptoe to kiss him, for which he bent down.

“If you desert her, I'll hunt you down and kill you with my two hands,” she murmured in his ear. He grinned.

They went away through the airlock, just as Alf the Hauler came in. Beer had frozen on his clothing and he was bleeding from his nostrils, but he seemed not to have noticed.

“Got a couple fousand meters of chain!” he announced. “Nough to move bloody shrackin' Antartarctica!”

“You silly boy, did you go out without your air?” Mary scolded gently. “Rowan, bring a wet face flannel for our Alf. Where are your keys, dear?”

Smiling like a broken pumpkin, Alf held them up. Mary confiscated them and passed them to Manco, who masked up before ducking outside to back Alf's hauler into position.

“You can hold yer breff out dere, you know,” said Alf proudly if muffledly, as Mary cleaned him up. “S'really easy once you get used to it.”

“I'm sure it is, love. Have another beer and sit still for a bit,” Mary told him, and turned to Rowan. “What's happening now?”

“Uncle Brick and the others are putting the ag-units in place,” said Rowan. “Is it time to disconnect Three Tank yet?”

“Not yet. They'll want a drink before they go up the slope,” Mary replied.

“But, Mum, they're *drunk!*” Rowan protested.

“Can you think of a better way to get them to do it?” Mary snapped. “What chance have we got, unless they think it's a mad lark they came up with themselves? I'll get this house on my claim any damned way I can. Pour another round!”

* * * *

Alice was reclining in her compartment, adjusting to the artificial gravity and staring up at the monitor above the couch. It was showing only old-fashioned flat images from the live camera mounted above the shuttleport; but the views were something to occupy her attention in the gray cubespace, and the litany of *Last time I'll ever have to look at this* was soothing her terrors.

Suddenly something on the screen moved, and the image became surreal, impossible: there out beyond the Settlement a dome was rising, as though a hill had decided to walk. Alice cried out. Eliphah was beside her immediately, though she had had the impression he had been off seeing about their menu selections for the flight.

“What's the matter?” he asked, taking her hand in both his own.

“Where did you come from?” she asked him, bewildered. “Look out there! She's actually talked them into it!”

Clearly free now, the Empress of Mars was crawling up the slope from the Settlement Base like a gigantic snail, ponderous, of immense dignity, tugged along inexorably by no less than three freighters on separate leads of chain, each one sending up its own pink cloud of dust from roaring jets. Eliphah watched it and thought of a Monty Python sketch, imagined a Strauss waltz playing somewhere.

“Of course she's done it, Alice.” How assured his voice was, and yet a little sad. “Your mother will found a city up there, on beer and rebellion. It'll be a remarkable success. You'll see, my dear.”

“You really think so?” She stared into his eyes, unsettled by the expression there. He was the kindest man she had ever met, but sometimes she felt as though she were a small lost animal he'd picked up and taken home. She turned her eyes back to the monitor. “I guess we should have stayed to help her, shouldn't we?”

“No!” He put his arms around her. “You'll come home to Earth. I'll keep you safe, you and the little girl. I promised your mother.”

“Oh, Earth...” Alice thought of green hills, and blue skies, and a blue sea breaking on a white beach ... and her mother, and her mother's problems, finally subtracted from her life. She closed her eyes, burying her face in Eliphah's shoulder. His beard smelled of cinnamon and myrrh.

* * * *

“Looks like a huge mobile tit!” whooped the Brick peering into his rear monitor as he yanked back on the throttle.

“But it's leaking, Mum,” fretted Mona, watching the vapor plumes emerge and dissipate instantly wherever they appeared, over every unplastered crack and vent. “Are we going to have any air at all once we get it up there?”

“We can wear our masks indoors the first few days,” Mary told her, not taking her eyes off the monitor. “Wear extra thermals. Whatever we have to do. Hush, girl.”

In Alf's cab, Chiring was muttering into a mike, aiming his cam at the monitor for lack of a window.

“Chiring Skousen, your News Martian, here! What you're seeing is an epic journey, ladies and gentlemen, a heroic gesture in defiance of oppression.” He paused, reflected on the number of seats the NeoMaoists had won in the last Nepali parliamentary election, and went on: “The valiant working classes have risen in aid of one woman's brave stand against injustice, while the technocrats cower in their opulent shelters! Yes, the underpaid laborers of Mars still believe in such seemingly-outmoded concepts as gallantry, chivalry and courage.”

“And beer,” said Alf. “Whoo-hoo!”

“The new battle cry of Mars, ladies and gentlemen!” Chiring ranted. “The ancient demand of *Beer for the Workers!* Now, if you're still getting the picture from the monitor clearly, you can see the slope of Mons Olympus rising before us. Our road is that paler area between the two rows of boulders. We, er, we're fighting quite a headwind, but our progress has been quite good so far, due to the several ice freighters kindly donated by the Haulers Union, which are really doing a tremendous job of moving Ms. Griffith's structure.”

“Yeh, fanks,” said Alf.

“And the, er, the chains used for this amazing feat are the same gauge used for tackling and hauling polar ice, so as you can imagine, they're quite strong—” Chiring babbled, keeping his camera on the forward monitor because he had spotted something he did not understand in the rear monitor. He paused again and squinted at it.

“What the hell's that?” he whispered to Alf. Alf looked up at the monitor.

“Uh-oh,” he said. “That's a Strawberry.”

“And, and, er, ladies and gentlemen, if you'll follow now as I turn my cam on the rear monitor, you can see one of the unique phenomena of the Martian landscape. That sort of lumpy pink thing that appears to be advancing on the Settlement Base at high speed is what the locals call a Strawberry. Let's ask local weather expert Mr. Alfred Chipping to explain just exactly what a Strawberry is. Mr. Chipping?”

Alf stared into the cam, blinking. “Well, it's—it's like a storm kind of a fmg. See, you got yer sandstorms, wot is bad news eh? And you got yer funny jogeraphy up here and jolligy and, er, now and again you get yer Strawberry, wot is like all free of ‘em coming together to make this really fick sandstorm wot pingpongs off the hills and rocks and changes direction wifout warning.”

“And—why's it that funny spotty color, Mr. Chipping?”

“Cos it's got rocks in,” grunted Alf, slapping all three accelerator levers up with one blow of his hamhand.

Chiring began to pray to Vishnu, but he did it silently, and turned his camera back to the forward monitor.

“Well, isn't that interesting!” he cried brightly. “More details on the fascinating Martian weather coming up soon, ladies and gentlemen!”

* * * *

“I'll be damned,” said the Brick, in a voice that meant he had abruptly sobered. “There's a Strawberry down there.”

“Where?” Mary craned her head, instinctively looking for a window, but he pointed at the rear monitor. “What's a Strawberry?”

“Trouble for somebody,” the Brick replied, accelerating. “Settlement Base, looks like.”

“What?”

“Oh!” said Mona. “You mean one of those cyclone things like Tiny Reg was in?”

“*What?*”

“Yeah,” grunted the Brick, accelerating more.

“Tiny Reg said he was hit by one down by Terra Sirenum and it just took his freighter and picked it up with him in it and he went round and round so fast it broke all his gyros and his compass as well,” Mona explained.

“Bloody Hell!” Mary began to undo her seat harness, but the Brick put out an arm to restrain her.

“You don't want to do that, babe,” he said quietly.

“What do we care if it hits Settlement Base, anyroad?” Mona asked.

“Girl, your sister's down there!”

“Oh!” Mona looked up at the monitor in horror, just as the Strawberry collided with the new Temple of Diana, which imploded in a puff of crimson sand.

“Alice!” Mary screamed, searching across the monitors for a glimpse of the transport station. There was the shuttle, safe on its pad, lights still blinking in loading patterns. There it stayed safe, too, for the Strawberry turned now and shot away from the Base, tearing through Tubes as it went, and the lockout klaxons sounded as oxygen blew away white like seafoam in the burning-cold day.

“Never saw one come up on Tharsis before,” was all the Brick said, steering carefully.

“But the transport station's safe!” Mona said.

“Goddess thank You, Goddess thank You, Goddess.... Is it getting bigger?” Mary stared fixedly at the monitor bank.

“No,” said the Brick. “It's just getting closer.”

* * * *

Within the Empress, Mr. Morton scrambled spiderlike along the network of crossing stabilizer struts, which had telescoped out to prop the Empress' walls like glass threads in a witchball. He peered down worriedly at the floor. It was heaving and flexing rather more than he had thought it would. He looked over at the telltale he had mounted on the wall to monitor stress changes, but it was too far away to read easily.

"Are we going to be okay?" inquired Manco, remarkably stoic for a man dangling in a harness ten meters above uncertain eternity. The Heretic swung counterclockwise beside him, her red eye shut, listening to the clatter of her saucepans within their wired-up cupboards.

"Masks on, I think," said Mr. Morton.

"Gotcha," said Manco, and he slipped his on as Mr. Morton did the same, and gulped oxygen, and after a moment he nudged the Heretic as she orbited past. "Come on, honey, mask up. Leaks, you know?"

"Yeah," said the Heretic, not opening her eye, but she slipped on her mask and adjusted the fit.

"So what do we do?" Manco asked.

"Hang in there," said Mr. Morton, with a pitch in his giggle suggesting the long sharp teeth of impending catastrophe.

"Ha bloody Ha," said Manco, watching the walls. "We're shaking more. Are they speeding up out there?"

"Oh, no, certainly not," Mr. Morton said. "They know better than to do that. No more than two kilometers an hour, I told them, or the stresses will exceed acceptable limits."

"Really?" Manco squinted through his goggles at a bit of rushing-by ground glimpsed through a crack on the floor that opened and shut like a mouth.

"All right, here's something we can do—" Mr. Morton edged his way along a strut to the bundle of extras. "Let's reinforce! Never hurts to be sure, does it?" He pulled out a telescoping unit and passed it hand over hand to Manco. "Just pop that open and wedge it into any of the cantilevers I haven't already braced."

Manco grabbed the strut and twisted it. It unlocked and shot out in two directions, and he swung himself up to the nearest joist to ram it into place.

"Splendid," said Mr. Morton, unlocking another strut and wedging it athwart two others.

"Should I be doing that too?" asked the Heretic, opening her good eye.

"Well, er—" Mr. Morton thought of her inability to hold on to a pan, let alone a structural element requiring strength and exactitude in placement, and kindly as possible he said: "Here's a thought: why don't you rappel down to that big box there on the wall, you see? And just, er, watch the little numbers on the screen and let us know if they exceed 5008. Can you do that?"

"Okay," said the Heretic, and went down to the telltale in a sort of controlled plummet. Below her, the

floor winked open and gave another glimpse of Mars, which seemed to be going by faster than it had a moment earlier.

“This box says 5024,” the Heretic announced.

Mr. Morton said a word he had never used before. Manco, hanging by one hand, turned to stare, and the Heretic's ocular implant began to whirr in and out, gravely disturbing the fit of her mask.

* * * *

“So, Mr. Brick,” said Mary in a voice calm as iron, “Am I to understand that the storm is bearing down upon us now?”

“Bearing *up*, babe, but that's it, essentially,” said the Brick, not taking his eyes off the monitor.

“Can we outrun it, Mr. Brick?”

“We might,” he said, “If we weren't towing a house behind us.”

“I see,” said Mary.

There followed what would have been a silence, were it not for the roar of the motors and the rotors and the rising percussive howl of the wind.

“How does one release the tow lines, Mr. Brick?” Mary inquired.

“That lever right there, babe,” said the Brick.

“Mum, that's our house!” said Mona.

“A house is only a thing, girl,” said Mary.

“And there's still people in it! Mr. Morton stayed inside, didn't he? And Manco stayed with him! They're holding it together!”

Mary did not answer, staring at the monitor. The Strawberry loomed now like a mountain behind them, and under it the Empress seemed tiny as a horseshoe crab scuttling for cover.

“And there's always the chance the Strawberry'll hit something and go poinging off in another direction,” said the Brick, in a carefully neutral voice.

“Mr. Brick,” said Mary, “Basing your judgment on your years of experience hauling carbon dioxide from the icy and intolerant polar regions, could you please think carefully now and tell me exactly what chance there is that the Strawberry will, in fact, change direction and leave us alone? In your opinion, see?”

“I absolutely do not know,” the Brick replied.

“Right,” said Mary. She reached out and pulled down the lever to release the tow line.

A nasty twanging mess was avoided by the fact that Alf, in his freighter, had made the same decision to cast loose at nearly the same second, as had Tiny Reg (who had actually lived through a Strawberry after all and who would have cast loose even earlier, had his reflexes not been somewhat impaired by

seventeen imperial pints of Red Crater Ale).

They all three sheared away in different directions, as though released from slings, speeding madly over the red stony desolation and slaloming through piles of rock the color of traffic cones. Behind them the Empress of Mars drifted to a halt, its tow lines fluttering like streamers. The Strawberry kept coming.

* * * *

“5020,” the Heretic announced in a trembling voice. “5010. 5000. 4050.”

“*Much*better,” said Mr. Morton, gasping in relief. “Good sensible fellows. Perhaps they were only giving in to the temptation to race, or something manly like that. Now, I’ll just get out my flexospanner and we’ll—”

“405 *I*,” said the Heretic.

“What the hell’s that noi—” said Manco, just before the ordered world ended.

* * * *

On thirty-seven monitors, which was exactly how many there were on the planet, horrified spectators saw the Strawberry bend over as though it were having a good look at the Empress of Mars; then they saw it leap away, only giving the Empress a swat with its tail end as it bounced off to play with the quailing sand dunes of Amazonia Planitia. The Empress, for its part, shot away up the swell of Mons Olympus, rotating end over end as it went.

* * * *

Mr. Morton found himself swung about on his tether in ever-decreasing circles, ever closer to a lethal-looking tangle of snapping struts to which he was unfortunately still moored. The Heretic caromed past him, clinging with both arms to the stress telltale, which had torn free of the wall. Something hit him from behind like a sack of sand, and then was in front of him, and he clutched at it and looked into Manco’s eyes. Manco seized hold of the nearest strut with bleeding hands, but his grasp was slick, and it took both of them scrabbling with hands and feet to fend off the broken struts and find a comparatively still bit of chaos where they clung, as the floor and ceiling revolved, revolved, slower now revolving—

Floor upwards—

Righting itself—

Going over again, oh no, was the floor going to crack right open?—

Still tumbling—oh, don’t let it settle on its side, it’ll split open for sure—

Righting itself again—

And then a colossal lurch as the wind hit the Empress, only the ordinary gale force wind of Mars now but enough to sail anything mounted on ag-units, and Mr. Morton thought: *We’re going to be blown to the South Pole!*

Something dropped toward them from above, and both men saw the Heretic hurtling past, still clutching the stress telltale as well as a long confusion of line that had become wrapped about her legs. She regarded them blankly in the second before she went through the floor, which opened now like split fruit rind. The line fell after her and then snapped taut, in the inrush of freezing no-air. There was a shuddering

shock and the Empress strained at what anchored it, but in vain.

The men yelled and sucked air, clutching at their masks. Staring down through the vortex of blasting sand, Manco saw Mr. Morton's neoGothic pumping station with the stress telltale bedded firmly in its roof, and several snarls of line wound around its decorative gables.

And he saw, and Mr. Morton saw too, the Heretic rising on the air like a blown leaf, mask gone, her clothing being scoured away but replaced like a second skin by a coating of sand and blood that froze, her hair streaming sidelong. Were her arms flung out in a pointless clutching reflex, or was she opening them in an embrace? Was her mouth wide in a cry of pain or of delight, as the red sand filled it?

And Manco watched, stunned, and saw what he saw, and Mr. Morton saw it too, and they both swore ever afterward to what they saw then, which was: that the Heretic turned her head, smiled at them, and *flew away into the tempest.*

* * * *

"Take us back!" Mary shrieked. "Look, look, it's been blown halfway up the damn volcano, but it's still in one piece!"

The Brick dutifully came about and sent them hurtling back, through a cloud of sand and gravel that whined against the freighter's hull. "Looks like it's stuck on something," he said.

"So maybe everybody's okay!" cried Mona. "Don't you think, Mum? Maybe they just rode inside like it was a ship, and nobody even got hurt?"

Mary and the Brick exchanged glances. "Certainly," said Mary. "Not to worry, dear."

But as they neared the drilling platform, it was painfully obvious that the Empress was still in trouble. Air plumed from a dozen cracks in the dome, and lay like a white mist along the underside, eddying where the occasional gust hit it. Several of the ag-units had broken or gone offline, causing it to sag groundward here and there, and even above the roar of the wind and through the walls of the cab, Mary could hear the Empress groaning in all its beams.

"Mum, there's a hole in the floor!" Mona screamed.

"I can see that. Hush, girl."

"But they'll all be dead inside!"

"Maybe not. They'd masks, hadn't they? Mr. Brick, I think we'd best see for ourselves."

The Brick just nodded, and made careful landing on the high plateau. They left Mona weeping in the cab and walked out, bent over against the wind, deflecting sand from their goggles with gloved hands.

"YOU GOT UNITS 4, 6 AND 10 DEAD, LOOKS LIKE," announced the Brick. "IF WE SHUT OFF 2, 8 AND 12, THAT OUGHT TO EVEN OUT THE STRESS AND LET HER DOWN SOME."

"WILL YOU GIVE ME A LEG UP, THEN, PLEASE?"

The Brick obliged, hoisting Mary to his shoulders, and there she balanced to just reach the shutoff

switches, and little by little the Empress evened out, and settled, and looked not quite so much like a drunken dowager with her skirts over her head. Mary was just climbing down when Alf and Tiny Reg pulled up in their freighters. Chiring scrambled from Alf's cab and came running toward her with his cam held high.

“UNBELIEVABLE!” he said. “IT'S AN ACT OF THE GODS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! NARROW ESCAPE FROM CERTAIN DEATH! FREAK STORM DEPOSITING BUILDING INTACT ON VERY SITE INTENDED! MARS'S FIRST RECORDED MIRACLE!”

“SHUT THE DAMN THING OFF,” Mary told the audience of Posterity. “WE'VE GOT PEOPLE INSIDE.”

Chiring gulped, seeing the wreckage clearly for the first time. He ran for the Empress, where the Brick was already taking a crowbar to the airlock.

“MUM!” Rowan jumped from Tiny Reg's cab. She reached her mother just as Mona did the same, and they clung to Mary, weeping.

“HUSH YOUR NOISE!” Mary yelled. “WE'RE ALIVE, AREN'T WE? THE HOUSE IS HERE, ISN'T IT?”

“DAMN YOU, MUM, WHAT'LL WE BREATHE UP HERE?” Rowan yelled back. “HOW'LL WE LIVE? WE'LL FREEZE!”

“THE GODDESS WILL PROVIDE!”

Rowan said something atheistical and uncomplimentary then, and Mary would have slapped her if she hadn't been wearing a mask, and as they stood glaring at each other Mary noticed, far down the slope below Rowan, a traveling plume of grit coming up the road. It was the CeltCart.

By the time the cart reached the plateau, Mary had armed herself with the Brick's crowbar, and marched out swinging it threateningly.

“COCHEVELOU, YOU'RE ON MY LAND,” she said. She aimed a round blow at his head but it only glanced off, and he kept coming and wrapped his arms around her.

“DARLING GIRL, I'M BEGGING YOUR PARDON ON MY KNEES,” said Cochevelou. Mary tried to take another swipe at him but dropped the crowbar.

“HOUND,” she gasped, “GO BACK TO EARTH, TO YOUR SOFT LIFE, AND I, ON MARS, WILL DRY MY TEARS, AND LIVE TO MAKE MY ENEMIES KNEEL!”

“AW, HONEY, YOU DON'T MEAN THAT,” Cochevelou said. “HAVEN'T I GONE AND GIVEN IT ALL UP FOR YOUR SAKE? THE SPOILED DARLINGS CAN ELECT THEMSELVES ANOTHER CHIEFTAIN. I'M STAYING ON.”

Mary peered over his shoulder at the CeltCart, and noted the preponderance of tools he had brought with him: anvil, portable forge, pig iron ... and she thought of the thousand repairs the Empress's tanks and cantilevers would now require. Drawing a deep breath, she cried:

“OH, MY DEAR, I'M THE GLADDEST WOMAN THAT EVER WAS!”

“MUM! MUM!” Mona fought her way through the blowing sand. “THEY’VE COME ROUND!”

Mary broke from Cochevelou’s embrace, and he followed her back to the cab of the Brick’s freighter, where Manco and Mr. Morton were sitting up, or more correctly propping themselves up, weak as newborns, letting Alf swab BioGoo on their cuts and scrapes.

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, BOYS? WHERE’S THE HERETIC GONE?” Mary demanded.

Mr. Morton began to cry, but Manco stared at her with eyes like eggs and said, “There was a miracle, Mama.”

* * * *

Miracles are good for business, and so is the attraction of a hot bath in a frozen place of eternal dirt, and so are fine ales and beers in an otherwise joyless proletarian agricultural paradise. And free arethermal energy is very good indeed, if it’s only free to *you* and costs others a packet, especially if they have to crawl and apologize to you and treat you like a lady in addition to paying your price for it.

* * * *

Five years down the line there was a new public house sign, what with the Queen of England being scoured away at last by relentless grit, and a fine new sign it was. Two grinning giants, one red and one black, supported between them a regal little lady in fine clothes. At her throat was the painted glory of a red diamond; in her right hand was a brimful mug, and her left hand beckoned the weary traveler to warmth and good cheer. Inside, in the steamy warmth, Sherpas drank their beer with butter.

Five years down the line there were holocards on the back bar, all featuring little Mary De Wit of Amsterdam, whether screaming and red-faced for the camera in her first bath, or holding tight to Mr. De Wit’s long hand while paddling her toes in the blue sea, or smiling like a sticky cherub before a massed extravagance of Solstice presents and Chanukah sweets, or solemn on her first day of school.

Five years down the line there was a little shrine in the corner of the kitchen with a new image, a saint for the new faith. It resembled nothing so much as the hood ornament of an ancient Rolls-Royce, a sylph leaning forward into the wind, discreetly shrouded by slipstream short of actual nakedness. Its smile was distinctly unsettling. Its one eye was a red diamond.

Five years down the line there was indeed a Centre for the Performing Arts on Mars, and its thin black-clad manager put on very strange plays indeed, drawing the young intellectuals from what used to be Settlement Base, and there were pasty-faced disciples of Martian Drama (they called themselves the UltraViolets) creating a new art form in the rapidly expanding city on Mons Olympus.

Five years down the line at Mars One there were long green fields spidering out along the Martian equator and even down to the lowlands, because that’s what a good socialist work ethic will get you, but up in Mars Two there were domed rose gardens to the greater glory of Her who smiled serene in Her cloak of stars, Mother of miracles like roses that bloom in despite of bitter frost.

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