

# Biding Time

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Ernie Gargalian was fat—“Gargantuan Gargalian,” some called him. Fortunately, like me, he lived on Mars; it was a lot easier to carry extra weight here. He must have massed a hundred and fifty kilos, but it felt like a third of what it would have on Earth.

Ironically, Gargalian was one of the few people on Mars wealthy enough to fly back to Earth as often as he wanted to, but he never did; I don’t think he planned to ever set foot on the mother planet again, even though it was where all his rich clients were. Gargalian was a dealer in Martian fossils: he brokered the transactions between those lucky prospectors who found good specimens and wealthy collectors back on Earth, taking the same oversize slice of the financial pie as he would have of a real one.

His shop was in the innermost circle—appropriately; he knew *everyone*. The main door was transparent alloquartz with his business name and trading hours laser-etched into it; not quite carved in stone, but still a degree of permanence suitable to a dealer in prehistoric relics. The business’s name was Ye Olde Fossil Shoppe—as if there were any other kind.

The shoppe’s ye olde door slid aside as I approached—somewhat noisily, I thought. Well, Martian dust gets everywhere, even inside our protective dome; some of it was probably gumming up the works.

Gargalian, seated by a long worktable covered with hunks of rock, was in the middle of a transaction. A prospector—grizzled, with a deeply lined face; he could have been sent over from Central Casting—was standing next to Gargantuan (okay, I was one of those who called him that, too). Both of them were looking at a monitor, showing a close-up of a rhizomorph fossil. “*Aresthera weingartenii*,”

Gargalian said, with satisfaction; he had a clipped Lebanese accent and a deep, booming voice. “A juvenile, too—we don’t see many at this particular stage of development. And see that rainbow sheen? Lovely. It’s been permineralized with silicates. This will fetch a nice price—a nice price indeed.”

The prospector’s voice was rough. Those of us who passed most of our time under the dome had enough troubles with dry air; those who spent half their lives in surface suits, breathing bottled atmosphere, sounded particularly raspy. “How nice?” he said, his eyes narrowing.

Gargantuan frowned while he considered. “I can sell this quickly for perhaps eleven million ... or, if you give me longer, I can probably get thirteen. I have some clients who specialize in *A. weingartenii* who will pay top coin, but they are slow in making up their minds.”

“I want the money fast,” said the prospector. “This old body of mine might not hold out much longer.”

Gargalian turned his gaze from the monitor to appraise the prospector, and he caught sight of me as he did so. He nodded in my direction, and raised a single finger—the finger that indicated “one minute,” not the other finger, although I got that often enough when I entered places, too. He nodded at the prospector, apparently agreeing that the guy wasn’t long for this or any other world, and said, “A speedy resolution, then. Let me give you a receipt for the fossil ...”

I waited for Gargalian to finish his business, and then he came over to where I was standing. “Hey, Ernie,” I said.

“Mr. Double-X himself!” declared Gargalian, bushy eyebrows rising above his round, flabby face. He liked to call me that because both my first and last names—Alex Lomax—ended in that letter.

I pulled my datapad out of my pocket and showed him a picture of a seventy-year-old woman, with gray hair cut in sensible bangs above a crabapple visage. “Recognize her?”

Gargantuan nodded, and his jowls shook as he did so. “Sure. Megan Delacourt, Delany, something like that, right?”

“Delahunt,” I said.

“Right. What’s up? She your client?”

“She’s *nobody’s* client,” I said. “The old dear is pushing up daisies.”

I saw Gargalian narrow his eyes for a second. Knowing him, he was trying to calculate whether he’d owed her money or she’d owed him money. “Sorry to hear that,” he said with the kind of regret that was merely polite, presumably meaning that at least he hadn’t lost anything. “She was pretty old.”

“‘Was’ is the operative word,” I said. “She’d transferred.”

He nodded, not surprised. “Just like that old guy wants to.” He indicated the door the prospector had now exited through. It was a common-enough scenario. People come to Mars in their youth, looking to make their fortunes by finding fossils here. The lucky ones stumble across a valuable specimen early on; the unlucky ones keep on searching and searching, getting older in the process. If they ever do find a

decent specimen, first thing they do is transfer before it's too late. "So, what is it?" asked Gargalian. "A product-liability case? Next of kin suing NewYou?"

I shook my head. "Nah, the transfer went fine. But somebody killed the uploaded version shortly after the transfer was completed."

Gargalian's bushy eyebrows went up. "Can you do that? I thought transfers were immortal."

I knew from bitter recent experience that a transfer could be killed with equipment specifically designed for that purpose, but the only broadband disrupter here on Mars was safely in the hands of the New Klondike constabulary. Still, I'd seen the most amazing suicide a while ago, committed by a transfer.

But this time the death had been simple. "She was lured down to the shipyards, or so it appears, and ended up standing between the engine cone of a big rocketship, which was lying on its belly, and a brick wall. Someone fired the engine, and she did a Margaret Hamilton."

Gargalian shared my fondness for old films; he got the reference and winced. "Still, there's your answer, no? It must have been one of the rocket's crew—someone who had access to the engine controls."

I shook my head. "No. The cockpit was broken into."

Ernie frowned. "Well, maybe it was one of the crew, trying to make it look like it *wasn't* one of the crew."

God save me from amateur detectives. "I checked. They all had alibis—and none of them had a motive, of course."

Gargantuan made a harrumphing sound. "What about the original version of Megan?" he asked.

"Already gone. They normally euthanize the biological original immediately after making the copy; can't have two versions of the same person running around, after all."

"Why would anyone kill someone after they transferred?" asked Gargalian. "I mean, if you wanted the person dead, it's got to be easier to off them when they're still biological, no?"

"I imagine so."

"And it's still murder, killing a transfer, right? I mean, I can't recall it ever happening, but that's the way the law reads, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's still murder," I said. "The penalty is life imprisonment—down on Earth, of course." With any sentence longer than two mears—two Mars years—it was cheaper to ship the criminal down to Earth, where air is free, than to incarcerate him or her here.

Gargantuan shook his head, and his jowls, again. "She seemed a nice old lady," he said. "Can't imagine why someone would want her dead."

"The 'why' is bugging me, too," I said. "I know she came in here a couple of weeks ago with some fossil specimens to sell; I found a receipt recorded in her datapad."

Gargalian motioned toward his desktop computer, and we walked over to it. He spoke to the machine, and some pictures of fossils appeared on the same monitor he'd been looking at earlier. "She brought me three pentapeds. One was junk, but the other two were very nice specimens."

"You sold them?"

"That's what I do."

"And gave her her share of the proceeds?"

"Yes."

"How much did it come to?"

He spoke to the computer again, and pointed at the displayed figure. "Total, nine million solars."

I frowned. "NewYou charges 7.5 million for their basic service. There can't have been enough cash left over after she transferred to be worth killing her for, unless ..." I peered at the images of the fossils she'd brought in, but I was hardly a great judge of quality. "You said two of the specimens were really nice." 'Nice' was Gargantuan's favorite adjective; he'd apparently never taken a creative-writing course.

He nodded.

"*How nice?*"

He laughed, getting my point at once. "You think she'd found the alpha?"

I lifted my shoulders a bit. "Why not? If she knew where it was, that'd be worth killing her for."

The alpha deposit was where Simon Weingarten and Denny O'Reilly—the two private explorers who first found fossils on Mars—had collected their original specimens. That discovery had brought all the other fortune-seekers from Earth. Weingarten and O'Reilly had died twenty years ago—their heat shield had torn off while re-entering Earth's atmosphere after their third trip here—and the location of the alpha died with them. All anyone knew was that it was somewhere here in the Isidis Planitia basin; whoever found it would be rich beyond even Gargantuan Gargalian's dreams.

"I told you, one of the specimens was junk," said Ernie. "No way it came from the alpha. The rocks of the alpha are extremely fine-grained—the preservation quality is as good as that from Earth's Burgess Shale."

"And the other two?" I said.

He frowned, then replied almost grudgingly, "They were good."

"Alpha good?"

His eyes narrowed. "Maybe."

"She could have thrown in the junk piece just to disguise where the others had come from," I said.

"Well, even junk fossils are hard to come by."

That much was true. In my own desultory collecting days, I'd never found so much as a

fragment. Still, there had to be a reason why someone would kill an old woman just after she'd transferred her consciousness into an artificial body.

And if I could find that reason, I'd be able to find her killer.

#

My client was Megan Delahunt's ex-husband—and he'd been ex for a dozen mears, not just since Megan had died. Jersey Delahunt had come into my little office at about half-past ten that morning. He was shrunken with age, but looked as though he'd been broad-shouldered in his day. A few wisps of white hair were all that was left on his liver-spotted head. "Megan struck it rich," he'd told me.

I'd regarded him from my swivel chair, hands interlocked behind my head, feet up on my battered desk. "And you couldn't be happier for her."

"You're being sarcastic, Mr. Lomax," he said, but his tone wasn't bitter. "I don't blame you. Sure, I'd been hunting fossils for thirty-six Earth years, too. Megan and me, we'd come here to Mars together, right at the beginning of the rush, hoping to make our fortunes. It hadn't lasted though—our marriage, I mean; the dream of getting rich lasted, of course."

"Of course," I said. "Are you still named in her will?"

Jersey's old, rheumy eyes regarded me. "Suspicious, too, aren't you?"

"That's what they pay me the medium-sized bucks for."

He had a small mouth, surrounded by wrinkles; it did the best it could to work up a smile. "The answer is no, I'm not in her will. She left everything to our son Ralph. Not that there was much left over after she spent the money to upload, but whatever there was, he got—or will get, once her will is probated."

"And how old is Ralph?"

"Thirty-four." Age was always expressed in Earth years.

"So he was born after you came to Mars? Does he still live here?"

"Yes. Always has."

"Is he a prospector, too?"

"No. He's an engineer. Works for the water-recycling authority."

I nodded. Not rich, then. "And Megan's money is still there, in her bank account?"

"So says the lawyer, yes."

"If all the money is going to Ralph, what's your interest in the matter?"

"My interest, Mr. Lomax, is that I once loved this woman very much. I left Earth to come here to Mars because it's what she wanted to do. We lived together for ten mears, had children together, and—"

"Children," I repeated. "But you said all the money was left to your *child*, singular, this Ralph."

"My daughter is dead," Jersey said, his voice soft.

It was hard to sound contrite in my current posture—I was still leaning back with feet up on the desk. But I tried. “Oh. Um. I’m ... ah ...”

“You’re sorry, Mr. Lomax. Everybody is. I’ve heard it a million times. But it wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, although ...”

“Yes?”

“Although Megan blamed herself, of course. What mother wouldn’t?”

“I’m not following.”

“Our daughter JoBeth died thirty years ago, when she was two months old.” Jersey was staring out my office’s single window, at one of the arches supporting the habitat dome. “She smothered in her sleep.” He turned to look at me, and his eyes were red as Martian sand. “The doctor said that sort of thing happens sometimes—not often, but from time to time.” His face was almost unbearably sad. “Right up till the end, Megan would cry whenever she thought of JoBeth. It was heartbreaking. She couldn’t get over it.”

I nodded, because that was all I could think of to do. Jersey didn’t seem inclined to say anything else, so, after a moment, I went on. “Surely the police have investigated your ex-wife’s death.”

“Yes, of course,” Jersey replied. “But I’m not satisfied that they tried hard enough.”

This was a story I’d heard often. I nodded again, and he continued to speak: “I mean, the detective I talked to said the killer was probably off-planet now, headed to Earth.”

“That *is* possible, you know,” I replied. “Well, at least it is if a ship has left here in the interim.”

“Two have,” said Jersey, “or so the detective told me.”

“Including the one whose firing engine, ah, did the deed?”

“No, that one’s still there. *Lennick’s Folly*, it’s called. It was supposed to head back to Earth, but it’s been impounded.”

“Because of Megan’s death?”

“No. Something to do with unpaid taxes.”

I nodded. With NewYou’s consciousness-uploading technology, not even death was certain anymore—but taxes were. “Which detective were you dealing with?”

“Some Scottish guy.”

“Dougal McCrae,” I said. Mac wasn’t the laziest man I’d ever met—and he’d saved my life recently when another case had gone bad, so I tried not to think uncharitable thoughts about him. But if there was a poster boy for complacent policing, well, Mac wouldn’t be it; he wouldn’t bother to get out from behind his desk to show up for the photo shoot. “All right,” I said. “I’ll take the case.”

“Thank you,” said Jersey. “I brought along Megan’s datapad; the police gave it back to me after copying its contents.” He handed me the little tablet. “It’s got her appointment schedule and her address book. I thought maybe it would help you find the killer.”

I motioned for him to put the device on my desk. “It probably will, at that. Now, about my fee ...”

#

Since Mars no longer had seas, it was all one landmass: you could literally walk anywhere on the planet. Still, on this whole rotten globe, there was only one settlement—our domed city of New Klondike, three kilometers in diameter. The city had a circular layout: nine concentric rings of buildings, cut into blocks by twelve radial roadways. The NewYou franchise—the only place you could go for uploading on Mars—was just off Third Avenue in the Fifth Ring. According to her datapad, Megan Delahunt’s last appointment at NewYou had been three days ago, when her transfer had actually been done. I headed there after leaving Ye Olde Fossil Shoppe.

The NewYou franchise was under new management since the last time I’d visited. The rather tacky showroom was at ground level; the brain-scanning equipment was on the second floor. The basement—quite rare on Mars, since the permafrost was so hard to dig through—was mostly used for storage.

“Mr. Lomax!” declared Horatio Fernandez, an employee held over from the previous ownership. Fernandez was a beefy guy—arms as big around as Gargalian’s, but his bulk was all muscle.

“Hello,” I said. “Sorry to bother you, but—”

“Let me guess,” said Fernandez. “The Megan Delahunt murder.”

“Bingo.”

He shook his head. “She was really pleasant.”

“So people keep telling me.”

“It’s true. She was a real lady, that one. Cultured, you know? Lots of people here, spending their lives splitting rocks, they get a rough edge. But not her; she was all ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ Of course, she was pretty long in the tooth ...”

“Did she have any special transfer requests?” I asked.

“Nah. Just wanted her new body to look the way she had fifty Earth years ago, when she was twenty—which was easy enough.”

“What about mods for outside work?” Lots of transfers had special equipment installed in their new bodies so that they could operate more easily on the surface of Mars.

“Nah, nothing. She said her fossil-hunting days were over. She was looking forward to a nice long future, reading all the great books she’s never had time for before.”

If she’d found the alpha, she’d probably have wanted to work it herself, at least for a while—if you’re planning on living forever, and you had a way to become super-rich, you’d take advantage of it. “Hmmp,” I said. “Did she mention any titles?”

“Yeah,” said Fernandez. “She said she was going to start with *The Remembrance of Things*

*Past.*”

I nodded, impressed at her ambition. “Anybody else come by to ask about her since she was killed?”

“Well, Detective McCrae called.”

“Mac came here?”

“No, he *called*. On the phone.”

I smiled. “That’s Mac.”

#

I headed over to Gully’s Gym, since it was on the way to my next stop, and did my daily workout—treadmill, bench press, and so on. I worked up quite a sweat, but a sonic shower cleaned me up. Then it was off to the shipyards. Mostly, this dingy area between the eighth and ninth circles was a grave for abandoned ships, left over from the early fossil-rush days when people were coming to Mars in droves. Now only a small amount of maintenance work was done here. My last visit to the shipyards had been quite unpleasant—but I suppose it hadn’t been as bad as Megan Delahunt’s last visit.

I found *Lennick’s Folly* easily enough. It was a tapered spindle, maybe a hundred meters long, lying on its side. The bow had a couple of square windows, and the stern had a giant engine cone attached. There was a gap of only a few meters between the cone and a brick firewall, which was now covered with soot. Whatever had been left of Megan’s shiny new body had already been removed.

The lock on the cockpit door hadn’t been repaired, so I had no trouble getting in. Once inside the cramped space, I got to work.

There were times when a private detective could accomplish things a public one couldn’t. Mac had to worry about privacy laws, which were as tight here on Mars as they were back down on Earth—and a good thing, too, for those, like me, who had come here to escape our pasts. Oh, Mac doubtless had collected DNA samples here—gathering them at a crime scene was legal—but he couldn’t take DNA from a suspect to match against specimens from here without a court order, and to get that, he’d have to show good reason up front for why the suspect might be guilty—which, of course, was a catch-22. Fortunately, the only catch-22 I had to deal with was the safety on my trusty old Smith & Wesson .22.

I used a GeneSeq 109, about the size of a hockey puck. It collected even small fragments of DNA in a nanotrap, and could easily compare sequences from any number of sources. I did a particularly thorough collecting job on the control panel that operated the engine. Of course, I looked for fingerprints, too, but there weren’t any recent ones, and the older ones had been smudged either by someone operating the controls with gloved hands, which is what I suspected, or, I suppose, by artificial hands—a transfer offing a transfer; that’d be a first.

Of course, Mac knew as well as I did that family members commit most murders. I’d



surreptitiously taken a sample from Jersey Delahunt when he'd visited my office; I sample everyone who comes there. But my GeneSeq reported that the DNA collected here didn't match Jersey's. That wasn't too surprising: I'd been hired by guilty parties before, but it was hardly the norm—or, at least, the kind of people who hired me usually weren't guilty of the particular crime they wanted me to investigate.

And so I headed off to find the one surviving child of Megan and Jersey Delahunt.

#

Jersey had said his son Ralph had been born shortly after he and Megan had come to Mars thirty-six Earth years ago. Ralph certainly showed all the signs of having been born here: he was 210 centimeters if he was an inch; growing up in Mars's low gravity had that effect. And he was a skinny thing, with rubbery, tubular limbs—Gumby in an olive-green business suit. Most of us here had been born on Earth, and it still showed in our musculature, but Ralph was Martian, through and through.

His office at the water works was much bigger than mine, but, then, he didn't personally pay the rent on it. I had a DNA collector in my palm when I shook his hand, and while he was getting us both coffee from a maker on his credenza, I transferred the sample to the GeneSeq, and set it to comparing his genetic code to the samples from the rocket's cockpit.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Lomax," Ralph said, handing me a steaming mug. "My father called to say he'd hired you. I'm delighted. Absolutely delighted." He had a thin, reedy voice, matching his thin, reedy body. "How anyone could do such a thing to my mother ..."

I smiled, sat down, and took a sip. "I understand she was a sweet old lady."

"That she was," said Ralph, taking his own seat on the other side of a glass-and-steel desk. "That she was."

The GeneSeq beeped softly three times, each beep higher pitched than the one before—the signal for a match. "Then why did you kill her?" I said.

He had his coffee cup halfway to his lips, but suddenly he slammed it down, splashing double-double, which fell to the glass desktop in Martian slo-mo. "Mr. Lomax, if that's your idea of a joke, it's in very poor taste. The funeral service for my mother is tomorrow, and—"

"And you'll be there, putting on an act, just like the one you're putting on now."

"Have you no decency, sir? My mother ..."

"Was killed. By someone she trusted—someone who she would follow to the shipyards, someone who told her to wait in a specific spot while he—what? Nipped off to have a private word with a ship's pilot? Went into the shadows to take a leak? Of course, a professional engineer could get the manual for a spaceship's controls easily enough, and understand it well enough to figure out how to fire the engine."

Ralph's flimsy form was quaking with rage, or a good simulation of it. "Get out. Get out now. I think I speak for my father when I say, you're fired."

I didn't get up. "It was damn-near a perfect crime," I said my voice rock-steady. "*Lennick's Folly* should have headed back to Earth, taking any evidence of who'd been in its cockpit with her; indeed, you probably hoped it'd be gone long before the melted lump that once was your mother was found. But you can't fire engines under the dome without consuming a lot of oxygen—and somebody has to pay for that. It doesn't grow on trees, you know—well, down on Earth it does, sort of. But not here. And so the ship is hanging around, like the tell-tale heart, like an albatross, like"—I sought a third allusion, just for style's sake, and one came to me: "like the sword of Damocles."

Ralph looked left and right. There was no way out, of course; I was seated between him and the door, and my Smith & Wesson was now in my hand. He might have done a sloppy job, but I never do. "I ... I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

I made what I hoped was an ironic smile. "Guess that's another advantage of uploading, no? No more DNA being left behind. It's almost impossible to tell if a specific transfer has been in a specific room, but it's child's play to determine what biologicals have gone in and out of somewhere. Did you know that cells slough off the alveoli of your lungs and are exhaled with each breath? Oh, only two or three—but today's scanners have no trouble finding them, and reading the DNA in them. No, it's open-and-shut that you were the murderer: you were in the cockpit of *Lennick's Folly*, you touched the engine controls. Yeah, you were bright enough to wear gloves—but not bright enough to hold your breath."

He got to his feet, and started to come around from behind his funky desk. I undid the safety on my gun, and he froze.

"I frown on murder," I said, "but I'm all for killing in self-defense—so I'd advise you to stand perfectly still." I waited to make sure he was doing just that, then went on. "I know *that* you did it, but I still don't know why. And I'm an old-fashioned guy—grew up reading Agatha Christie and Peter Robinson. In the good old days, before DNA and all that, detectives wanted three things to make a case: method, motive, and opportunity. The method is obvious, and you clearly had opportunity. But I'm still in the dark on the motive, and, for my own interest, I'd like to know what it was."

"You can't prove any of this," sneered Ralph. "Even if you have a DNA match, it's inadmissible."

"Dougal McCrae is lazy, but he's not stupid. If I tip him off that you definitely did it, he'll find a way to get the warrant. Your only chance now is to tell me *why* you did it. Hell, I'm a reasonable man. If your justification was good enough, well, I've turned a blind eye before. So, tell me: why wait until your mother uploaded to kill her? If you had some beef with her, why didn't you off her earlier?" I narrowed my eyes. "Or had she done something recently? She'd struck it rich, and that sometimes changes people—but ..." I paused, and after a few moments, I found myself nodding. "Ah, of course. She struck it rich, and she was old. You'd thought, hey, she's going to drop off soon, and you'll inherit her

newfound fortune. But when she squandered it on herself, spending most of it on uploading, you were furious.” I shook my head in disgust. “Greed. Oldest motivation there is.”

“You really are a smug bastard, Lomax,” said Ralph. “And you don’t know *anything* about me. Do you think I care about money?” He snorted. “I’ve never wanted money—as long as I’ve got enough to pay my life-support tax, I’m content.”

“People who are indifferent to thousands often change their ways when millions are at stake.”

“Oh, now you’re a philosopher, too, eh? I was born here on Mars, Lomax. My whole life I’ve been surrounded by people who spend all their time looking for paleontological pay dirt. My parents both did that. It was bad enough that I had to compete with things that have been dead for hundreds of millions of years, but ...”

I narrowed my eyes. “But what?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. You wouldn’t understand.”

“No? Why not?”

He paused, then: “You got brothers? Sisters?”

“A sister,” I said. “Back on Earth.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older, by two years.”

“No,” he said. “You couldn’t possibly understand.”

“Why not? What’s that got—” And then it hit me. I’d encountered lots of scum in my life: crooks, swindlers, people who’d killed for a twenty-solar coin. But nothing like this. That Ralph had a scarecrow’s form was obvious, but, unlike the one from Oz, he clearly *did* have a brain. And although his mother had been the tin man, so to speak, after she’d uploaded, I now knew it was Ralph who’d been lacking a heart.

“JoBeth,” I said softly.

Ralph staggered backward as if I’d hit him. His eyes, defiant till now, could no longer meet my own. “Christ,” I said. “How could you? How could anyone ...”

“It’s not like that,” he said, spreading his arms like a praying mantis. “I was four years old, for God’s sake. I—I didn’t mean—”

“You killed your own baby sister.”

He looked at the carpeted office floor. “My parents had little enough time for me as it was, what with spending twelve hours a day looking for the god-damned alpha.”

I nodded. “And when JoBeth came along, suddenly you were getting no attention at all. And so you smothered her in her sleep.”

“You can’t prove that. Nobody can.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“She was cremated, and her ashes were scattered outside the dome thirty years ago. The doctor said she died of natural causes, and you can’t prove otherwise.”

I shook my head, still trying to fathom it all. “You didn’t count on how much it would hurt your mother—or that the hurt would go on and on, mear after mear.”

He said nothing, and that was as damning as any words could be.

“She couldn’t get over it, of course,” I said. “But you thought, you know, eventually ...”

He nodded, almost imperceptibly—perhaps he wasn’t even aware that he’d done so. I went on, “You thought eventually she would die, and then you wouldn’t have to face her anymore. At some point, she’d be gone, and her pain would be over, and you could finally be free of the guilt. You were biding your time, waiting for her to pass on.”

He was still looking at the carpet, so I couldn’t see his face. But his narrow shoulders were quivering. I continued. “You’re still young—thirty-four, isn’t it? Oh, sure, your mother might have been good for another ten or twenty years, but *eventually* ...”

Acid was crawling its way up my throat. I swallowed hard, fighting it down. “Eventually,” I continued, “you would be free—or so you thought. But then your mother struck it rich, and uploaded her consciousness, and was going to live for centuries if not forever, and you couldn’t take that, could you? You couldn’t take her always being around, always crying over something that you had done so long ago.” I lifted my eyebrows, and made no effort to keep the contempt out of my voice. “Well, they say the first murder is the hardest.”

“You can’t prove any of this. Even if you have DNA specimens from the cockpit, the police still don’t have any probable cause to justify taking a specimen from me.”

“They’ll find it. Dougal McCrae is lazy—but he’s also a father, with a baby girl of his own. He’ll dig into this like a bulldog, and won’t let go until he’s got what he needs to nail you, you—”

I stopped. I wanted to call him a son of a bitch—but he wasn’t; he was the son of a gentle, loving woman who had deserved so much better. “One way or another, you’re going down,” I said. And then it hit me, and I started to feel that maybe there was a little justice in the universe after all. “And that’s exactly right: you’re going down, to Earth.”

Ralph at last did look up, and his thin face was ashen. “*What?*”

“That’s what they do with anyone whose jail sentence is longer than two mears. It’s too expensive in terms of life-support costs to house criminals here for years on end.”

“I—I can’t go to Earth.”

“You won’t have any choice.”

“But—but I was *born* here. I’m Martian, born and raised. On Earth, I’d weigh ... what? Twice what I’m used to ...”

“Three times, actually. A stick-insect like you, you’ll hardly be able to walk there. You should

have been doing what I do. Every morning, I work out at Gully's Gym, over by the shipyards. But you ..."

"My ... my heart ..."

"Yeah, it'll be quite a strain, won't it? Too bad ..."

His voice was soft and small. "It'll kill me, all that gravity."

"It might at that," I said, smiling mirthlessly. "At the very least, you'll be bed-ridden until the end of your sorry days—helpless as a baby in a crib."

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