

# MAELSTROM

## KAGE BAKER

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ven on a rough, rude, frontier Mars, people will still have a need for entertainment, and perhaps even for the consolations of Art. And, as proved by the sly and funny story that follows, they may have to turn to the most unlikely of sources to find them. ..

One of the most prolific new writers to appear in the late nineties, Kage Baker made her first sale in 1997, to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, and has since become one of that magazine's most frequent and popular contributors with her sly and compelling stories of the adventures and misadventures of the time-traveling agents of the Company; of late, she's started two other linked sequences of stories there as well, one of them set in as lush and eccentric a high fantasy milieu as any we've seen. Her stories have also appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Sci Fiction*, *Amazing*, and elsewhere. Her first Company novel, *In the Garden of Men*, was also published in 1997 and immediately became one of the most acclaimed and widely reviewed first novels of the year. More Company novels quickly followed, including *Sky Coyote*, *Mendoza in Hollywood*, *The Graveyard Game*, *The Life of the World to Come*, as well as a chapbook novella, *The Empress of Mars*, and her first fantasy novel, *The Anvil of the World*. Her many stories have been collected in *Black Projects*, *White Knights* and *Mother Aegypt and Other Stories*. Her most recent books include two new collections, *The Children of the Company* and *Dark Mon-days*. Coming up are a new novel, *Machine's Children*, and another new collection, *Gods and Pawns*. In addition to her writing, Baker has been an artist, actor, and director at the Living History Center, and has taught Elizabethan English as a second language. She lives in Pismo Beach, California.

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Mr. Morton was a wealthy man. He hated it.

For one thing, he wasn't accustomed to having money. During most of his life he had been institutionalized, having been diagnosed as an Eccentric at the age of ten. But when the British Arean Company had needed set-tlers for Mars, the Winksley Hospital for the Psychologically Suspect had obligingly shipped most of its better-compensated inmates off to assist in the colonization efforts.

Mr. Morton had liked going to Mars. For a while, he had actually been paid a modest salary by the BAC. Eccentric though he was, he was never-theless quite brilliant at designing and fabricating precast concrete shelters, a fact that would have

surprised anyone who hadn't seen the endless model villages he'd built on various tabletops in Ward Ten, back on Earth. The knowledge that he was earning his own keep as well as doing his bit to help terraforming along had built up his self-esteem.

When the economic bubble that had buoyed up the BAC burst, Mr. Morton had been summarily made Redundant. Redundant was nearly as bad as Eccentric. He was unable to afford a ticket back to Earth and might well have become an oxygen-starved mendicant sleeping in the Tubes, had he not found employment as a waiter at the Empress of Mars tavern. Here Mr. Morton had room, board, and oxygen, if not a salary, in surroundings so reminiscent of dear old Winksley Hospital for the Psychologically Suspect that he felt quite at home.

Then his employer, known as Mother Griffith by her patrons, had had a run of extraordinary luck that had resulted in making her the richest woman on the planet. Farewell to the carefree days of Mr. Morton's poverty! Mother Griffith set him up in business as a contractor and architect.

She now owned the entirety of Mons Olympus, and leased out lots to commercial tenants with the dream of building a grand new city on Mars. Areco, the immense corporation owning the rest of the planet, busily devised laws, permit fees, and taxes to hinder her as much as it was able. But by bankrolling Mr. Morton's firm, Mother Griffith found she was able to evade neatly several miles of red tape and avoid a small fortune in penalties.

All Mr. Morton was now obliged to do was sit at a drafting terminal and design buildings, and, now and then, suit up and wander Outside to look at a construction site where laborers actually hired and directed by Mother Griffith were busily pouring the peculiarly salmon-pink concrete of Mars.

For a brief period, Mr. Morton had enjoyed the contemplation of his bank account. He had enjoyed being able to afford his very own Outside gear at last, with the knowledge that he'd never have to improvise an air filter out of an old sock again. His indoor raiment was all of the best, and in the sable hues he preferred. And oh, what downloads of forbidden books the black market in literature had to offer, to a man of his economic status!

And yet, the more he kept company with Messrs. Poe, Dumas, Verne, King, and Lovecraft, the greater grew his sense of overwhelming melan-choly. His position as a newly prosperous bourgeois seemed distasteful to him, a betrayal of all that was artistic and romantic in his soul.

"Stop moping," Mother Griffith told him. "Bloody hell, man, the God-dess gifts you with obscene amounts of cash, and you can't think of more to do with it than buy some fusty old words? You're making a city with your own two hands, in pixels anyway. There's power for you! You want *artistic*, is it? Stick up some artistic buildings. Cornices and gingerbread and whatnot. I don't care how they

look.”

Mr. Morton retired to his drafting terminal in high dudgeon and plotted out an entire city block in Neogothic Rococo. Factoring in Martian gravity, he realized he could make his elaborate spires and towers even more soar-ing, even more delicate and dreamlike. A few equations gave him breathtak-ing results. So for a while he was almost happy, designing a municipal waste treatment plant of ethereal loveliness.

And, just here above, where its gargoyles might greet both sunset and dawn, would rise... the *Edgar Allan Poe Center for the Performing Arts!*

Mr. Morton leaned back from his console, dumbfounded. *Here* was a worthy use for vulgar riches.

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When the last of the concrete forms had been taken away, when all the fabulously expensive black walnut interiors shipped up from Earth had been installed, Mr. Morton’s theater was a sight to behold. Even the shaven-headed members of the Martian Agricultural Collective, notorious for their philistinism, suited up and hiked the slope to stare at it.

For one thing, dye had been added to the concrete, so the whole thing was an inky purple. Not only gargoyles but statues of the great poets and dramatists, floral roundels, bosses, shields, crests, and every other ornamental folly Mr. Morton had been able to imagine covered most of its gloomy exterior, and a great deal of the interior too. On Earth, it would have crum-bled under the weight of gravity and public opinion. Here on Mars, it stood free, a cathedral to pure weirdness.

Within, it had been fitted up with a genuine old-fashioned proscenium stage. Swags of black velvet concealed the very latest in holoprojectors, but Mr. Morton had hopes of using that vulgar modern entertainment seldom.

“But that’s what people want to see,” said Mother Griffith in dismay.

“Only because they’ve never known anything better,” said Mr. Morton. “I shall revive Theater as an art, here in this primitive place!”

He thought it might be nice to begin with the ancient Greeks, and so he put a word in his black marketeer’s ear about it. A week later that useful gentleman sent him a download containing the surviving works of Aristoph-anes. Mr. Morton read them eagerly, and was horrified. Had he ever truly understood the meaning of vulgarity before now?

He was not at a loss for long. Mr. Morton decided that he would write the EAPCPA’s repertory himself; and what better way to open its first season than with

adaptations of every single one of Poe's works?

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"You're putting on *The Descent into the Maelstrom*?" shouted Mother Griffith. "But it's just two men in a boat going down a giant plug hole!"

"It is a meditation on the grandeur and horror of Nature," said Mr. Morton, a little stiffly.

"But how on earth will you stage such a thing?"

"I had envisioned a dramatic reading," said Mr. Morton.

"Oh, that'll have them standing in the aisles," said Mother Griffith. "Look you, Mr. Morton, not to intrude on your artistic sensibilities or anything, but mightn't you just think about giving 'em at least one of those son-et-lumière shows so they have something to look at? For if the miners and haulers feel they haven't had their tickets' worth of entertainment, they're liable to tear their seats loose and start swinging with 'em, see, this being a frontier and all."

Mr. Morton stormed off in a sulk, but, on sober reflection, decided that to ignore the visual aspect of performance was, perhaps, a little risky. He drafted another script, in which the Maelstrom itself would be presented by dancers, and each unfortunate mariner had a stylized lament before meeting his respective fate.

"They want a thrilling spectacle?" he said aloud, as he read it over. "*Here it is!*"

Fearful as he was to commit the purity of his script to human actors, Mr. Morton liked even less the idea of machine-generated ones. He decided to hold auditions.

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The interior of Mr. Morton's theater, while richly furnished, was quite a bit smaller than its remarkable exterior (air being a utility on Mars, living places tended to conserve its volume). Mr. Morton preferred to think of the result as an "intimate performance venue." Seating capacity was thirty persons. Mr. Morton sat in the back row now, watching as Mona Griffith stepped from the wings.

"Hi, Mr. Morton!" said Mona.

"Hello, Mona." Mr. Morton shifted uncomfortably. Mona was the young-est of Mother Griffith's daughters. She was carrying a SoundBox 3000 unit. She set it on the floor and switched it on. Slinky and suggestive music oozed forth. Mr.

Morton's knuckles turned white.

"Mona, you're not going to do a striptease, are you?" he inquired.

"Well—yes," said Mona, in the act of unbuckling her collar.

"Mona, you know how your mother feels about that," said Mr. Morton. He himself knew quite well; he had known Mona since she was ten. "In any case, I'm holding auditions for a play, not a—a burlesque review!"

"I'm of age now, aren't I?" said Mona defiantly. "And anyway, this isn't just a striptease. It's very intellectual. I'm *reciting* as I'm stripping, see?"

"Tell me you're not stripping to Hamlet's soliloquy," begged Mr. Morton.

"Pft! As if! I'm doing General Klaar's Lament from *The Wars of the House of Klaar*" said Mona. "And I've got these really horrible-looking fake wounds painted in unexpected places, see, so as to create quite a striking effect. So it wouldn't be at all, um, what's that word? Prurient?"

"No, I don't suppose it would be," said Mr. Morton. "But—"

They heard the warning klaxon announcing that the airlock had opened, and then the heavy tread of armored feet approaching the inner door. *Boom*. The inner door was kicked open, and a man in miners' armor strode down the aisle toward Mona. He drew a disrupter pistol and shot the SoundBox 3000, which promptly fell silent.

"Durk! You bastard!" shrieked Mona. The intruder marched up onstage, not even removing his mask. Mona kicked his shin viciously, forgetting that he was wearing Larlite greaves, and hopped backward clutching her foot. "My toe!"

Her fiancé shoved his mask back and glared at her. "You promised me you wouldn't do this," he said.

"You shot my SoundBox!"

"But you promised me you wouldn't do this!"

"But you shot my SoundBox!"

"Put your mask on. We're going home!" said Durk, waving his pistol distractedly.

"But you shot my SoundBox!"

“Next,” said Mr. Morton, from underneath his seat.

The next applicant waited until Durk and Mona had made their noisy exit before emerging from the wings.

“Er... Hello, Alf,” said Mr. Morton.

Alf was a hauler. Haulers drove Co2 freighters out on the High Road, the boulder-marked route that cut across the Outside wastes to the two poles. The mortality rate for haulers was high. Consequently, most haulers had been recruited from Hospitals, because they tended to care less about that fact.

Alf was able to face down cyclones, wandering dunes, flying boulders, starvation, and thirst without turning a hair, but he was sweating now as he peered out toward the empty seats.

“Erm,” he said.

“Are you here for the audition, Alf?”

“Yeah,” said Alf, blinking.

“And... we took our meds this morning, did we?”

“Yeah.”

“So... what will you be performing today, Alf ?”

“Erm,” said Alf, and then he drew a breath and said:

“Scene. Morning room in Alregons Flat in Arf Moon Street. Da room is luxriussly an artriscally fronished. Da sound of a pianer is eard in da adoining room. Lane is ranging arfternoon tea onna table an arfter da music as ceased, Alregon enners curvy mark from music room ower curvy mark. Alregon. Didja ear wot I wuz playing Lane? Lane I din’t fink it wuz plite to listen sir—”

“Alf, what on earth is that?”

Alf fell silent and blinked. “S’play.”

“Which play?”

*“Da Importance of Being Earnest,”* said Alf. “By Oscar Wilde.”

Mr. Morton sat bolt upright. “Where did you find a copy?” Oscar Wilde’s work had been condemned as Politically Trivial so long ago that scarcely any of it survived.

“Canary Wharf Ospital,” said Alf. Mr. Morton frowned in perplexity. Canary Wharf was a much less genteel institution than Winksley. He fought back feelings of class division and inquired:

“They had *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the library?”

“Nah,” said Alf. “Shoved under floor inna closet. It was like dis old book wiv paper an all? Used to read it when I wuz locked innere. I remember everyfing I read, see?”

Mr. Morton felt his heart patter against his ribs. “You remember the whole play?”

“Oh, yeah.” Alf grinned. “Allaway to ‘When I married Lord Bracknell I ad no forchoon of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing dat to stand in my way. Well I spose I must give my consent.’ I wuz locked in a lot.”

“You must recite the whole play for me one day, Alf,” said Mr. Morton, dazzled by mental images of an Exclusive World Premiere Revival.

“Sure,” said Alf. “Did I pass da audition?”

“Why—of course,” said Mr. Morton, thinking to himself that Alf could always sweep the floors. “Well done. I’ll let you know when rehearsals start.”

“Hey, fanks,” said Alf, and, grinning hugely, he clumped away to the airlock.

“Next?” said Mr. Morton.

A woman edged out on stage, wringing her hands. Mr. Morton recog-nized the silver brooch she wore on her bosom, and sighed. She was one of the sisters from the Ephesian Church’s mission down the mountain at Settlement Base.

“Hello,” she said. “I... ah.. .just wanted to ask you whether you’d ever known the infinite consolation of the Goddess?”

“Next,” said Mr. Morton.

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In the end, Mr. Morton decided to advertise. He put a notice in *Variety* (the Tri-Worlds edition): himself, recorded in holo, staring earnestly into the foremost camera and saying:

“Have you ever considered emigration to Mars? An adventure awaits you in a new company just forming on the Red Planet! The Edgar Allan Poe Center for the Performing Arts is looking for persons with theatrical experience interested in sharing our grand quest to bring the mysteries of our craft to the red and windswept Areal frontier!

“Yes, *you*, who have longed to escape from the humdrum routine of Earth, may find your ultimate self-expression here in the tortured and dramatic landscape of a new world! Send all inquiries to: [Amorton@poeyouareavenged.pub.ares.uk](mailto:Amorton@poeyouareavenged.pub.ares.uk) *today!*” The link flashed at the bottom of the holo. Mr. Morton pointed at it and dropped his voice impressively: “Do you dare?”

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*Do we dare not to?* Meera wondered sadly. She looked over at Crispin, who was sleeping as soundly as though they hadn’t a month to go on their lease and no money to renew, and hadn’t been living on cauliflower for a week, and hadn’t just received notice that the revival of *Peter Pan* was indefinitely postponed due to the producer’s backing out. She had been cast as Peter, and her salary would have paid both the lease and the last three installments on the Taranis.

Crispin was an actor too. He had boyish good looks and a wonderful voice, and was brilliant in the right parts; but most of the time he tended to get the wrong parts. His Mr. Toad had been praised to the skies, likewise his Christmas Panto SpongeBob; but his Dr. Who had, in the succinct words of the *Times* theater critic, “stunk up the stage,” and his Mr. Darcy had simply appalled everyone, himself included. He hadn’t worked in over a year.

And this morning another catastrophe loomed, one likely to make all their other problems seem small and manageable.

Meera reached over and grasped Crispin’s foot, and shook it gently.

“Babe,” she said. “Look at this.”

“Huh?” Crispin sat up with a snort. She replayed the *Variety* snippet for him. He stared at Mr. Morton’s shaky doppelganger, and gradually the lights came on behind his eyes.

“I wonder,” he said.



“It might solve a lot of problems,” said Meera.

“Yeah. Yeah! We could tell the rental agent to go shrack himself, for one thing.” Crispin slid to the edge of the bed and reached for his pants. “I passed the genetic scan in school; did you?”

“Yes.”

“So we’re eligible to go up there. It might be sort of rough, though.”

“Could it be much worse than this?” Meera waved her hand in a gesture that took in their sparsely furnished bed-sitter. Crispin glanced around and grinned.

“I wouldn’t mind saying goodbye to Earth. This might be a good thing for us! How many actors can there be on Mars anyway?” His smile dimmed a little. “Though I suppose you wouldn’t want to leave your family.”

“Are you mad?” Meera cried. “I’d give anything to put half the solar system between us!”

“Okay, then!” Crispin pulled a shirt on over his head. “Let’s mail the guy.”

“There’s something else,” said Meera, looking down at her hands. She clasped them tight. “Cris.. you remember the night we went to Gupta’s party?”

“Heh heh heh,” said Crispin, leering at her. She didn’t say anything else.

There was a silence of about thirty seconds, in which he connected the dots. Her eyes filled with tears. He went pale.

“Oh, no,” he murmured. “I mean—oh, babe, what a wonderful thing! It’s only—”

“It’s a bloody disaster!” Meera wailed. He sat down beside her and took her hands.

“We—we’ll think of something. I’ll get a job. And... and if I manage to work off the fine in five years—”

“We couldn’t work off the fine in twenty years,” said Meera, gulping back a sob. “I’ve already checked. The baby would be shaving by the time we were free.”

“Shrack,” said Crispin. He thought about the other alternative, but that carried an even stiffer penalty. Meera fought to compose herself. She said:

“But you see—if we emigrated to Mars—we wouldn’t *need* a Reproduc-tion

Permit.”

“We wouldn’t?” said Crispin. “Oh... we wouldn’t, would we? They let you have them, up there.”

Meera nodded.

“That settles it.” Crispin grabbed a datastick from the pocket of his coat. “Where’s the one with your head shot? We’ll both apply. What can we lose?”

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Six weeks later, they were emerging from the shuttle in the hangar at Settlement Base, a little wobbly-legged from their journey.

“Shouldn’t we have our air masks on?” said Meera fretfully.

“Nobody else has,” said Crispin. “We’re under a dome, see?” He drew in a deep breath. “Phew!” Hastily he clapped his mask on. “They must have had a leak in a sewer pipe!”

“No, actually,” said the shuttle pilot, grinning. “It always smells like this. They raise cattle down the MAC tubes. You’ll get used to it.”

Meera slid her mask in place and reached for Crispin’s hand. “Let’s go claim our trunks.”

They took a few steps forward and promptly stopped, as all newcomers did, startled by Martian gravity.

“This is lovely!” Meera bounced on tiptoes. Crispin, giggling, let go her hand and ran a few paces, bounding athletically toward an imaginary bas-ketball hoop.

“That’ll be them, I’m guessing,” said one of a pair of men walking toward them.

“Oh, dear, are we that obvious?” said Meera, turning to smile. Her eyes widened.

The taller of the two was very tall indeed and very thin, suited all in black, with an old-fashioned bubble helmet; it made him look rather like Jack Skellington. The other was wide and barrel-chested, with a bushy beard. He wore no mask. He had clearly washed for the occasion, but not very well; soot lay in every crevice, in the creases of his big hands and in the wrinkles around his pale eyes, which gave him an alarmingly villainous appearance.

“That’s all right,” he said, grinning. He had a thick pan-Celtic accent. “We was all immigrants once.”

“Ms. Suraiya, Mr. Delamare, what an honor!” cried the other gentleman, with his voice a little muffled and echoing. He clasped Meera’s hand in both his own and bent to kiss it, but only succeeded in rapping her knuckles with the curve of his helmet. “Oh—I’m so sorry—”

“Ah, hell, Morton, take the damn thing off,” said the bearded one. He inhaled deeply. “It ain’t that bad down here. Reminds me of old times, so it does.”

“I can’t bear it, and obviously neither can they,” said Mr. Morton. He leaned down solicitously. “The air is much fresher where we’re going, though I must admit it’s a little thin. I cannot express what a pleasure it is to welcome you to Mars, Ms. Suraiya! Mr. Delamare! Amadeus Ruthven Morton at your service, and may I present Mr. Maurice Cochevelou? May we collect your trunks for you?”

“Yes, please,” said Meera.

“I think they’re over here,” said Crispin, and vaulted away to the baggage claim area with Cochevelou walking after him.

“We were so awfully impressed by the holoshots of your theater, Mr. Morton,” said Meera. “When are auditions?”

“Oh, *you* needn’t audition!” said Mr. Morton. “We do get all the latest holos up here now, you know. Everyone’s seen *Mr. Korkunov Says Hello!*”

“How nice!” *Mr. Korkunov* was a kiddie holo in which Crispin had had a recurring role as Brophy the Bear, until the show’s cancellation.

“And of course, you were one of Smeeta’s daughters on *Wellington Square*,” Mr. Morton said.

“The one who got married to a millionaire and moved to Montana,” said Meera ruefully. She had been written out of the show after refusing to sleep with the director.

“Yes. I can’t tell you how happy I am to be working with real profession-als!” said Mr. Morton. “I’m afraid our little theater is still something of an amateur undertaking—”

“Meera! Check it out!” yelled Crispin, balancing his trunk on one hand as he approached. He tossed it to the other hand as though it were made of balsa. “One-third gravity!”

“Careful—” Meera threw up her hands as Crispin butted the trunk like a football, and promptly clutched his head.

“Ow!”

“It’s lighter, but it’s just as hard,” Mr. Cochevelou told him. He scooped up the fallen trunk, swung the other trunk to his shoulder, and led them out of the hangar. They had their first glimpse of Mars: Settlement Dome above them, scoured to near-opacity by sandstorms, and the portals to the Tubes opening off it. To one side was the Ephesian Mission, breathing out incense which mingled peculiarly with the prevailing methane reek.

“So this is Mars,” said Meera, trying not to show her disappointment.

“Oh, no, darlin’,” said Cochevelou. “*This ain’t Mars.*” He grinned and led them to an airlock. “Masks on tight? You might want to pull up those hoods. We’re going Outside.” He slid on his own mask, around which his beard protruded to bizarre effect, and handed them a pair of heavy suits such as he wore, waiting patiently while they pulled them on and sealed up. Then he shouldered his way through the airlock. They followed him, holding hands tightly.

“*This is Mars,*” said Cochevelou. He dumped their trunks into the back of a rickety-looking vehicle with balloon tires, and turned to wave an arm at the immense red desert. Rocks like crusts of dried blood, boulders in the colors of tangerines or bricks, wind-scoured curry-colored pinnacles and spires of rock. Far off, pink whirlwinds moved lazily across the plain. Looming before them was a gentle slope that rose, and rose, looking not so impossibly high as all that until they saw the cluster of tiny buildings far up and still not halfway to the sky.

Meera barely noticed that she was colder than she’d ever been in her life. It was all so vast, and so silent, and beautiful in a harsh way. It did not look like the surface of an alien world.

*And it isn’t, is it?* she thought. *We’re Martians now. This is home.*

The view was even more breathtaking by the time they had rumbled up the mountainside as far as the little buildings, but by that time the cold really was more than either of them could stand another minute, and they staggered gratefully through the airlock into what seemed, by comparison, a place as warm and steamy as a sauna.

“And here they are!” bellowed Cochevelou, pulling up his mask. Crispin and Meera followed suit. They stood in a domed darkness relieved only by lamps at scattered tables and booths, and one brighter light over the. . .bar?

Yes, unmistakably a bar. It had a concentrated smell of old ale and fried food

that anywhere else would have been overpowering, but by contrast with the stench of Settlement Dome seemed pleasant and wholesome. Quite a crowd was assembled there, and all eyes were turned to Crispin and Meera.

A buxom lady of a certain age pushed her way to the front of the crowd. “Welcome to the Empress of Mars, my dears. Did you talk to them about housing, Mr. Morton? No, not you. Never mind. Mary Griffith, and de-lighted to make your acquaintance. Manco? Just take their trunks up to the best nook, there’s a dear. Rowan! Set a booth for them, they’ll not have had anything but those nasty squeezey pastes for days and days. Come and sit, dears.”

A girl edged her way forward, holding up a stylus and plaquette. “Please—can I have your autograph, Ms. Suraiya?”

“Me too?” inquired a man, clearly a miner or prospector, so covered in red dust he looked like a living statue. “And yours, Mr. Delamare?”

“Mr. Delamare, Ms. Suraiya, I’m with the *Ares Times*,” said a gentleman, bowing slightly. “Could I ask you just to step over here for the holocams a moment? Chiring Skousen, so pleased to meet you—and I wonder whether you’d consider doing an interview a little later... ?”

Meera looked sidelong at Crispin, who flashed her a triumphant smile. It was going to be all right.

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And it was all right, even after Meera’s first visit to the Settlement Base clinic, when she learned that having a child on Mars meant that there could be no second thoughts about emigration. Returning to Earth presented un-acceptable risks to a baby born in Martian gravity, at least until adulthood, when it could train for the ordeal of Earth weight.

It was all right, even after Cochevelou gave them a midday tour Outside, and they saw the little mounds of red stones that had been placed, here and there, over the suffocated and frozen remains of prospectors who had ventured Out with no clear idea of the dangers they faced; or the ruined foundation of the big Ephesian temple that had been destroyed in some kind of hurricane, causing the good mothers to rebuild much more humbly within the protective stench of Settlement Base.

It was all right, even when they discovered how many of their new neighbors had been in Hospital, because the haulers and the laborers and the prospectors didn’t *act* as though they were liable to cause breaches of the public peace. Mostly they minded their manners, and only occasionally laughed a little too loudly or got into fights in the bar. There were no Public Health Monitors snooping around to have them collared and dragged off in any case, and, when you got right down to it,

Eccentrics were people just like anyone else.

It was all right because Crispin and Meera had free food and free lodging, in one of the funny little lofts plastered like swallow's nests within the dome of the Empress of Mars, and were promised better housing yet, as soon as Mr. Morton's workers completed the new block of flats—the first ever on Mars! It was all right because their interview with Mr. Skousen made the front page of the *Ares Times*, and they were treated like royalty everywhere they went.

It was all right because they soon got used to the smell, except when they ventured down to Settlement Base; and there were Scentstrips available in Mother Griffith's convenience shop that could be stuck across the air filter in one's mask, so that one hardly noticed anything except Island Spice, Berry Potpourri, or Spring Bouquet.

And it was all right because, on their first walk up to the EAPCPA, Meera had looked up at its black spires sharp against the purple sunset of Mars, and seen above them the soaring frame of the dome being built to shelter a new city, its bright steel catching the last of the sunlight, tiny points of blue glowing where the suited welders worked so far up. Standing there, Meera had felt the little flutter of the baby moving for the first time.

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Meera peered at the plaquette screen.

“As the old man spoke,” she read aloud, “I became aware of a vast and gradually increasing sound.”

“That's your cue,” said Crispin, leaning toward, in the makeup mirror.

“Actually I think he said he's just going to record us for that bit, so he can put in some effects,” said Meera, “So the Visitor goes on, 'vast bed of the waters, frenzied convulsion, heaving boiling hissing, prodigious streaks of foam'—blah blah—and there's me and the other two girls just sort of pacing around in a circle in the background, looking dangerous. And I suppose you're going to be just sort of staring at us in horror.”

“How's this look?” Crispin turned to her. In addition to the white wig and beard, he had put in a set of tooth appliances. He gave her a mad snaggly smile and rubbed his hands together, cackling like a lunatic.

“Maybe... a little over the top,” said Meera, as gently as she could.

“No, no, see, the guy has been driven mad by his experience,” said Crispin. “You have to put in some comic relief, when the story's an absolute downer like

this. It's, like, this psychological release for the audience.”

Meera bit her lip.

“Go on, go on,” said Crispin. “Who got the part of the Visitor, anyway, did Morton tell us?”

“Mr. Skousen,” said Meera. “The newsman up here.”

“Oh, good, at least he'll know how to read. Go on.”

““These streaks of foam, spreading out to a great distance, took unto themselves the gyratory motion of the subsided vortices, and seemed to form another, more vast.’ You know what I'd do, if I were you? Talk to some of those hauler people. They go Outside a lot. Mother Griffith was telling me about some of the really dreadful storms.”

“Oh, yeah, the...Raspberries or something, they call them.” Crispin nodded. “Like what took out that temple. Yes, brilliant. Who's that big guy who plays my brother, in the boat? Alf. He's an old-timer here. I'll buy him a beer or something. Go on, go on.”

Meera lifted the plaquette. ““I looked down a smooth, shining, and jet-black wall of water, speeding dizzily around and around with a swaying and sweltering motion, sending forth to the winds an appalling voice. The mountain trembled to its very base.’ He looks at the Old Man. ‘This, this can be nothing else than the great whirlpool of the Maelstrom!’ And that's your cue.”

Crispin clasped his hands together and gave a shrieking laugh. ““Ah! I will tell you a story—’ What are you making that face for?”

“Darling, that was your SpongeBob laugh.”

Crispin scowled, an effect the dental appliances rendered hideous. “No it wasn't. It was crazier.” He did it again. “No, you're right. Sorry.” He gave a sepulchral chuckle instead. “Oh, that's it. ‘I will tell you a story that will convince you I ought to know something of the Maelstrom!’”

\* \* \* \*

“I'd like to thank you all for being here today,” said Mr. Morton, clasping his long white hands. “Especially our stars, who have—ha, ha—truly crossed the heavens to shine here amongst us. But I am positive that each and every one of you will shine in your own proper sphere as we begin our journey toward True Art.”

“Yaaay!” cried Mona. There was polite applause.

“Our stars, of course, need no introduction,” Mr. Morton went on. “However, I’d like each of the rest of the cast to stand and have his or her moment in the spotlight. Why don’t we begin stage left? That would be you, Alf.”

“Erin,” said Alf. “Name, Alf Chipping. Dee-oh-bee twenty-free April twenty-two-eighty-free. Patient number seven-seven-five. Haulers’ Union Member number sixteen.”

“And.. .why did you decide to take up acting, Alf?”

“Like plays,” said Alf.

“Good for you,” said Crispin.

Mona stepped forward. “I’m Mona Griffith, and I’m engaged to be mar-ried next year, and I’ve always wanted to be a performer. When I was little I used to climb on the table and pretend I was a hologram. I can still sing the Perky Fusion song. Want to hear it? ‘Perky Fusion, he’s the man, Perky Fusion in a can, cleaner source of energy, lights the world for you and me, Perky Fusion one-two-three!’”

“How nice,” said Mr. Morton. “And how about you next, Ms. Hawley?”

He addressed a girl who looked rather like Joan of Arc, with her shaven head and hyperfocused stare. She stood straight.

“Exxene Hawley,” she said. “Joined the MAC with my boyfriend. Wanted to make a better world on Mars. He turned out to be a stinking bastard. I said, I’d make my own stinking better world. Left him and the stinking MAC. Now I’m here. It makes as much sense as anything.”

“And you’re in theater because... ?”

“It’s a good outlet for my issues, innit?”

“O—kay,” said Mr. Morton. “And so we come to Chiring.” A dapper gentleman rose and flashed them a smile.

“Chiring Skousen, your News Martian. I’m shooting a documentary on the birth of Theater on Mars.” He waved a hand at the holocams stationed about the room.

“Which will, no doubt, win him *another* award from the Nepalese Jour-nalists’ Association,” said Mr. Morton coyly. “Mr. Skousen is our other ce-lebrity, of course, but we knew him when!”



“And I’ve always cherished a secret ambition to play Edgar Allan Poe,” added Chiring.

“And so we come to Maurice,” said Mr. Morton, nodding toward that gentleman. He stood and nodded.

“Maurice Cochevelou,” he said. “I run Griffith Steelworks. Used to do a bit of acting with the Celtic Federation’s National Theater Project. Thought it might be nice to step back on the old boards, you know. Oh, and I’m engaged to be married to Mother Griffith.”

Someone snickered.

“Well, I *am*,” said Mr. Cochevelou plaintively.

“And there we are,” said Mr. Morton, but Crispin raised his hand.

“Hey! Everyone else had to stand and face the music. We shouldn’t be exempt!” He rose to his feet and raised his arms at the elbows, holding them out stiffly. “Hey hey, Mr. Korkunov, I’ve had *such* a busy morning!” he said, in his loudest Brophy the Bear voice. Mona giggled and applauded. “And I’d just like to say that Crispin Delamare is really looking forward to working with you all!”

He sat down. Meera rose, blushing.

“I’m Meera Suraiya, and I’m looking forward to working with you too.”

“And we’re expecting a baby in six months!” said Crispin. Meera put her hands to her face in dismay. To her astonishment, people applauded. She looked around at them all. They were *happy* for her.

\* \* \* \*

“No, nobody thinks anything about it, up here,” said Mother Griffith, as she led them along the corridor. “At least, nobody thinks any harm of it. They do say people aren’t having them now on Earth. I can’t say I’m surprised, with those fines! I had mine in the Celtic Federation, see, when you didn’t need a permit. Different now; shame, but there it is. I wouldn’t go back to Earth if you paid me, indeed.”

“What do people do for—well, for clothes, and furniture?” inquired Crispin.

“And nappies?” inquired Meera.

“Catalogs,” said Mother Griffith. “Or the PX at Settlement Base. For now. Not to worry! Within the twenty-four-month, the boys will have my Market Center finished. It’ll be vast! At last, affordable consumer goods up here at reasonable

prices, what a thought, eh? It'll be even more civilized when your next one comes along."

"Next one?" said Meera, in a faint voice. Crispin shrugged.

"And here we are!" said Mother Griffith proudly, and pulled a lever. With a hiss, the great door before them unsealed and folded back on itself. A rush of air met them, cool and sweet, very like Earth. They stepped through and found themselves on a catwalk, looking out across a gulf of air at a corresponding catwalk on the opposite side. Behind them, the portal hissed shut again. "Griffith Towers!"

"Brilliant!" said Crispin, going at once to the railing and peering over. Meera followed him and looked down, then quickly backed away. Ten stories below was an open atrium with a fountain, and little green things dotted here and there. Immediately above them was a modest dome, letting in the light of day.

"That's a rose garden down there," said Mother Griffith, in satisfaction. "Trees, too, would you believe it? No expense spared. Can't wait to see what the American sequoia will do in our gravity. I know it doesn't look like much now, dears, but give it a few seasons."

"Oh, no, it's very nice," said Crispin, and Meera conquered her fear of heights enough to take a second look. She had to admit that the place showed promise; while most of it was cast concrete, in pink and terra-cotta hues, the floors were cut and polished stone of an oxblood color. There was a great deal of ornamental wrought iron on all the balconies, and hanging baskets that were clearly meant to contain plants one day. Green flowering creepers, perhaps, in all that wrought iron, level after level descending...

The image of the Maelstrom came into her mind, the whirling vortex. Meera pulled back and gasped out, "Griffith Towers, you said. Will there be floors added going upward?"

"Lady bless you, no, dear! Far too dangerous, even when we get the Great Dome finished. Couldn't very well call it Griffith Hole-in-the-Ground, though, could we? It'll be nicer when the workmen's gear isn't lying all about," conceded Mother Griffith. "You'll have some noise to put up with for a few more months, but it'll all be finished by the time the baby comes. *Your* place is done, though. Come and see."

She led them along the catwalk to a door, beside which was the first window they had seen on Mars, something like a large porthole. Mother Griffith rapped on it with her knuckles.

"Expect you never thought you'd see one of these again, eh? Triple-glazed Ferroperspex. Anything happens to the dome, you'll still be safe inside. As long as you don't open the bloody door, of course," she added cheerfully, and palmed the

via panel. The door opened for them. “Got to program in your handprints before we leave, do remind me.”

They stepped through, and the lights came on to reveal a snug, low-ceilinged room. It had plenty of built-in shelves, though the phrase was more correctly “cast-ins”; everything was made of the ubiquitous pink cement, polished to a gloss, from the entertainment console to the continuous bench that ran around the walls. There wasn’t a stick of wood in evidence anywhere. The few pieces of freestanding furniture were made of wrought iron. An attempt had been made to add warmth, in the big Oriental rug on the floor and in the bright cushions on the bench.

“Front parlor,” announced Mother Griffith. “Kitchen and bath through there—yes, a real private bath, with running hot water and all! Everything state-of-the-art, see? And bedrooms off here—this one we made adjoining, thought you’d want that for the nursery. Come and see.”

Each room had a sealed airlock rather than a door. They stepped through into the bedroom and stared; for the bed was sunk into a recess in the floor, under a transparent dome of its own.

“More state of the art,” said Mother Griffith. “Anything happens, your own little dome keeps you safe with your own oxygen supply.”

“‘Anything happens’? What’s likely to happen?” asked Crispin.

“Oh, nothing very much, nowadays,” said Mother Griffith, with a wave of her hand. “Once the Great Dome’s finished, I don’t expect there’ll be many emergencies. If we get another Strawberry, it can’t flatten the place— that’s the clever part of building underground, see? Though it might dash a boulder or two against the atrium dome, so it’s best to take precautions. And it’s five years now since we had an asteroid strike, and that was way out in Syrtis Major, so—”

“Asteroid strike?”

“Scarcely ever happens,” said Mother Griffith quickly. “We never waste time worrying about ‘em, and you needn’t either. And aren’t they building a whole series of orbiting gun platforms up there, and bases on Phobos and Deimos to boot, all manned with clever lads who’ll pot the nasty things off with lasers to some other trajectory, if they don’t blow them up entirely? They are indeed.

“No, the only real inconvenience is the dust. There’s a lot of dust.”

“But,” said Meera. “Just supposing for a moment that an asteroid *did* hit—say it plummeted right through the atrium dome!”

“We’d lose the rose garden,” said Mother Griffith. “And I suppose anyone

who'd been silly enough to be down there without a mask on, but that's Evolution in Action, as we're fond of saying up here. You'd be snug in here with your door sealed, I expect."

"But we'd be trapped!" said Crispin.

"Not a bit of it! There's a hatch in the kitchen, opens out on the main-tenance crawlway. Leads straight back to the Empress of Mars, so you'd just stroll up and have a pint while the Emergency Team dealt with things. What, were you expecting aliens with steel teeth lurking round the water pipes? Not a bit of it; only alien you'll see is the fellow in the Tars Tarkas costume on Barsoom Day, bringing presents for the kiddies," said Mother Griffith firmly. "Come now, have a look at the nursery."

\* \* \* \*

Meera waited offstage with Exxene and Mona, the three of them in matching black leotards. They were growing slightly bored, waiting as they had been for fifteen minutes. Across from them, they could see Alf and Cochevelou, waiting for their cues, sitting quietly in a pair of folding chairs.

"I don't see why we couldn't have done it live," Mona complained. "I take really good care of my singing voice, you know? I could do it night after night. I'd be loud enough too."

"He couldn't have put in his special effects then, could he?" said Exxene. "We'll be louder. Scarier. Inhuman, like."

Meera shifted uncomfortably. Her leotard was a little tight. She wondered how much the baby showed. It was hard to think of herself as a scary, inhuman force of nature with a baby.

"I heard the first edit," she said. "It's wonderful. He's mixed in all kinds of sound effects, bits of music—all distorted so you can't quite recognize them, you know—and then our voices come in on the Philip Glass piece and we sound quite unearthly."

"I guess it's okay, then," said Mona. Exxene stamped her feet in impatience and did a back bend.

"When's this Poe going to get his arse in gear?" she muttered. Mr. Morton entered from stage right, waving his hands.

"Sorry! Sorry, all! Mr. Skousen is ready. Places, if you please."

Meera focused and thought of herself as a deadly goddess, a creature of the storm, a wall of water black as jet, devouring... or an asteroid approach-ing through

the black cold infinity of space... Here came Mr. Skousen in makeup as Edgar Allen Poe, and she was appalled at the thought of how much white pancake foundation they must have had to use. He had poise, though, and the big sad dark eyes for the role; he walked sedately to his mark, turned his little Hitler mustache to the audience, and said:

“‘You must get over these fancies,’ said my guide.”

“Your cue, Mr. Delamare,” said Mr. Morton. Crispin, in full makeup, came bounding out, rubbing his hands.

“‘For I have brought you here that I might tell you the whole story as it happened, with the spot just under your eye!’” he cackled, leaping so high he almost collided with the holo rig.

Meera winced. Mr. Morton pulled his white hands up to his mouth, as though he were about to stifle a scream of dismay; but he made no sound. Mr. Skousen, visibly startled, turned to stare.

“‘Look *out*, from this mountain upon which we stand, look *out* beyond the belt of vapor beneath us, into the *seaaaa!*’” Crispin declaimed. Mona stifled a giggle. Mr. Skousen cleared his throat, not quite suggesting disap-proval.

“‘I looked dizzily, and beheld a wide expanse of ocean,’” he said. “‘A panorama more deplorably desolate no human imagination can conceive. To the right and left, as far as the eye could reach, there lay outstretched, like ramparts of the world, lines of horribly black and beetling cliff, whose character of gloom was but the more forcibly illustrated by the surf which reared high up against it its white and ghastly crest, howling and shrieking for ever.’” He spoke in clear, somber, and entirely appropriate tones.

Mr. Morton forgot to cue the music, but the stage manager—Mona’s be-trothed, who had cleverly traded shirts with another miner so he could keep an eye on her—remembered anyway, and switched on the sound.

A menacing drone filled the air, disturbing currents of Bach’s Fugue in G, eddies of electronically modified voices.

“Oh, wow, is that Mi?” said Mona.

“We sound good,” said Exxene in surprise.

“Ladies, that’s our cue,” Meera reminded them, and they processed out from the wings, looking baleful as the three witches in the Scottish play, seductive as the mermaids in *Peter Pan*, deadly as the Guardswomen in *Sheemtu*. They prowled together in a tight circle upstage, and Exxene in particular got an unsettling light in her

eye.

“I’m going to kill somebody,” she said sotto voce.

“That’s the spirit,” said Meera, resolving to keep well out of arm’s reach of her.

They walked on, round and round, in a silence that deepened.

“Line?” said Crispin at last.

“Do you hear anyfing, do you see any change in da water,” said Alf helpfully.

“Do you *hear* anything?” said Crispin, lurching up to Mr. Skousen and jerking at his sleeve. “Do you *see* any change in the water?”

“Crumbs!” said Mona, sincerely shocked. “He’s *awfull*”

“Oh, dear, Mr. Delamare,” said Mr. Morton, “Mr. Delamare—I am afraid—this is not quite what I had in mind.”

“Sorry?” Crispin straightened up. “Oh. Too broad, isn’t it? I can tone it down a little.”

“Yes, please,” said Mr. Morton. “Go on. Your line, Chiring.”

Mr. Skousen drew a breath and said:

“As the old man spoke, I became aware of a vast and gradually increas-ing sound.”

Mr. Morton waved distractedly, and Durk raised the volume on the music. Mulet’s *Thou Art the Rock* was briefly recognizable. Mr. Skousen raised his voice:

“The vast bed of the waters, seamed and scarred into a thousand con-flicting channels, burst suddenly into frenzied convulsion—heaving, boiling, hissing—prodigious streaks of foam gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging eastward. These streaks of foam, spreading out to a great distance, took unto themselves the... er...”

“Jyartry motion of da subsided votrices,” said Alf.

“Thank you. Took unto themselves the gyratory motion of the subsided vortices, and seemed to form another, more vast.

“I looked down a smooth, shining, and jet-black wall of water, speeding dizzily around and around with a swaying and sweltering motion, sending forth to the winds an appalling voice. The mountain trembled to its very base.”

Mr. Skousen looked at Crispin, and cried: ““This, this can be nothing else than the great whirlpool of the Maelstrom!””

Crispin leaned in and, with his very, *very* worst SpongeBob titter, said, “I will tell you a story that will convince you I ought to know something of the Maelstrom! Ha-ha-*ha!*”

“Oh, dear God,” said Mr. Morton.

\* \* \* \*

“I didn’t think I was *that* bad,” said Crispin miserably. They were sitting together in their little state-of-the-art kitchen, over a couple of mugs of Martian-style tea. Yellow lakes of melted butter swam on its surface, but it was surprisingly soothing.

“You weren’t really,” said Meera. “It’s only that... it’s not a comedy, darling.”

“It could be,” said Crispin. “It could be played funny. Why doesn’t any-body see the humor in the thing? Nobody could see the humor in *The Dancing Daleks* either. Why are people so serious? Life isn’t serious.”

“No, but Art is,” said Meera. “Apparently.”

“The big guy, Alf, he’s amazing. We talked, you know, about all his ad-ventures on the road up here, really awful stuff he’s lived to talk about, and you should hear him! ‘So dere I was wiv, like, dis sand doon over me, and I finks to myself: How da hell am I gointer find out wewer Arsenal won da match? So I reckoned I’d better get a shovel or somefink, but dere weren’t no shovel, so I tore da seat off da lawy and dug out wiv it.’ It’s all in a day’s work to him! He was laughing about it!”

“That was nice; you got his voice exactly,” said Meera.

“These people live on the edge of destruction, all the time, and they manage by treating it all as a joke,” said Crispin. He folded his arms the way Mother Griffith did and cocked his head at Meera. ““Oh, my goodness no indeed, you don’t want to let a little thing like an asteroid hitting the bloody planet bother you! Just come up to the Empress for a pint, my dears!’ So why can’t Morton see how *really* innovative it would be to play this thing for laughs?”

“I don’t know,” said Meera. “But, you know, it’s his vision. And it’s his theater. And these people have been awfully good to us.”

“So I don’t suppose I could walk out of the show,” said Crispin. He gave her a furtive look that meant: *Could I?*

“No,” said Meera firmly. “This isn’t like walking out on *Anna Karenina*, where it didn’t matter because Mummy loaned us the money to get the car fixed. Or walking out on *From the Files of the Time Rangers*, when it didn’t matter because your aunt left you that bequest. It isn’t just a matter of scrap-ing by until one of us gets a commercial. You’re right; you can’t leave. *We* can’t leave. Remember why we’re here.”

“I know,” said Crispin, and sighed. He looked at her sadly. “Life has caught up with us, and it’s going to suck us in. I have to grow up now, don’t I?”

“Grow up?” Meera laughed, though she felt tears stinging her eyes. “Crispin, you’re having adventures on bloody Mars! You’re living in a *Star Wars* flat beneath the surface of another planet! Our baby’s going to think Father Christmas has four arms and tusks! Do you think growing up is going to be *boring?*”

He giggled, looking shamefaced.

“No, no, see, it’s all wrong. If I’m having adventures on Mars, I ought to be in my space suit, with my rocket ship in the background, and my clean-cut jaw sticking out to *here*—” He thrust his chin out grotesquely. Meera couldn’t help laughing. He jumped up on the table and struck an attitude.

“And I’d have a ray gun in either fist—and I’d be firing away and drop-ping alien hordes in their tracks, brrzzzt! Aiee! Die, space scum! ‘Retreat, my minionth! It ithThtar Commander Delamare! Curthe you, Earthman!’ And I’d have this gorgeous babe, naked except for some strategically placed pieces of space jewelry, clinging to my leg as I stood there. Played by the beautiful and exotic Meera Suraiya.” He smiled down at her.

“Would she be pregnant?”

“Of course she would,” said Crispin, jumping down and kissing her. “Got to repopulate the planet somehow.”

\* \* \* \*

“It’s standing room only!” said Mr. Morton, biting his fingernails. “Look! Look! Look at them out there!”

Cochevelou peered through the gap in the curtain. He spotted Mother Griffith in the front row, arms folded, with most of the tavern staff seated to either side of her. Behind them, in ranks all the way to the back wall, were haulers and miners.



Some were washed and combed and wearing their best indoor clothing; some had clearly come straight from their rigs, or from their mine shifts, for they wore psuits or miner's armor and had tracked in red dust on the purple carpet.

"Heh," said Cochevelou, leaning back. He took a small flask from an inner pocket, and had a sip before passing it to Morton, who drank and coughed. "Now, see, if you'd charged 'em for tickets like I'd told you, you'd have made a chunk of change tonight."

"No! These poor fellows would never have access to the finer things in life on Earth; I won't deprive them of the chance, here on Mars," said Mr. Morton. "The Arts shall be free! If only..."

"If only?" Cochevelou tucked away the flask and peered at him. It was dark backstage, and Mr. Morton's licorice-stick silhouette was barely visible; his pale face seemed to float above it, like the mask of tragedy.

"If only it wasn't for the human element," he said mournfully.

"Ah. The holotalent?" Cochevelou shrugged. "Well, and what if the boy's terrible? It ain't like this lot will know any better."

"There is that," Mr. Morton admitted. "But... I have built my theater. I am about to accomplish a thing of which I have dreamed my life long. I am a dramaturge, Maurice. My players are assembled, my Shrine to the Arts is filled... and..."

"And?"

*"What if it disappoints me?"* Tears stood in Mr. Morton's eyes.

Cochevelou stroked his beard, regarding Mr. Morton in wonder.

"Well," he said at last. "You wouldn't be the first man it'd happened to, would you? And after all, it ain't about you being happy, is it? It's about giving all them out front something that'll take their minds off dying up here."

"Of course it is," said Mr. Morton, and sighed. "But oh, the terror of dreams fulfilled! It must go on now, mustn't it? No way to wave a magic wand and crumble my theater back into the violet dust of unlimited possibilities?"

"No, there ain't," said Cochevelou. "The show's going on, and you're sitting in the little boat about to go over the edge into the whirlpool. Let's just hope there's something nice at the bottom."

"Ten minute call, Mr. Cochevelou," said Durk.

“Oh, dear,” said Mr. Morton, and ran for the wings. Then he remembered that he was supposed to give a speech before the curtain rose, and ran back. Cochevelou kept going, to the little dressing room he and Alf shared. Alf was dutifully smearing adhesive on his face, preparatory to attaching his false beard.

“You ought to grow a real one,” said Cochevelou, flipping the end of his own with pride.

“Can’t,” said Alf, looking at him in the mirror. “On account of the meds they gave me in Ospital.”

Cochevelou winced. “Not ever?”

“I don’t mind so much,” said Alf, fitting on the false beard. “This don’t arf tickle.”

“Well.” Cochevelou thumped him on the shoulder. “We’re almost on.”

Meera was standing quite still in the wings, summoning all the despair and anger she could. Exxene was walking in a tight circle, muttering, “Kill, kill, kill.” Mona was fussing with her ribbon-stick, looping it through the air in swirly arcs.

“I don’t like this one,” she whispered. “Can I trade with you?”

Meera simply nodded and handed over hers. She was exhausted; Crispin had had a bad case of performance nerves and hadn’t slept much the night before. He had tried not to wake her, but every time he had climbed into or out of bed, the hiss of the air seal had brought her to sharp consciousness and the certainty that an asteroid was plummeting straight for Griffith Towers.

Uncertain applause out front: Mr. Morton clearing his throat.

“I bid you welcome, friends, to the inaugural season of the Edgar Allen Poe Center for the Performing Arts! When future generations of Martians look back to this evening, upon which the shy Muse of Tragedy first ventured onto our rocky soil, they will undoubtedly...”

Crispin emerged from his dressing room, and would have looked hag-gard even without benefit of makeup. As he passed between the colored lights on his way to the wings, his photoreactive beard and wig nickered, black-white-black. He stepped into place beside Chiring, and nodded.

“What’s the house like?”

Chiring gave him two thumbs-up.

“That’s the ticket,” said Crispin, as cheerfully as he could. He began to bounce on the balls of his feet. “Energy-energy-energy, come on, Crispin, aah eeh eye ohh ooh. Run run run!” He drew up his fists and began to run in place.

“What are you doing?” whispered Chiring.

“Gearing myself up,” said Crispin, running faster and faster. “Never fails to kill those butterflies in the tummy. YeeOW!” He finished, as he always had, by launching himself into midair.

Unfortunately, he had forgotten about Martian gravity. Crispin soared up and straight into the blue can spotlight, which rang like a gong when it connected with his skull. He dropped like a sack of flour, out cold.

“Mr. Delamare!” Chiring stared down at him, aghast.

“What the hell?” Cochevelou leaned down from the curved framework meant to symbolize a fishing boat. “Oh. Drunk, is he?”

“No!” Chiring fell to his knees and slapped ineffectually at Crispin’s face. “Oh, no, Mr. Delamare—oh, look, he’s cut his scalp too—”

“What was that—” Mona ventured out from stage left, saw Chiring, and gave a stifled shriek.

“What is it?” Meera looked up, startled.

“Chiring and your husband are fighting! He’s knocked him down!” cried Mona.

“What?” Meera raced across the stage, closely followed by Exxene who, when she came in range, aimed a roundhouse blow at Chiring. Chiring yelped, ducking, and waved his hands in panic.

“What are you hitting *me* for? He hit his head on the light!”

“Cris!” Meera knelt beside him. “Oh, baby—somebody call the para-medics!”

“What paramedics?” said Cochevelou, climbing out of the boat frame.

“So what were you fighting about?” Mona asked Chiring.

“What do you mean, ‘what paramedics?’” said Meera, horrified.

“We weren’t fighting!” said Chiring.

“I mean, we haven’t got any,” said Cochevelou. He knelt beside Crispin too and thumbed open an eyelid. “Not to worry, ma’am. He’ll come round. Morton has a cot in his office; let’s stow him in there until he sobers up.”

“But he isn’t drunk!”

“But we’re about to go on!” said Mona.

All this while, the sound of Mr. Morton’s speech had been in the back-ground, but it had begun to falter. They heard hesitant applause and then Mr. Morton leaped through the curtain.

“What the hell is going on back here?” he demanded. He spotted Crispin, unconscious and bleeding on the floor, and his eyes went wide.

“He jumped up and hit his head and knocked himself out and I had nothing to do with it!” screamed Chiring. He stabbed a finger at the blue can spot. “It was that light right there!”

Mr. Morton made a sound suggesting that all the air had been knocked out of him. He fell to his knees.

“Aw, now, it’ll all come right, Morton dear,” said Cochevelou. He pulled out his flask, uncapped it and stuck it in Mr. Morton’s nerveless hand. “Just you drink up. Alf, give us a hand with old Brophy Bear.”

“But we’re about to go on!” said Mona.

“Yeah,” said Exxene. “What’ll we do?”

In tears, Mr. Morton shook his head. He tilted the flask and drank.

“Alf knows the part,” said Mona. “He knows all the parts.”

Everyone, including Alf, gave her a withering look. Quite clearly, they heard someone in the audience saying:

“Well? When are we going to see something?”

“Looks like it’s you, son,” said Cochevelou. He bent over Crispin and peeled off his false beard, but when he pulled the wig off too it was full of blood. “Oh, bugger.”

Meera leaped to her feet and advanced on him menacingly.

“I don’t care how you do it,” she said, “but you’re getting my husband to *some* kind of medical facility, and you’re doing it *right now*.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Cochevelou, backing away. He thrust the wig and beard at Alf, and turned and ran for his life. Meera knelt again beside Crispin, accepting a handful of tissues Exxene had fetched her to compress his wound.

“Scalp wounds bleed buckets,” she told Meera reassuringly. “It don’t mean nothing.”

“Oi!” shouted someone in the audience. “Are we going to sit here all shrackin’ night?”

“I might have known this would happen,” said Mr. Morton, tragically calm. “They’ll riot next, I know it.”

“No! The show must go on, right?” said Mona. “Come on, Alf! Look, Mr. Morton, see how nice he looks in the other beard? And you can wear *his* beard, and *you* can play the youngest brother, because there’s no lines—”

“Raise the damn curtain!” said someone in the audience.

“And—I know! I’ll go out and dance for them,” said Mona.

“In a pig’s eye you will, my girl,” snapped Mother Griffith, shouldering her way backstage with Cochevelou close behind her. She stopped short, gaping at Crispin. “Goddess on a golf ball! Why haven’t you sent him to the clinic, you idiots?”

The audience had begun to sing “Why Are We Waiting?” Mother Griffith turned and thrust her head through the curtain.

“Shut up, you lot, we’ve got an injured man back here!” she shouted. “Manco! Thak! Come up here and help us.”

The audience, cowed, fell silent at once, as two of Mother Griffith’s staff scrambled over the footlights and so backstage. In short order, Crispin was bandaged, tied into a chair, masked up, and carried away down the tunnel, with Mother Griffith leading the way.

“Wonder why they were fighting?” whispered a miner to a hauler.

“I hear those Hollywood types are temperamental,” the hauler whispered back.

The scurrying and cries behind the curtain faded away. For a moment it hung still, so motionless its folds might have been carved from stone; then it rose, to reveal Edgar Allan Poe standing on an outcropping of rock, before a backdrop of severe sky and a sea like black stone. He was sweating, looked frightened and miserable. He looked out at the audience and said:

“‘You must get over these fancies,’ said my guide.”

The old man, an immense old man like a walking hill, stepped forth from the wings. There was a disturbing glare in his eyes. Were those streaks of blood in his wild white beard? He looked at Poe and said quietly:

“‘For I ave brort you ere dat I might tell you da ole story as it appened, wiv da spot just under yer eye. Look out from dis mountain upon which we stand, look out beyond da belt of vapor beneaf us, into da sea.’”

Poe shrank visibly. He licked his dry lips and said:

“‘I looked dizzily, and beheld a wide expanse of ocean. A panorama more deplorably desolate no human imagination can conceive

Meera, sitting huddled on a chair in the wings, felt Exxene grip her shoulder.

“‘Come on, that’s us,” she said.

*May as well*, thought Meera, rising mechanically. *Show must go on*. She moved out with the others, into the eerie light, into the eerier music. She put into the slink of her walk all the hopelessness she felt. Mother cat, look-ing for a safe place to have its kittens. But there was no safe place...

She and Crispin had been pulled under by the circling tide of history, two emigrants like any others, in the long outward flow of life from the place where it started to its unknown destination. Some washed up on the distant shore and did well for themselves, became ancestors to new genera-tions of races. .. some failed to survive their first winters, and their names were forgotten.

She glanced into the audience on one pass around, and was shocked out of her reverie to see that they were watching raptly, leaning forward in their seats.

*Why, look at that; they’re completely into it*, she thought. Alf had stepped back from the rock, into the blue circle of light, and his beard and hair had gone to black; well, perhaps the stage effect had pleased them. Here came the rickety little boat effect, pushed by Cochevelou and Mr. Morton. Oh, no, look at the false beard hanging askew, under Mr. Morton’s chin! That was going to get a laugh.

It didn’t, somehow. Alf droned on without inflection, and the audience

strained to hear, but his accents weren't strange or comic, not to them.

““The roar of the water was drowned in a shrill shriek, like the sound of waste-pipes of many thousand steam-vessels, letting off their steam all together. We were not in the belt of surf that always surrounds the whirl; and I thought that another moment would plunge us into the abyss—down which we could only see indistinctly. The boat did not seem to sink into the water at all, but to skim like an air bubble upon the surface of the surge.

““The rays of the moon seemed to search the very bottom of the profound gulf; I saw mist, where the great walls of the funnel met together at the bottom. What a yell went up to the heavens from out of that mist! Our first slide into the abyss itself, from the belt of foam above, had carried us to a great distance down the slope. Round and round we swept—not with any uniform movement—but in dizzying swings and jerks, that sent us some-times only a few hundred yards—sometimes nearly the complete circuit of the whirl...””

And why shouldn't the audience be transfixed? This was *their* story; they heard it every day. They had all lived through something like this, here, on this alien soil. Pitiless dunes that buried you, suffocating wastes that froze you, bombs that might roar out of the stars unannounced and strike with an impact that smacked you into flattened and broken strata. Mars in all its casual malevolence, against whom one miscalculation meant sudden death and a freeze-dried corpse pointed out to gawking tourists.

Meera flung up her arms and danced, and the other two whirled after her. They were black goddesses, they were nightmare crones, they were the Fates, they were the brides of Death in this bleak place. *We are always at your elbow; never forget. The* members of the audience stared openmouthed, started forward when first one and then the other mariner was dragged down, seduced, pulled to his death out of sight.

At last, there was only Alf staring out, with the sweat shining on his moon face, real terror of remembrance in his eyes, and his voice had sunk to a hoarse late-night whisper that nonetheless carried to the back of the house.

““A boat picked me up. Those who drew me on board were my old mates, but they knew me no more than they would have known a traveler from the spirit land. My hair, which had been raven-black the day before, was as white as you see it now. I told them my story. They did not believe it. I now tell it to you.””

There was a profound silence. The lights went down.

Finally, there was an uncertain patter of applause, which abruptly swelled to thunder. The audience had struggled to their feet and were baying their approval. The ladies stared at one another, wondering. Mr. Morton, who had been helping himself

to the flask since his exit, looked up foggily.

“Good Lord,” he said. “They *liked* it!” He rose to his full height and nearly fell over. “Curtain call! Shoo! Shoo! Get out there!” He flapped his hands at them. Meera caught his arm and pulled him out too, and he stood between Alf and Cochevelou, blinking in the glare of the footlights.

Meera took Mona’s and Exxene’s hands, as much for support as tradition. A haze was in the air, for men were stamping now as well as applauding, with the dust flying up from their boots. She couldn’t see a face that wasn’t streaked with tears, white or black runnels cut through the red dust.

Someone was pushing through the crowd. Mother Griffith reached the front row, waving, shouting to be heard above the commotion, but still drowned out by the frenzied whooping.

*He’s okay*, she mouthed at Meera. Just so she wouldn’t be misinterpreted, she made a circle with forefinger and thumb and winked broadly, grinning. Mona hugged her and Exxene pounded her shoulder, which hurt rather a lot, but Meera scarcely noticed.

Her baby was dancing.

\* \* \* \*

Crispin was sitting up in the clinic bed, wearing an absurd gown with teddy bears on it, sipping from a juice box. His head was bandaged, but the color had returned to his face.

“It was a hit because I wasn’t in it, you know,” he said ruefully. “Luckiest thing that could have happened.”

“Oh, darling, you know you’d have been wonderful,” said Meera, stroking his hair back from the edge of the bandage.

“They said it was all right if we visited,” Mona announced, entering with Exxene. “You left before you got your presents! Are you feeling better, Mr. Delamare? Look what Durk had made for us! Isn’t he an old dear? There’s three!”

She held up a huge sweater. Across its bosom had been machine-embroidered: THE MAELSTROMETTES.

“Isn’t that funny? Except he had them all made triple-X-size for some reason. Mine comes down to my knees,” said Mona.

“Here’s yer roses,” said Exxene, holding out a bouquet. “Know what? I’ve



had five proposals of marriage tonight. Odd, ain't it?"

"And you know what else, Mr. Delamare?" said Mona. "Mr. Morton wants to do a comedy next, as soon as you're all recovered! Won't that be wonderful? It's this lost play or something about somebody named Ernest. At least, I think that was what he said. He was on his third glass of cham-pagne."

"A comedy?" Crispin brightened. A bell rang, out in the corridor.

"Crums, that'll be 'Visiting Hours Are Over,'" said Mona. "Come on, Meera, we'll walk you home. Good night, Mr. Delamare."

"I'll be here first thing tomorrow," said Meera, leaning down to kiss him. She took a rose from her bouquet and carefully threaded it through the straw of his water carafe.

Walking up the tube with Mona and Exxene, she realized that she didn't notice the methane smell now at all. And how bright the stars were, up there above the half-finished city on the mountain!

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