



Illustrated by Eli Bischof

# The Return of Tom Dillon

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Harry Lang

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**P**olice detective Hector Kovack couldn't take the bullet back.

He lay in the gray, predawn ooze of a hungover Martian Tuesday morning, twisting the thought with all his might. Or try-

ing. Drunk, hungover or sober, the truth wouldn't twist. No matter how many questions he answered for Internal Affairs or how long they kept him chained to a desk or how much bootleg gin he drank, Hector Kovack would always be the cop that blew his brother's face to smithereens with a .45. Big gun, especially for a scrawny native Martian trained solely in the use of nonlethal shock weapons.

He investigated a murder, the first ever in the history of human-settled Mars. He discovered the Jane Doe victim was his mother. She was tortured to death and buried in the desert by his brother Victor. He got a good, hard grip and pursued his brother with all restraint, discipline, and professionalism. It wasn't enough. On a dark street with no good options, Victor shot him in the chest. He grabbed the wrong weapon and shot back. . . .

Pale sunlight beamed through Hector's bedroom window, hit his eyes like missiles and woke up the snakes in his belly. He made it to the bathroom, counted out the pills to return him to the human race, washed his face, looked in the mirror.

Victor looked back. Sometimes he was in a pool of blood with a smoking hole between his eyes. Sometimes he was the little brother, laughing at a dumb dad joke or singing happy birthday.

Hector couldn't stand to go to bed at night because he knew what waited in his dreams, so he drank himself into a stupor and hoped it would turn into dreamless sleep. He couldn't stand to wake up in the morning or go in to the precinct because he knew what waited in the dull, dirty sunlight of rusty old Mars.

Hector Kovack couldn't stand it.

"How about some lunch?"

Lieutenant Ray McGill never stopped trying to feed his former partner. The stocky, gray crew-cut Earthling theorized that Martians were skinny because they were too stubborn to eat right. Mrs. McGill would be proud of her boy's efforts to spread health and happiness through food.

"I'm not hungry," Kovack said, busily pushing pixels across columns of reports nobody would ever read because that was his job. That and picking lint from the black-and-gray uniform he'd hung up when he made detective, then brushed off when he was put on probation.

"So what? You're never hungry. Stretch your legs, then. I'm going to the D-ville. Come with me."

He was a lieutenant, after all. Officer Kovack signed out, locked the computer, and grabbed his stick and crown. An empty holster was strapped securely to his thigh. Cops

called that a dunce cap.

Kovack's cozy cubby was neatly tucked into a corner of the precinct's basement, around the corner from IT and down the corridor from the evidence lockers. A dark, nasty place, no matter how many lights were turned on, with the same musty smell that haunted basements since the first humans dug the first holes to store extra stuff they didn't want cluttering the rest of the house. One of those lockers held a 3D-printed .45 caliber handgun with his fingerprints and a .32 with his brother Victor's.

McGill ignored the Emergency Exit Only! sign glowing above the airtight hatch opposite Kovack's dusty desk. The hatch opened onto the Underground Main, the broad tunnel providing access to the buried 75 percent of Planet Four Corporate Settlement D, one of eight settlements spreading themselves across the southern end of Chryse Planitia. If he wanted to, Kovack could scurry to and from his apartment without ever poking his head above ground. He usually wanted to.

It was a ten-minute walk along the Main to the D-ville Café. Now that he was back in uniform, Kovack strode proud and fierce, showing all the would-be Dillingers and Lex Luthors who was who and what was what. The very image of security, justice, and swift retribution. With an empty holster.

McGill made small talk about riding the mag-rail through the tunnels under the neighborhoods of Southwest Philadelphia or patrolling the transit platforms and access ways of his old beat in the ever-churning section called the Meadows. White noise for listening ears. There were things on McGill's mind. Roving surveillance was taken for granted in the streets above and the corridors below but was prohibited in places of business.

A healthy lunch crowd filled the small underground D-ville Café, but Margie Bulack, the energetic owner and barista, made sure McGill and Kovack had peace and quiet. She'd had some difficulties with the handsome but icy Detective Kovack in the past, but seeing him reduced to a uniform gave her no satisfaction. Margie wasn't above slipping him some bootleg gin when he seemed to need it. But never in front of the lieutenant.

"Here's the latest," said McGill after the drone flew away with their order. He leaned

forward, speaking low, like he was leaking classified information. "We found the remains of Janice Dupree and Ralph Jones. Same MO as the rest. They had to bust up a concrete pad under some new switchgear at the North 2 substation to dig them up. That makes twenty-three victims, which matches the number of cognizant avatars found by the Regional Attorney's net search. God willing, there won't be more."

"As if God was willing there should be any," said Kovack. Something tweaked his antenna. He scanned the upstanding faces of hardworking Martians and Earthlings on assignment chowing down on Bulack's fine vegetarian fare. "It's not my problem."

"Snap out of it, Hector," said McGill.

"I'll do that, Lieutenant. A week from next Tuesday. Excuse me."

McGill watched tall, dark, and morose Officer Kovack thread his way across the crowded floor with the same spidery gait as all the native Martians. The young man had been through a lot. Until a few months ago, Hector Kovack was just a good detective keeping order in a small town on the Martian frontier, investigating halfhearted financial crimes, identity manipulation scams, and the occasional bootleg gin distillery. Thanks to solid social engineering, the population virtually policed itself.

Then a long, black box got dug up at a construction site. The box contained a dead, mutilated Earthling. It was the first murder on Mars, and Detective Kovack happened to get the call.

Kovack quickly discovered that the body in the box was a victim of native Martian malcontents known as Hothouse Orchids. Their complaint was simple. They resented being born as weaklings confined to domes and tunnels, with no possibility of ever breathing the free air of Mother Earth. They were the oppressed residue of humanity's obsession with planetary expansion. They would suffer in silence but not in idleness.

Their options were limited, but their imaginations recognized no boundaries. They developed cognizant avatars as convincing online replacements for carefully chosen victims and elaborate narratives to cover up the physical absence of said victims. They were obsessed with twentieth-century American

Earth, source of the madness behind their predicament, so they adopted the colorful pa-tois of old gangsters and equipped themselves with the monstrous firearms of the time.

They fell upon their victims, tortured them to death, ripped out teeth, cut off fingertips and toes, and gouged microchips from heads and hands. Then they hid their unidentifiable remains under the frozen, irradiated dirt of their hateful little world.

All of this was uncovered by Hector Kovack, a cop doing his duty. He discovered these things just in time to stop an outbreak of general mayhem, the next step in the Orchids' unhinged program.

But not in time to save the people who mattered most. The Earthling in the box turned out to be his mother. Her killer was his brother. By the time the case was closed and his family destroyed, Kovack had been beaten once and shot twice. But all he could feel was guilt, failure, and more guilt.

Ray McGill understood all of it. His partner was reeling and only time could straighten him out. But there was no time. The Orchids were just warming up. Kovack was the world's leading expert on the what, how, and why of their operations. He would be needed, regardless of his emotional state or the petty antagonism of the political parasites infesting the command structure. McGill tried to keep him primed, but it was uphill all the way.

Kovack stopped at a table with a sole occupant, a sharp dresser with a pricey gray jacket and tie from Earth, a fat, jeweled ring on his left hand, slick black hair, smooth, moon-white complexion, and a physique of spun glass. The cane dangling from the edge of the table identified him as a visitor from Luna.

Kovack stood straight and glared.

"Is there a problem officer . . . Hector!"

Kovack did not smile at his childhood friend Tom Dillon, but he did hold out his hand. Dillon took the hand with a warm grip that was stronger than the average Lunie.

"Sit down, sit down! Tell me everything!"

"I'm here with my lieutenant," Kovack said. "He can't be left alone in a public place. When did you get back to Mars?"

"About three and a half months ago. I've been busy. I meant to look you up . . ." He let

the thought evaporate. "I'm sorry Hector. Sorry about your mom and sorry about Victor. I should've called."

"It's okay. You back for good?"

"Maybe," said Dillon. "I'm here on business. I'm a political campaign consultant. I was hired by Ozzie Gilchrist for the D-ville representative's race."

"Gilchrist?"

"Don't tell me you're voting for Barney Hobbs?"

"I haven't given politics much thought," said Kovack.

"I guess not. So, how're you doing?"

"They kicked me back into uniform till they decide what to do with me. Internal Affairs is investigating me. The Commissioner wants me fired, maybe prosecuted for manslaughter, but my captain doesn't. She has an in with the Regional Attorney. We'll see how that plays out."

"How do you want it to play out?"

"Damned if I know."

"They owe you a medal, pal," said Dillon. "Your Orchids are sprouting on Luna, too. I guess the great minds behind planetary expansion didn't figure on resentment from humans who could never live on Earth. Not everybody wants to be drafted for the Grand Enterprise. Go figure. They may look you up for advice."

"I haven't heard about that. Same MO?"

"MO?"

"Modis Operandi," Kovack clarified. "Mode of operating."

"I don't . . . I'm not familiar enough with details," said Dillon. "But people are scared." A molecule of a smile curled the left corner of his thin-lipped mouth. Kovack tried to remember if that signaled fear, nervousness, or something else.

McGill's get-back-to-work stare beamed like a beacon. "Time's up," Kovack said. "We should catch up. You free tonight?"

Dillon pulled his appointments up on his Dick Tracy device. "No," he said. "I have some campaign business tonight. Beam me your number. We'll figure something out. Really good to see you, Hector."

"You know him?" asked McGill, who had already massacred a bowl of minestrone and was now zeroed in on a plate of linguine.

"Tom Dillon. I grew up with him. His family moved to Luna eight or nine years ago. He's a

political consultant. He's here to get Ozzie Gilchrist elected to the Big Eight."

"You don't like Gilchrist?"

"That SOB'll get us all killed."

A spark of interest at last. "Do tell," McGill prodded.

"Don't play dumb, Lieutenant. Gilchrist is loud and proud for independence."

"You're not for independence?"

"Sure I am," said Kovack. "But we're already on our way. We'll get there in one piece if we just let it play out. Gilchrist is on record with stupid statements about 'understanding' the Orchids."

"What's wrong with that? You understand the Orchids."

Kovack gave him an inscrutable Martian stare. "You can have my pilaf," he said. He stood up and shoved his chair under the table. "I'm on the clock."

At 2:45 A.M., Kovack's Tracy screamed like the stupid girl in a horror vid. Whatever was at the other end of the call had to be better than the dream he was having.

It was McGill.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Get down to the precinct. Leave the uniform in the closet. You're back in clothes."

Kovack jumped. A call in the middle of the night meant something big. Getting his shield back without a fuss meant something bigger.

He stopped on his way out the door, opened a panel in the living room wall, and found the illegal gin stashed all the way in the back. He poured a hefty dose into a tumbler and sent it on its way. No questions asked, none answered.

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"Who found it?" asked Kovack, with a yawn that carried clearly over the radio. One of these days some genius would get a street named after him for figuring out how to get coffee to a man in an environmental suit.

It was a busy crime scene, way out in the low, moaning wind of the desert, with vehicles parked at an evidence-preserving distance and white, drone-borne lights blazing down on the victim at the center of it all. Officers and technicians made their careful sweeps, recorded their findings, then hung around until there were enough of them to fill a vehicle and head back to D-ville's air and warmth.

Others awaited the arrival of the Medical Examiner and her order to begin the gruesome work of packing up the frozen body and getting it to the morgue without breaking it.

McGill looked to the distant, comfortable glow of the domes, suspended between the black, featureless desert and the starry India ink sky. Away from the purplish-gray, glaringly lit naked woman buried to her midriff in the dull red regolith, colder than anything physics could account for. "PHASE 2" was branded across her chest, centered over her heart. Not the worst thing McGill had seen lately, but it filled him past his limit.

"Trucker," he said. "Hauling a load of beans from H-burg. He had to go off-road to get around a sinkhole."

"Not far off-road," noted Kovack. "They weren't trying to hide this one. Do we know who she is?"

"Brenda Hobbs," answered McGill. "Representative Hobbs' daughter, twenty years old Terrestrial."

"They didn't take her chip? That's odd. Cause of death?"

"Bruises on the throat. The ME will have to make it official but she was obviously strangled. What else do you want to know?"

"Why you're acting like a detective and reporting to me like I'm a lieutenant."

"Don't get used to it, Junior," said McGill. "I got the call so I beat it out here posthaste. Once I saw what this was, I woke up the captain so she could authorize your return to duty. Now that you're oriented, you're just a plain old detective again."

"Suits me," said Kovack. Which it did. He felt like an old machine warming up after sitting idle. It was good to be back at real work. "Anything underground?"

"Hey, Hal," called McGill with a wave of his arm. A technician in a black suit and a Mobility Assist Unit marched over like a robot in an old 2D. "You finish that depth sweep?"

"Yeah," said the tech, bringing the report up on his sleeve screen. "She's wearing an anklet on her left leg. She's intact; no mutilation apart from the brand. No clothing. As far as we can tell, no wounds of any kind."

"What about the surrounding area?" asked Kovack.

There was a brief pause, like Technician Hal was required to wonder why the disgraceful

Detective Kovack was allowed to ask him questions. "Nothing but dirt, Detective," he answered.

"You're sure about that?"

"Read it yourself." The tech beamed him the underground scans.

Kovack took a quick look then said, "Run it again. Take it down another four or five feet, especially under the body."

"Why?"

"Because he said so," explained McGill. "That's why."

Ten minutes later, Technician Hal was back with his new and improved report.

"You called it, Detective," he said. "There's a bundle of stuff, clothing and personal affects, four and a half feet directly under the body. How did you know?"

"She didn't walk out of the dome in her birthday suit," Kovack answered smoothly. "Once she was out here, they had to do something with her stuff. Burying it under her was the easiest thing. A lot of evidence. Almost worked, right Hal?"

After the technician quietly went back to his work, McGill said, "That was some quick-thinking BS, Hector. The rest of the Orchids' victims didn't walk out in birthday suits either. You didn't like his attitude so you wanted to show him who was boss, am I right?"

"Paid off, didn't it?"

Another police rover pulled up. Dr. Wanda Stoltz, D-ville's Medical Examiner, climbed out, gave Lieutenant McGill a go-to-hell apology for taking so long to get there, then began her preliminary examination. Dr. Stoltz was a fairly typical middle-aged second gen, with the proportions of a pencil, tough, wiry limbs, ever-present spectacles because eyes had a hard time evolving, and a super-analytical mind that would be the envy of any thinking human.

Most of all she had a truly bad attitude, for which Kovack adored her. She could be heard swearing fluently in two languages over the open channel.

"Due to the condition of the body, I can't estimate the time of death without tests, but it was definitely under twenty-four hours," Stoltz reported to McGill. "She's frozen stiff. Hard to assess how far rigor has advanced. She was strangled, all right. I'd say she was still warm when they planted her. They may have

had under a minute to set up this display before she lost all flexibility. Somebody may have held her erect while somebody else filled in the hole. Abrasions under the arms are an indication. Some defensive cuts on the arms. . . .”

“Which could mean DNA from the killer?” Kovack asked hopefully.

“Which could mean DNA from the killer,” affirmed Stoltz. “But won’t. From the configuration of the bruises around the throat and the small window to get her into the ground, I assume the killer was in a suit, wearing pressure gloves, probably the size conforming, maximum dexterity ones they use for working outdoors. He didn’t bleed or leave skin or sweat on her, if that’s what you’re after. I’m guessing they brought her here in a rover, stripped her, buried her belongings, then killed her. They could have killed her before they went EVA to bury her stuff, but I figure they’d want her alive and terrified as long as possible. Given the Orchids’ MO I assume she wasn’t molested but I’ll check. We’ll have to excavate her like she’s made of glass and wrap the sections of the body as they’re uncovered. It’ll take hours.”

“What about the brand?” Kovack asked. “Before or after she was dead?”

“Before.”

“Chemical burn?” asked McGill. “Laser?”

“Far as I can tell, good old hot metal,” answered Stoltz. “Like she was cattle.”

“That checks all the boxes,” McGill said to Kovack.

“Vehicle tracks?”

“Obliterated by the bean truck. We scanned the area, back up to the road, which is fused regolith. Analysis may distinguish another set of tracks, but nobody’s holding their breath. Anything else you need to see?”

“Not till forensics goes through her stuff,” said Kovack. He stood looking at the young woman, dead for no good reason, her face twisted into a purple atrocity. He couldn’t help thinking what it was like for her to be going about her bright young life right up till the instant a monster dragged her out to the desert and wrapped his big filthy hands around her throat. “I guess God wasn’t willing.”

“Now it’s your problem,” McGill said.

Regional Representative Barnett Hobbs was a rugged specimen, tough where it was good

to be tough, tender and unspoiled at the center. The kind who would hit you over the head if it meant knocking real sense into you and fixing your life. Having come from an engineering background, he had no taste for the game of politics but stayed up nights thinking about dome maintenance and how to keep all the water fresh and all the people safe, happy, and productive. Running for office was the last thing he wanted to do. That’s why he got the votes in the last two elections for Chryse Regional Representative for Planet Four Corporate Settlement D.

For his trouble, he got a murdered daughter.

Hobbs sat like an empty suit in his cozy square living room. An extravagant fire crackled on the big screen, throwing heatless light and shadows around the small, orderly space. Belonging to the most consequential legislative body on Mars did not get him a mansion; there weren’t any. He’d managed to get dressed and pull a comb through his fine, brown hair and wash the streaks of salt from his face before the second wave of police came. His wife lay in the bedroom sleeping off tranquilizers, dreaming about the darling girl she’d never see again.

“Everybody loved Brenda,” Hobbs told McGill and Kovack helplessly, as if saying it might make her a little less dead.

“What about you, sir?” asked Kovack. “Any enemies?”

“I didn’t think so. Opponents, obviously. Some don’t mind playing rough. But this . . . Do you think it was the Orchids?”

“It’s too early to tell,” answered McGill. “What can you tell us about her movements last night?”

“We were all here, the campaign staff, that is, planning events until 6:00. She left here to get dinner with friends.”

“Did she come home?” asked McGill after taking down names.

“No, but that wasn’t unusual. She frequently stays with her friend Sharon Delancey, just for a change. She’s on the waiting list for new digs. In the meantime, we treat . . . treated her as an adult.”

“Can you think of anything that might help us?” McGill said. “Had she made new friends lately? Met any new people, possibly dated anybody you don’t know? New activities?”

"She was a real butterfly," Hobbs said. "Interested in everybody and everything. Including my campaign. She was excited about being on staff. I don't know how I can go on after this . . ."

The two detectives looked at each other. One of them had to say it.

Kovack spoke up. "Do you intend to drop out of the race?"

"Well, I . . . That is . . ." His limp eyes were flat on the floor. His hands were empty, threadbare gloves draped over the arms of the chair. The world couldn't end soon enough.

Then power was restored. His head came up, with eyes sharp and clear, catching the glare of the digital fire, adding the missing heat. He gripped the arms of the chair like Arthur drawing the sword, John Henry lifting his hammer.

"No," he said. "Hell no! If she died for politics . . . East help them!"

The eastern sky was hazy steel blue when the two detectives left the ragged shadows of the residential block and started down the cold, empty street. Kovack hadn't taken a good look at the sky in weeks, not since the night he'd chased his brother down a dark alley and did what he did. The wound in his chest was as healed as it would get, but the damp morning air made it radiate a dull, throbbing ache. He sidestepped the recurring wish that his brother had aimed more to the left. Those thoughts were wearing themselves out, but Victor would never leave him alone.

"6:45," noted McGill. "I'll alert Chryse Central so they can tell the precincts to beat the bushes for Orchids, then I'll get IT started analyzing safety and security videos. With a little luck we can reconstruct most of Ms. Hobbs' movements. Irene Acuna can track down the friends and get their statements."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Solve the case," McGill said. "Hopefully before any more candidates' daughters get it."

"The link between the Orchids and politicians is pretty tentative at this point, don't you think?" said Kovack, his breath curling in fine white puffs of mist. Primary humidity control was down for preventative maintenance, and the secondaries were due for an upgrade. "The MO is radically different. It doesn't seem likely they'd go from 'burn it all down' to partisan dogfights in just a few weeks."

"Orchids are the only killers we've seen so far," McGill said. "It's all we have to go on. We know they plan big and move fast. Go to Angel of Mercy and see what you can get out of them. Then have a talk with that friend of yours . . . Dutton?"

"Dillon."

"Dillon. See if he knows just how well Ozzie Gilchrist 'understands' the Orchids."

"That's a big jump, Lieutenant."

"Not where I come from, sonny."

The psychiatric unit of the Angel of Mercy Hospital was located on the building's top floor, which stuck up out of the ground like the roof of an ancient tomb waiting to be looted by eager archeologists. Planet Four had come up short of funding at a critical point in the hospital's construction. They made a deal with the Catholic church, who ended up with a plaque in the lobby and the right to name the place but nothing else, not even a statue of St. Whatsisname. The walls were smooth, glassy black on the outside, transparent on the inside, with a clear dome on top. It was hoped that the sight of sky, sand, and sun would inspire patients in their struggle for sound minds and happy hearts. No exterior doors above ground. Freedom was to be earned, not seized by a mad dash or insane plan.

Hector Kovack had done a stretch in the unit while recovering from the gunshot and all that went with it. Psychiatric triage, with strict orders for continued treatment, which Kovack blew off. Maybe someday he'd want to be well, but for now, crippling guilt and diminished self-confidence felt right. With or without help, nobody would get him back on his feet but him.

There was no such thing as crime on Mars, only the unmutual actions of unbalanced minds in need of adjustment. That meant no prisons, leaving the psychiatric unit of the Angel of Mercy Hospital as the only place in D-ville secure enough to confine killers.

Kovack spent his morning interviewing Orchids awaiting trial. Or trying to. Some wouldn't talk, some couldn't. One, former police IT Director Joel Osterhaus, just laughed at every single thing Kovack said. Joel was convinced he had not actually been caught. Such a thing could not happen to a man of his brilliance and resourcefulness. They were working

him over with a mind game, probably a deep simulation. Detective Kovack was an avatar and he could go process himself right back to the memory bank they'd built him from.

Next was Frank Dupree, a psycho who beat up Kovack before getting beaten up harder by Kovack. He'd done a lot of the nastier work in the Orchids' quest for vengeance or justice or whatever they told themselves they were after. Dupree had plenty to say before his arrest but had not said one word since. He was useless.

That left Judy Jones.

Jones was a special case, kept under extra-special lock and key. She was under the care of Dr. Adrian Galt, an Earthling more interested in studying his Martian subjects than helping them. Someday he would publish his grand, seminal work on the inevitable cognitive degradation endemic to long-term, deep-space colonization. As soon as he could make the facts fit the theory.

"The answer is no, Detective," Galt said with emphasis. When he said "no," his head bobbed like it was a hammer and the word was a nail. He meant to be forceful but his round, smooth face, twinkling eyes, and bald, egg-shaped head reminded Kovack of a baby. "Ms. Jones is at a critical stage in her treatment. A lot of good work could be undone by a visit at this time. She goes to trial in a month. That's not much time to bring her into compliance with competency requirements."

"Not my problem, Doctor," said Kovack. He was in no mood to negotiate. News of Brenda Hobbs' murder was now public. Clocks were ticking. "Ms. Jones has information essential to our investigation. I could get a court order." He could not get a court order. The threat was empty as an android's heart.

Whether moved by civic duty or sheer lack of stamina, Dr. Galt relented. "Follow me," he said, heaving a masterfully performed sigh. Through a secure door they went, into a big, round room flooded with amplified sunlight, furnished with tables, comfortable chairs, plush sofas, broad-leafed potted plants. A happy place for souls who neither knew nor cared what happiness was. Patients in pastel pajamas and therapists in lab coats sat at the tables playing therapeutic games or lounged in the sunlight, keeping their voices down.

Dr. Galt passed quickly through the doorway, ignoring greetings from the patients.

"Ms. Jones is halfway through calibration," he explained. "We have to observe the operation of the implants over a period of weeks and make adjustments, which is why stimulation is tightly controlled."

"I'll try to keep it dull," cracked Kovack.

The doctor led him to a small, comfortable consultation room with a transparent wall looking out on a peaceful, well-kept garden. Sunlight lay like dust on lacy Japanese maples, clumps of maiden grass and purple flowers.

Judy Jones, self-styled mastermind of the D-ville Hothouse Orchids, sat at a small table like a cold lump of clay. Her head, which had been completely shaved, sprouted ugly patches of mousey stubble. There were Frankenstein stitches on either side. Her eyes were dark, dry wells, with all the luster of sandblasted concrete. The sharp odor of disinfectant soap was faint but inescapable.

Kovack did his best not to recall their first meeting during the investigation. It was a fool's errand. Jones had taken the initiative and dropped by his apartment one night to size him up. He couldn't recall much of what was said. He only remembered the breezy sweep of coppery hair across her shoulders, the unnerving fragrance of exotic flowers from a distant world, and the ice-and-fire that glittered in her hard, sapphire eyes.

Dr. Galt made a grand show of instructing the detective how to speak to his patient and insisting Ms. Jones' nurse remain present. Kovack insisted back that he had to talk to Jones alone. Doctor and nurse huffed out of the room.

Kovack sat down across the table from her, figuring how to play it. He was nothing to her but a cop. Even that wasn't simple.

"Hello, Ms. Jones."

She responded like a statue.

"Remember me? I'm Victor's big brother."

She inhaled, a little more than a statue would. Maybe hell began to smolder at the bottom of the well of her eyes.

"The cop who shot your boyfriend."

Her killer eyes snapped onto his, and they were hot. Hot enough to shake him.

"Judy," she croaked, starting just above a whisper but gaining force like an approaching eruption. Her voice was like a rusty nail being pulled from a rotting old plank. "My name is Judy! Nobody in this rathole calls me by my damn name! It's JUDY!"

"Hello, Judy. I'm Detective . . . I'm Hector."

"Go to hell, Inspector Hector."

"I have to do some things first," said Kovack. "You have to help me."

"You killed your brother, Cain," she said, like that explained everything. She spoke with the force of a run-down battery. Her energy came and went.

"You killed your mother and father."

"That's different," she said, supremely convinced that it mattered. "Everybody has to kill somebody. Victor killed his mother. Frank killed his mother. Moms take it on the chin, huh? Joel Osterhaus . . ."

"The cell leader," Kovack clarified, knowing the effect it would have.

"Technically accurate," she said, through clenched teeth, "but the capers were all *my* ideas. They all followed *me*. Good old Joel killed his boyfriend. Yeah, we got *those* here. Got special permission. His parents went back to Earth, out of reach. He had to make do . . ."

"To join the club, right? Pass the test and fight for Mars, right Judy?"

"You betcha, Quisling. I told you to look up Quisling, remember? You ever look it up?"

"You weren't around to help me spell it."

Her eyes started to shine, like flowers watered just in time. Maybe hell was cooling off. Maybe he'd moved her to a different hell, one closer to his.

"Can you answer a few questions?" he asked. "Strictly business?"

"Don't ask if I forgive you," she said, two glittering beads evaporating at the corners of her eyes. "That's not business."

"What did we miss?" Kovack asked. "How many Orchids are there in D-ville?"

"You got us all, copper."

"But you know where to get more, right? You must have recruiters in G-boro or F-town?"

She gave him a weak but cagey smile. That was good. Kovack wanted her to feel cagey.

"That scare you?"

"Not much. But it does make me wonder. What if somebody wanted to look like an Orchid without being one?"

"What . . . ? Oh, I get it," she said. "You want to know how to infiltrate. Forget it. Nobody gets into the inner sanctum without taking the big step."

"Killing somebody?"

"Observed and verified," she said. Now she was wide awake.

"Somebody close?"

"Flesh and blood. Then replace them with a cognizant avatar so nobody knows they're gone. It takes . . ." She had to think about what it takes. "It takes a kind of strategic thinking to pull it off. You know all about that, right Mr. Big Bro?"

Kovack had been fooled by his own mother's cog for months. Jones could take all the punishment the system could dish out and hit back twice as hard. He had to give her that.

"And after the big step?" asked Kovack.

"Strictly business, like you said. No departures from the plan, not never. Oh, we'll tweak the cogs, all right. Make them untraceable. Always room to maneuver in cyber-land. We'll make clones, too, for physical presence where needed. We're taking the planet from the inside, Junior. No stopping it. . . ."

"What's Phase Two?"

"Never heard of it."

"A fallback plan?" suggested Kovack. "An adjustment, now that the Orchids have been cracked?"

"Still never heard of it," insisted Jones. "We're deep and on course. We don't panic just because some flatfoot gets lucky."

"Maybe it's something new," Kovack said. "The Orchids are under new management. Maybe you're just not in the know."

"Could be." She was drained. "But I'll always know more than you."

"What's the endgame, Judy? The ultimate aim of the big tantrum?"

Judy laughed. Her drugged-out laughter sounded like a bullfrog with asthma.

"To raise hell," she said. "As long as Earthlings and stooges wipe their big feet on our planet."

"Then what? What happens after you chase them all away?"

"Nothing happens. We lose our last reason to live. Eventually, the Earthlings come back and it starts all over again. The end."

She closed her mouth and kept it closed.

Dr. Galt was waiting for him outside the consulting room. "Did you get what you wanted?" he asked, staging one last hissy fit to communicate his pitiful disdain.

"Does anybody?" said Kovack. "Listen, Doctor." He paused, looking at the closed door

like he had X-ray vision. “Take care of her, would you?”

“That’s what I’m paid for,” the doctor said. Under his breath he added, “Keep all the animals clothed and in their right minds.”

Kovack picked up some coffee at a kiosk and took it back to his desk at the precinct. His real desk in the big office with the big windows, cops and managers, not the one down in the dungeon.

His computer was bursting at the seams with information on the Hobbs investigation. Detective Irene Acuna had filed a number of statements and was out collecting more. Preliminary report from Dr. Stoltz. As expected, the victim had not been sexually assaulted. There were marks not detected at the scene, maybe significant, maybe not. More information to follow. Forensics had a list of the articles buried at the scene. A quick scan piqued his interest, but he left it for later, when he could give it his full attention. There were acknowledgements from all precincts but no leads. Safety and security monitors had a good, strong track on Brenda Hobbs until 8:22 P.M., when she got lost in a crowd in the recreational section and vanished into thin air. Nothing yet about suspicious vehicles leaving or entering the dome.

He was setting up a report correlating all the collected data so far when his Tracy peeped. A message from Tom Dillon.

*FREE TONIGHT. D-VILLE, 6:15. OK?*

OK Kovack responded. It was not okay. He’d been detecting and investigating since 2 A.M. He was tired, like an old man. Time served on his backside in the dungeon made him flabby, and it took more than a few weeks of goofing off to truly recover from a hole in the chest. And he didn’t look forward to welcoming his childhood friend home with an interrogation.

It was Wednesday night, Margie Bulack’s night off. The D-ville’s floor-to-ceiling screens showed a view of Lyon, west across the Saône just after sunset. Warm, golden lights streamed placidly across a bridge, and the low rumble of clean, quiet vehicles could be heard by any who cared to listen. Autumn was in the air, its rich, drowsy fragrance mingling with aromas of basil, sage, cloves, and ginger, but mostly basil. That meant Henri Duvall,

Margie’s business partner and cook, was in charge.

Tables had been removed from a corner, where a spotlight shown down on Nina Simone swinging *Mood Indigo*, free of the pain and conflict that drove her a century-and-a-half ago. Henri Duvall knew the value of her surviving beauty. Margie Bulack wished he wouldn’t sacrifice space for paying customers every time she took off.

Hector was a few minutes late, but that was okay because he was an officer of the law and had important things to do. It also meant he’d left work at five, gone home, and fallen asleep before he could set an alarm. Blind chance roused him in time to keep the date.

The crowd was a sparse, middle of the week bunch, mostly overpaid Earthlings reluctant to retire to the sterile confines of compact, underground quarters for the night. Kids who didn’t want to go to bed. Martians weren’t so frivolous. They kept respectable hours and a good grip on their digital nickels and dimes.

Dillon and his cane sat waiting at the same table as the day before. He wore different expensive clothes; a tailored Nehru-style jacket of burgundy sharkskin fabric, charcoal gray shirt, and indulgently cuffed trousers. Martians typically had one suit of clothes for work and one or two for leisure, styled for durability and ease of care. Clothing cost money and took up space. One set of glad rags from Earth was unusual. Two was showing off. Whatever a campaign consultant did, it sure did pay.

“I was afraid I got stood up,” Dillon said with a double-edged smile. He was happy to see an old friend but not used to being kept waiting.

A frosty pitcher of low-dose sangria sat on the table, the legal limit for alcohol everywhere in the Solar System but Earth. The frontier was a force multiplier when it came to consequences for impaired judgement.

“I was unavoidably detained,” said Kovack, filling a glass and scanning a menu. “Try the pilaf. Henri puts his heart and soul into it.”

“I think I’ll get a burger. Not in the mood for heart and soul. So. Ten years?”

“About eight and a half,” Kovack said. “Closer to four and a half, Mars Independent Time.”

“Aka Solar Chaos Time, according to the masters on Mamma Earth. Too long, however

you measure it. How's the Internal Affairs thing going?"

"It's not going, at least for now," Kovack answered. "I'm back in CID."

"You're working on the Hobbs case?"

"Everybody is."

"Then I guess you've seen my statement to Detective Acuna?"

"Yours and half of D-ville," said Kovack. He took a sip of the thoroughly unsatisfying sangria. "I thought we were going to catch up on old times."

"So we are. Say, you should try Luna." Same old Tom. When they were kids he could barely make it to the end of one story before jumping in at the middle of the next one. "You know how the Earthlings are like, these super strong giants here on Mars? That's how we are on Luna."

"Until an Earthling shows up."

"Well, yeah," Dillon acknowledged, "but at least we're in second place."

"Strange attitude for a political campaign consultant," said Kovack. "How did you get into that racket? Last time I saw you, you were a gadget geek, dead set on engineering. All your screen savers were exploded views of terrestrial tractors and Mars rovers. I don't remember you having any interest in politics."

"Still don't." The drone had just left the kitchen with their food. Dillon tracked it the whole way, like a kid waiting for ice cream. "Between me and you, I couldn't care less if Ozzie wins, from a political perspective. They're all whores. But I'm a competitor who happens to have the ideal skillset for this kind of work."

"Which is?"

Dillon made Hector wait while he chewed up a chunk of V-burger. "Reading the crowd, knowing the right story to tell and being comfortable telling it. Verbal jujitsu when needed."

"Changing minds?"

"Ha!" Dillon nearly sent a sweet potato fry flying. "Not how it works. People believe what they want to believe, none more so than the 'open minded.' The play is to figure out who believes what, who does the client the most good and what story to tell them."

"So . . . convictions?" said Kovack. "You have any of those?"

"Yes I do," answered Dillon. "You can't be a human being without convictions. You know

that better than most. You also know they cost you plenty and buy you nothing. Convictions and two digibits gets you a cup of coffee at the D-ville. Better coffee than Luna, I can tell you that. Excuse me." He stood up. "Killed a bunch of sangria waiting for you to get here. Be back."

Kovack took a spoonful of pilaf, then noticed the cane left dangling from the edge of the table. Why did Dillon even use that thing? Two months was plenty of time for a healthy Martian to reacclimate. Probably a style decision.

He picked it up. The cane was smooth and black, with a golden tip at the bottom and a golden dragon's head handle. Nice and heavy. Clothes horse Dillon certainly wouldn't leave it in a closet.

"My turn," said Dillon, sliding back into his seat. He took the cane and re-dangled it. "How in the world did you end up a cop? I thought you wanted to be a geologist. I mean, Victor was supposed to follow your mom into computer science, you were going to go dig up the ice caps like your dad, rest his soul."

"Not many Martians have the physical stamina for the kind of field work Dad did. And, as it turns out, there's plenty of dirt to dig up right here in D-ville."

"There's that literary flare," Dillon said happily. "You still reading those old detective novels? You were quite the snob about which writers were good and which ones were hacks."

"I was a dumb kid," Kovack answered. "I don't get much chance to read fiction. How about you? Are you still reading classics or did you stop at Machiavelli?"

"I never bothered with Machiavelli. Way too complicated. I just go with my instincts."

"About which stories to tell."

"About reading the crowd," said Dillon. "Take the way you got us off the investigation onto 'old times' then questioned me about my work. You did that to control the conversation. Maybe it's a habit because you're a cop. Or, maybe I'm being interrogated. Which is unnerving since I already gave a statement."

"What do you think it means?"

"What do I think it means . . . ?" mused Dillon, looking up at the plump stars beaming their golden happiness down to the streets of Lyon. "Can't mean I'm a suspect. You know

David Han and I ran into Brenda Hobbs and Sharon Delancey in Rec Sec shortly before she disappeared. We're acquainted well enough to wave and say hi, which we did. Small-town politics makes us one big happy family. You know my movements for the rest of the night. Feel free to access the watchdog log on my door if you need to know the precise second I got home. Person of interest? Refer to my previous statement. I give up. What does it mean?"

"How well do you know Ozzie Gilchrist?"

"Ozzie? I wondered why you dropped the Mars *Independent Time* reference. Ozzie's a teddy bear. Why do you ask?"

"I hear bears have claws and Gilchrist has a history," said Kovack.

"Violent?" Dillon chomped some more burger. Kovack assumed he was avoiding eye contact.

"Not personally. But he does like to heat things up with inflammatory rhetoric."

"You've heard of the First Amendment, right?" said Dillon. "You know, the one they adopted from the U.S. Constitution for the Fundamental Declarations of the Martian Colonies?"

"I have," said Kovack, putting down his spoon and leaning across the table. "Honest people treat it with respect. Stormtroopers treat it like a human shield. Where would you say Ozzie Gilchrist falls on that continuum?"

"Wait . . . wait. I thought the Orchids were responsible. . . ."

"That's one theory," Kovack said. Was Dillon angry? Confused? Putting on an act? "Gilchrist is pretty cozy with the Orchids. Or pretends to be. Why is that?"

"He doesn't pretend anything," Dillon answered. "He only says he understands their frustration. They're a prop for his campaign. What theory are *you* working on?"

Kovack relaxed. "It's not even a theory," he said. "I figured if Barney Hobbs was demoralized enough he might drop out of the race. Gilchrist isn't bashful about identifying with the Orchids, qualifiers and disclaimers notwithstanding. Maybe violence is in his toolkit."

"Really, Hector? You think Ozzie would gamble on murder just to represent 7,500 people?"

"Are you sure he wouldn't gamble on mur-

der to be in the right place when Mars goes independent?"

"Now who's reading Machiavelli? At least the CliffsNotes. Okay, Ozzie is smart. I'll give him that. He's tough and ambitious but he's no killer. I don't think he has the guts. I know he doesn't have the imagination."

"The Gilchrist family is rich," said Kovack. "Ozzie can pay people to have guts. And imagination."

Kovack watched the faint color blossom across his friend's cheeks. He could almost time how long it would take for the wave to surge, crest, and subside.

"I'll give Ozzie your resume," Dillon said, cold and hard, the red not quite gone. "You have plenty of both."

"Forget it," said Kovack, picking up his spoon. "We have to turn over every rock. Especially on a case like this one."

"Why especially?"

"This guy is sharp. That's why we defaulted to the Orchids. They're the experts. If it's not the Orchids, then we have a lot of homework to do."

"Speaking of homework, you still owe me an essay on android rights," Dillon said brightly. Enough shop talk. "Remember that book report on *A Tale of Two Cities* I wrote for you for Ms. Shipe's class?"

"What are you talking about?" Not exactly the way Kovack remembered it, but it was a long time ago. "I wanted help, not a ghost-writer. Also, I paid you in calculus. You . . . you didn't really think Madame Defarge was the hero, did you?"

"Of the book? Of course not," said Dillon. "I just wanted to see if I could make the case. I guarantee you would've gotten an A for originality if you didn't stay up all night rewriting it. Although, in the real world, she was on the winning side, wasn't she? Power counts, my friend, even in the hands of little old nobodies. And you saw what Carton's convictions got him."

"Sydney Carton wasn't driven by convictions," Kovack argued. "He barely had any. He was driven by love."

"Until he was driven by oxcart." Dillon always wanted to be king of the last word. Maybe that's how he got to be a highly paid consultant.

There was no more mention of Martian

murder or politics. They were both glad about that.

“The victim’s name is David Han, a medical student at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine, remote extension, major in medical technology. He opened his door to a couple of friends who turned out to be masked intruders, one male, one female. They subdued him, gagged him, stripped him to the waist, branded him, then shot him through the left temple with a nine-millimeter handgun. Not silenced. Neighbors heard the shot. They called Emergency Response, thinking it was an explosion or a pressure breach.”

“Eyewitnesses?” asked Kovack. Another crime scene, this time in a secure home with half a cup of black coffee next to a screen comparing causes of orthostatic intolerance in native Martians and Earthlings, a pair of goldfish in a tank taking up more than its fair share of space, personally significant knickknacks on shelves and a paper poster for the Gilchrist campaign hanging on the wall. A ragged hole in the candidate’s left eye showed where the bullet ended up.

The murder took place at lunchtime, in broad daylight, a few hours after Tom Dillon told Kovack that Han was his alibi. Whatever glimmer of a theory Kovack thought he had about the Hobbs case was now on the rocks.

“It’s all recorded on Mr. Han’s security cam,” reported the officer. “They even made sure to position him for the best camera angles.”

“Let’s see it.”

Crime scene techs simmered in the hallway while Detective Kovack took his leisurely stroll through the evidence. David Han was still warm but cooling rapidly in a drying crimson pool, taking up most of the space on the square, faux-hardwood floor of his comfy, overstuffed living room. They’d all have to take turns squeezing into the tiny apartment to do their jobs, taking care not to step on poor Mr. Han or slip on his bloody floor.

The plot of the security vid was just as the officer described it. The apartment’s watchdog identified and announced two visitors who were known to Han. As soon as the door closed behind them their faces changed from friends to demons. They wore holo masks. Han was confused. He didn’t realize he was in

danger until the female pulled a homemade shock weapon, zapped him, then pistol-whipped him for good measure. She gagged him, bound his wrists behind his back, then attempted to rip open his shirt but didn’t have the strength. This aggravated her. She took it out on Han’s face, then settled down to work on the shirt’s fasteners.

The male was busy assembling the brand. There was a shaft, presumably containing the power source. This screwed into a framework with the letters, which folded for easy concealment. He passed the brand to his partner, then pulled out the handgun.

By this time Han was on his knees twitching and sobbing. The male crouched and jammed the muzzle of the 9mm into his temple. The female thrust the brand into his chest like a matador finishing a bull. Han’s scream was muffled by the gag. The male pulled the trigger. He wasn’t prepared for the recoil, and the bullet made a mess, flying at an upward angle, taking out Ozzie Gilchrist’s left eye.

Kovack made a note. Something bothered him about the brand.

Their work finished, they packed up their tools. But they didn’t run for the door. Not yet. Instead, they turned to the camera.

The female’s holo mask changed, from a demon to Judy Jones’ mother Eunice, the first female victim of the Hothouse Orchids. It then displayed every female victim, ending with Rene Umana Kovack.

The male’s mask ran through the same routine with the male victims. It stopped with Hector Kovack.

Hector and his mother stared from the screen, bloody mayhem in the background, then bolted like mice scenting an approaching cat. They never spoke a single word.

David Han had no family on Mars. Notification of his death would travel a long road, beginning with the Planet Four office in A-burg and ending with a Planet Four supervisor knocking on a door in Hong Kong. Verification protocols would add a lot of drag.

Hector Kovack had less than a passing thought to spare for grieving Earthlings. The killers had put him on notice.

He was on his way back to the precinct when his Tracy peeped.

“Meet me at 10 D Street.” It was McGill.

“Time to talk to Ozzie Gilchrist.”

Oswald Gilchrist was a character built and sustained on contradictions. Back on Earth, the Gilchrist family made their fortune in construction and kept it for enough generations to morph into Main Line blue bloods, a transformation that came with all the arrogance, corruption, and political combat expected of an old-school Philadelphia dynasty. Gilchrist offspring were set for sweet lives of getting their sticky hands on anything they wanted and being celebrated for it.

Oswald’s father Harvey Gilchrist had other ideas. He wanted to make an honest living doing something that counted. Over all the cliché histrionics and objections, he got his hands dirty learning the old family business, found an “outsider” woman not given to strategic vapors and palace intrigue and rocketed off to the Red Planet to dominate the construction boom on Chryse Planitia.

Along came Oswald. He was all mixed up. He was supposed to be rich and powerful, ruling his slice of the mythical East Coast in the magic kingdom of the USA. Yet here he was, stranded in exile, practically a nobody. A weakling, no less. What was a deprived aristocrat to do?

Build his own kingdom, that’s what.

Martians lived or died by their work ethic, so Ozzie worked hard. Martians were weak on the outside, tough on the inside. Ozzie did what he could about his outside and studied hard to build the most useful inside. Once directed and motivated, a Martian stops at nothing. . . .

By the time young Oswald was ready to run for office, he was virtually unrecognizable to the decent people who raised him, but the family resemblance was unmistakable. Watch out world.

Lieutenant McGill and Detective Kovack arrived at the Gilchrist Construction office, aka campaign headquarters, at 2:15 P.M. Harvey Gilchrist had acquired and renovated a Planet Four storage vault as a showplace but conducted actual business online. He let his rambunctious boy use the place for his campaign, hoping his inevitable defeat would get him focused on more serious things.

The detectives were greeted at the door by a tall, muscle-bound Earthling with a shaved head and a conspicuous bulge under his black

jacket. Conventional firearms were absolutely prohibited and shock weapons were only available to civilians by special license. McGill flashed his holo ID. Kovack took note of the weapon.

They were conducted up a flight of stairs, into a neat, sleek office with aqua-green carpeting, neutral-cool walls and a curved, capacious window letting in a lot of D-ville and Martian sun. In front of the window was an onyx desk no bigger than a small continent with nothing on it but the usual business-grade holo terminal.

Behind the desk sat the man himself. Broad shouldered, tan, meticulously coiffed blonde hair, eyes blue enough to put a smile on Richard Wagner’s face, attired like a mid-twentieth century mafia don. Gilchrist counted heavily on giving the Martians something they hadn’t seen before, betting they were bored with mild-mannered managers like Barney Hobbs.

Seated at the right hand of the candidate almighty was Tom Dillon, looking gray and disconnected, gripping the ever-present cane with white knuckles. A seat on the left was empty.

“I hear you think I killed Brenda Hobbs,” Gilchrist said to Kovack. “I guess poor David’s murder puts that to rest.”

“No it doesn’t,” Kovack replied. “And Dillon didn’t tell you that because I didn’t tell him that.”

“Suit yourself,” said Gilchrist. “What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“You can tell us who killed your campaign volunteer and why,” said McGill.

“Why don’t you ask Barney Hobbs? Maybe he thinks like your boy here,” said Gilchrist, pointing a thumb at Kovack. “Too bad I don’t have a pretty daughter.”

“Too bad you pissed off the Hothouse Orchids,” Kovack said. “They don’t like their brand being used without permission.”

“You think that’s it? Huh. There’s gratitude for you. So protect me. You’re a cop.”

“Gee, Mr. Gilchrist, I sure will do my best. Where were you between the hours of 8:00 P.M. Tuesday night and 12:30 A.M. Wednesday?”

“Right here,” said Gilchrist. “With my associate, Mr. Manders. Isn’t that right, Jackie?”

“Yes, Mr. Gilchrist,” the big man answered without moving a muscle.

"What were you two doing, Jackie?" Kovack asked, turning his back to Gilchrist. "No, no, look at *me*, not Ozzie. What were the two of you doing here, alone, for four and a half hours?"

"Campaign stuff. Event planning, security, site selection, and logistics. Like that."

"Big operation," said Kovack. "I understand a Gilchrist rally can draw upward of a dozen people. What about you, Tom? Any ideas?"

"Ozzie has a point," said Dillon, his mouth dry as great-grandma's pressed rose petals. Maybe poor David had lost a roll of the dice. Maybe the killers weren't finished with the Gilchrist campaign. "David was a workhorse. Whoever did this knew we couldn't afford to lose him. Maybe Hobbs hired the Orchids for revenge. Mistakenly, of course."

Kovack didn't point out what a stupid idea it was that Orchids could even be identified, much less bought. Tom had a lot to learn. "Or maybe somebody started something they didn't know how to finish," he said. "Anything else, Lieutenant?"

"I think that's all we'll get out of the Gilchrist campaign for now," said McGill. "Let 'em figure out how they'll spin this for the media. We have to get busy staying up nights to shoo away the monsters under the candidate's bed."

Manders had been standing by the door since he brought them up, like he was riveted to the wall. On his way out of the office, Kovack stumbled, arms flailing, fell into the big man and tumbled to the floor. He quickly rolled and sat up, pointing the big man's weapon at him.

"How'd this get here?" Kovack asked. "You have a license for this thing?"

"Left it in my other suit."

"You should've left this there too. Come on," he said, springing to his feet. "You can tell the sergeant all about it."

"You're not taking my protection?" cried Gilchrist. "You can't do that!"

"Tough guy," said McGill, shaking his head. "Maybe your consultant can double as a bodyguard."

Gilchrist cast a scornful eye upon Dillon. "This killer? He might scuff his nails. Thanks for nothing, McGill!"

The two detectives left the building, turned the bodyguard and his weapon over to a wait-

ing officer and headed for the precinct. They took the scenic route, through Koichi Wakata Park. They were both overdue for some peace and greenery.

"What's your reading?" McGill asked.

"He knows less than we do."

"I got news for you. Ozzie Gilchrist knows less than a lot of people. He wouldn't last ten minutes with the family back home. And his alibi smells like a dead mackerel. . . . That's a fish."

"I know it's a fish, Lieutenant," Kovack said. A group of teenagers kicked a ball around on a grassy patch. Same place he and Dillon played soccer in the old days. Kovack was fast and nimble, but he could never get the ball past Dillon. "The Orchids shook him up."

"Maybe he'll stop taking their name in vain," McGill said.

"Too late. Expect to see Gilchrist avatars making a mess before Ozzie turns up in a box."

"Unfortunately, I wasn't kidding about staying up nights to protect him. Like Captain Darego doesn't have enough to do. By the way, how much did you have to drink today?"

No amount of Martian cool could keep the shock off Kovack's face.

"Gin, right?" said McGill. "You get it from that curly blond, Margie Bulack, the cutie with the hard head and soft heart. She thinks she's helping you. That's because alcohol is not well understood in our dry utopia. Forbid a thing, then you don't have to do any work understanding it." He stopped to give Kovack a chance to deny it or tell him to mind his own damn business, but Kovack just stared like he'd met a prophet.

"Stop looking at me like I'm clairvoyant," said McGill. "I'm CIA. Catholic Irish Alcoholic. A patient of Dr. Bob for ten years. And you're about as sneaky as a rocket crash."

"I'm breaking the law," Kovack said.

"You both are. I can't look the other way, Hector. You know that. On the other hand, we can't afford to lose you so here's what I can do. I'm gonna leave you alone for the duration. You're high-functioning. I don't want to upset your equilibrium. But as soon as this case is solved, you're on the wagon and Margie Bulack gets cited. Okay?"

"I'm not sure I like that, Lieutenant. Sounds like cheating."

"That's what Captain Darego said. She said to do it anyway."

"A little help!"

Hector turned just in time to spot a low-flying soccer ball sailing his way. He neatly trapped it, dribbled a few steps then drilled it straight past the goalie.

"Nice shot," said McGill. Like most Earthlings, he couldn't comprehend how they made soccer work in the low gravity of Mars.

"Yeah." Kovack was shaking. His hand was inside his jacket, welded to the butt of his weapon. His first impulse was to shoot the ball and anything else that moved.

The two detectives made it to the precinct just in time to hear all personnel being ordered to the squad room. They arrived to find holo mode engaged, linking all eight precincts with Chryse Central. The entire Regional Police Force was assembled.

"This can't be good," McGill observed.

Chief of Police Anushka Landis, stern of countenance, resolved and statuesque in her well-decorated black-and-grays, stood at the center of the circular holographic space, facing eight directions at once. She chatted quietly with his majesty the Commissioner while the rhubarb wore itself out.

"I'll get right to it," she announced, without so much as a "Good afternoon." Like most cops on the working side of the political divide, the Chief was allergic to fanfare. "At noon today, four murders were committed. One in B-boro, D-ville, F-town and H-burg." That got her all the attention. "Each victim was a campaign volunteer for a candidate in their community's Regional Representative election," she continued. "Two from the Marscon party, two Marsprog. Each murder took place in the victim's home and was recorded. The MO for each killing was exactly the same. It is apparent, though not yet proven, that the Hothouse Orchids were responsible for the coordination and execution of these murders.

"Our first priority is to prevent any more killing. My office will coordinate with the eight precinct captains to provide protection for candidates and the remaining volunteers in the four communities holding elections this year. Planet Four security at the Aldrin Spaceport has offered their support should it be needed. Our other first priority is to identify

and apprehend the perpetrators. CID will suspend all investigations not related to these cases and reassign investigators accordingly.

"This is a big job, and we're a small force. Get used to double shifts and no sleep. And remember whose fault it is. We want them neat and clean if we can swing it, as fast as possible in any case. Be smart. Are there any questions? Captain Parker."

"Can we assume that these murders are related to the Hobbs case?"

"That is the working theory," Landis answered. "Lieutenant Patel."

"Do we know what could've triggered this outburst?" asked the lieutenant. "Maybe an anniversary or some event that inspired them to depart from their usual MO and make a public display?"

"Good question. Let's ask our expert. Detective Kovack?"

"It's not likely to be an anniversary," Kovack answered. "First Landing is over a month away. As an organized group the Orchids haven't been around long enough to build a history or venerate heroes. They're not sentimental. They're nihilists. Their entire aim is to destroy the current order, but they don't know and don't care about what to replace it with.

"Their new MO gives an appearance of advancing some intricate master plan, but the Orchids are better tacticians than strategists. I'd say they're acting on one of a number of preplanned templates, selected and activated almost at random. We're talking about young people of high intelligence, driven by anger, resentment, and an intense but shallow will to power. Logical thinkers who are led by their emotions. Energy, brains and gigantic chips on their shoulders. It's quite possible they're reacting to something they interpret as a provocation. We just have to figure out what."

"Good insights. Thank you, Detective. Keep in mind they are hiding in plain sight, right under our noses. Stay alert!"

Captain Carolyn Darego kept the neatest, cleanest precinct captain's office on the planet Mars, probably in the entire Solar System. On her tidy white desk was a tidy white computer, a holo of herself with one handsome husband and two brighter-than-average children, and a vase of purple flowers, the same

kind Kovack saw when he interviewed Judy Jones. A small Nigerian flag, brought to Mars by her grandparents, hung under glass on the wall behind her.

The captain was petite, meticulous about her personal appearance, and chronically well-mannered. Harmless as a stick of dynamite in a bouquet of daisies.

Lieutenant Ray McGill, Detective Hector Kovack, and Detective Irene Acuna sat in the presence, ready for anything from commendations to public execution. The captain believed officers belonged on their toes at all times, in every situation.

"Detective Kovack," she said in accented tones warm as the distant savannah, "you have been back in CID for over twenty-four hours, and you haven't been shot even once yet. Why are you dragging your feet?"

"I'm older now, Captain. I don't get around like I used to."

"Not too old, I hope. Chief Landis wants you to head up this investigation. I do not. I want you on Hobbs exclusively. Detective Acuna will handle the Han case. Lieutenant McGill, you'll coordinate with Kovack and Acuna and serve as D-ville's liaison with Central. Any complaints?"

"That seems . . . counterintuitive," said Acuna, a direct descendant of the first permanent settlers. Her fine proportions, delicate features, and warm coloration were early indications of the elegance of future, fully-adapted generations. They also meant frequent trips to labs for tracking and study. "Lieutenant McGill has experience we need on the ground. Kovack knows the Orchids inside out. They should both be on Han, and I should take Hobbs."

"That's good thinking," the captain acknowledged, "but not as good as mine. Hobbs is the key. Kovack wasn't born knowing all about the Orchids. He started from zero, stayed out of the public eye, and nailed them in short order. That's the kind of drive we need for Hobbs. David Han is one of four similar cases. You'll have plenty of information and direction from the other three. Lieutenant McGill has more stamina than the three of us put together. You'll both get more help from him than you can use, plus a direct connection with everything they know at Central.

"Detective Kovack, what do you know

about Hobbs?"

"We have a solid timeline up until she excused herself from the friends she was with in Rec Sec. She said she was going to Sharon Delancey's apartment for the night. Delancey was one of the friends in the group. That's the last she was seen. She hasn't been located on any vids. We've constructed a number of possible routes she could've taken without being seen, including unmonitored service ways.

"Detective Acuna took statements from everybody Hobbs spoke to that night. IT scanned vids for signs she was followed before she disappeared. No means or opportunity, much less motive, found there.

"We're analyzing traffic in and out of the dome. Nothing suspicious so far, but there will be.

"As for the crime scene . . ." Kovack took a breath and corralled his scampering thoughts. This was where he was expected to be ace super-sleuth, but there must've been a chunk of kryptonite in his way. "We know she was strangled by a goon in a pressure suit, which places the murder at the scene. Dr. Stoltz confirms that she was buried within minutes after her murder. But her personal effects were already in the ground, several feet deeper than the body. It would take a man hours to dig that deep. The ground is hard. How does he even get in and out of the hole? Then he'd have to reenter the vehicle, strip her, spend more time burying her stuff, come back and murder her, then bury her. He might've been done in time for lunch the next day. Not to mention: what was she doing all this time? Not breathing. Excavation vehicles don't come with airlocks.

"Obviously, we'll get the engineering figured out," said Kovack, rubbing his tired eyes. "I got pulled onto Han before I could get very far. What really bugs me is the motive. The Orchids don't have one, at least none that I can see. Brenda Hobbs was not important enough to kill and impossible to convincingly replace online with a cog. She would be missed immediately. They could be acting out of simple hate, but that doesn't fit. No extended torture. She wasn't made to ritualistically suffer for the crimes of the invaders. She retained her identity and was displayed instead of hidden. It was all risk and no payoff. The Orchids' methods are savage, but there's a comprehensible

rational to everything they do.”

“What about PHASE 2?” asked McGill.

“Meaningless,” answered Kovack. “I checked with an Orchid who knows. Also, the brands we saw today were all the same but different from the one used on Hobbs. Different font and size. The media reported on the Hobbs brand but didn’t show it. I’m not convinced the Orchids killed Brenda Hobbs.”

“Copycats?” said McGill.

The three Martians looked at each other, hoping one of them knew what the Earthling was talking about.

“I mean, did the Orchids copy the first killer’s MO in order to steal his glory or cover their tracks? Happens all the time on Earth.”

“No . . .” Kovack answered. What kind of asylum did McGill come from? “To the extent they imitated his MO, they did it to send him a message. We’re debating who killed Hobbs, but today’s killings were the Orchids, loud and clear. They don’t like being fingered for something they didn’t do. Kind of like copyright infringement. The terror they’re now inflicting on the population is an added benefit. They’re happy to take credit for that. In my opinion.”

“Why would the Orchids think the killer violated their copyright?” asked McGill.

“Because the media concluded they were responsible and pushed it as a virtual fact,” Kovack answered. “Everybody knows the Orchids are the only killers on Mars. Except maybe they’re not.”

“We still need a motive,” said Acuna. “Maybe Ozzie Gilchrist isn’t off the hook after all.”

“Murder to win an election?” McGill said. “After seeing Gilchrist up close I think Kovack’s buddy Dillon is right. Ozzie’s not up to it.”

“Well, what, then?” said Kovack, throwing up his hands. He’d burned up a lot of brain power on this one and come up empty. “What else makes sense?”

“Martians!” McGill snorted. “What you people don’t know about people could fill an encyclopedia. Cold-blooded murder never makes sense. It’s the ugliest, most debased thing a human being can do. There is only one ultimate motive for this kind of murder and that’s power. Whoever killed Brenda Hobbs had a pathological drive to exert power over her. If he’s an Orchid, that power drive could

be why he joined up.”

“I don’t think so,” said Kovack. “This guy wants recognition. That would make him a rogue and a liability. The Orchids would just take care of him, no muss, no fuss.”

“Don’t control-freak killers typically do more damage?” asked Acuna. “Torture, sexual abuse, and other kinds of dominance?”

“On Earth, they do,” answered McGill. “Martians generally have a more subdued emotional range. By design. A highly controlled environment, rigorous psychological selection criteria for immigration, effective tracking and intervention, rigid social controls. Mars is the biggest experiment yet in building Utopia by handcrafting a race of utopians. I’m no expert on Martian psychology, but it makes sense that what presents on Earth as a tidal wave of violent actions is distilled into a single, economical act.”

“Keep going,” the captain encouraged him. “Maybe we can build a profile.”

“Martian male,” McGill said, “according to Dr. Stoltz’s evaluation. Obviously resourceful, with a thorough knowledge of D-ville’s layout. We’ll figure out how he got out of the dome and back in, but the fact that we have to figure it out is telling. Emotionally he’s an attention whore but logically he’s cautious. He may have a big personality to hide behind, or he may be an ant keeping his head down. The care taken to hide evidence and make a presentation suggests a budding serial killer. There’s a persistent myth that serial killers are geniuses but that’s BS. He’ll have certain aptitudes but be otherwise unremarkable. I’m guessing he’s a charmer . . . You already know all this, right?” he said to Kovack, who was busy looking off into space.

“The power trip is the key,” Kovack said. “You can throw camouflage over arrogance, but it always retains its shape. It’s considered unseemly, so an arrogant SOB might gravitate toward occupations and pursuits that allow for aggression. Police work. Sports . . .”

“Politics,” said Acuna.

“Politics,” Kovack agreed. “The genius myth may be BS, but it comes from somewhere. Maybe he can make a smart impression but can’t hold up to scrutiny. Or maybe . . . Something Dillon said. He told me Ozzie was smart. Anybody think Ozzie Gilchrist is smart?”

“What’s your point?” asked Acuna.

"That's his camouflage?" McGill said. "Playing dumb?"

"This is getting too theoretical," said the captain. "Chief Landis has a couple of head shrinkers at Angel of Mercy working on their own profile. Maybe they'll come up with something useful. As of now we have no credible motive and no persons known to have means or opportunity. But it means something that Gilchrist and his circle continue to draw our attention. Concentrate your efforts there, Detective Kovack, at least until you're led in another direction. You and Lieutenant McGill will bring Detective Acuna up to speed on the Han case then get to work on your assignments. I have a meeting with the Commissioner in two minutes. I will promise him useful news in twenty-four hours. Don't make me a liar."

"Sin presión," said Kovack to Acuna.

"Deja de quejarte," Acuna replied with a small laugh like tinkling bells. "Sabías que el trabajo era peligroso cuando lo tomaste."

Kovack dropped into the squeaky old chair at his desk, opened an empty drawer, and wished he was Philip Marlowe or one of his cheaper knockoffs. Imagine living in a time and place where you could keep an "office bottle."

It was after five, and the place was quiet. McGill and Acuna were both away from their desks, but their screens were still lit. Patrol Sergeant Dykstra was out on a call. The precinct's secretary Leslie Tracz and plant manager Devin Ashworth had their heads down, tapping keys. Some low chatter from dispatch; nothing dramatic.

Outside the big windows the sky was unusually clear, making its way through violet-gray toward the blue-gray of sunset. Low dunes cast lengthening shadows, but there was no sand blowing, no dust devils twisting up from the ground. One could almost imagine the place was livable.

Ranked formations of information crowded the virtual screen hovering over Kovack's desk like dense clusters of glowing fruit. Everything that was known about the case was there in front of him, along with reasonable extrapolations, inferences, and not a little probability casting. There was even a category for things-that-could-not-possibly-be-connected-with-this-

case. More than one lightning bolt had flashed from that abyss during the original Orchids investigation.

This was Kovack's element. Bright ideas were nice, but the true labor of investigation was just that; labor. Connecting useful dots after mining them from mountains of irrelevant facts and half-baked conjectures. He took a quick look at his outlined summary for a starting point then decided he might get lucky with transportation.

The easily available public airlock logs were great for eliminating suspects. Every vehicle and all passengers, in and out, were accounted for and verified crime free. The developing city of D-ville was currently under a central dome with four smaller domes connected by tunnels and surface tubes as well as tracks through sections under the natural skies of Mars. Two vehicle-scale airlocks for the big dome, two smaller domes with one lock apiece. There were also private maintenance and expedition portals accessible with credentials only.

Kovack called up a bloodhound, set his search criteria and police access authorization, then turned it loose on the general web. Eventually the data dog would return with maintenance records, sensor readings, and alerts indicating any kind of activity at any surface exit, whether it involved a vehicle or not. Hopefully the aggressive search app would have carte blanche access. Police surveillance was less of a contentious issue since maniacs murdered twenty-three people before anyone noticed, but civil liberties were still a thing.

Kovack put his feet up on the paper-thin desk and considered maniacs. He ran his left hand through his fine, black hair, finding the fleshy ridge running front to back where a hot steel slug had creased his scalp. Another souvenir from the Hothouse Orchids investigation. He was targeted by an assassin who came that close to earning his pay. Kovack handily brought him down with his shock weapon, but the assassin, an unidentifiable blank, managed to shoot himself in the head before he could be questioned.

That was the Orchids. Incorruptible maniacs with discipline and sophisticated, purpose-driven plans. Chess players who didn't leave trails of breadcrumbs on the board. Not perfect, by any means, but not stupid.

Whoever killed Brenda Hobbs was stupid. A ham-fisted showman counting on his audacity to blind his pursuers. Ozzie Gilchrist fit neatly, but, when he came down to it, Kovack couldn't imagine a Martian committing such an aimless crime. Nor could he conceive of a lone wolf hunting women to turn into sick trophies to pump up his ego. Mars didn't run that way.

Maybe other places did.

According to Dillon, the Orchids were active on Luna. It might help to know what they were up to over there.

Rather than waste time with a meandering online search, Kovack decided to contact the Lunar authorities directly. He composed a detailed request for information, addressed it to the Lunar Protectorate Office of Civil Security, and sent it on its way.

His Dick Tracy peeped. It was Dr. Stoltz.

"What's up, Doc?"

"I was wrong, that's what. Brenda Hobbs had skin under her nails. She took a swipe at somebody."

Kovack took his feet off the desk and sat up straight. "Go on."

"DNA analysis narrows it down to about 85 percent of the native male population, basically anyone of European descent between the ages of fifteen and fifty. You know we can't search medical records, so that's as far as we'll get with that. But it does change the sequence of events."

"How could she get skin from a guy in a suit?"

"Exactly."

"Are we looking for somebody with a scar?"

Kovack asked.

"I doubt it. Surface level particles, about what you'd get from vigorously scratching an itch. But she did try, bless her little heart."

"What about the tox screens?"

"Inconclusive," Stoltz answered. "If I had to guess I'd say she was dosed with a sedative after she acted up, but I can't support it clinically."

"Thanks, Doctor. Working late, aren't you?" Kovack said, glancing at the time. It was after six. He'd lost track. There were stars in the blue-violet sky. Tracz and Ashworth were gone. They probably said goodbye on the way out.

"David Han took priority," she said, low and

dangerous. Kovack could smell the smoke. Wanda Stoltz was not a star order-taker. "That interfered with some of the time-sensitive tests on Hobbs. A lot of scanning and virtual reconstruction needs to be done when there's rapid freezing and decompression. It takes time. Idiots! You can't just slice into a body that's been out on the surface!"

"Good to know," Kovack said with a shudder. "Enjoy your evening."

He was looking for the ME's report when he heard the "Woof!" of the search app signaling it was done. There was bound to be tons of unhelpful data to sift through, but Hector Kovack was compulsive. The search was started first so it would be examined first.

On a whim, he decided on a single keyword to narrow the search range. Gilchrist.

Within ten seconds he forgot all about the ME's report. Within five minutes he was out of the office, on his way to break some rules.

The underground maintenance and repair garage for Gilchrist Construction's heavy equipment was just as dark, quiet, and deserted as Kovack hoped it would be. The muffled purr of distant machinery, felt more than heard, denied silence a complete monopoly. Emergency lights only. Cameras were off. The repair bay was isolated so there wouldn't be people around needing to be watched.

Maintenance records showed that the outer door of the bay had developed a bad habit of opening and shutting at random times. A part was on the way to fix it. In the meantime, safety regs required isolation of compartments with unreliable airlocks, so the company safety officer shut down the repair bay and locked the hatch.

The garage was easily reached by one of the unmonitored routes plotted for Brenda Hobbs.

Something started bugging him as soon as he left the precinct. He tried to ignore it but it wouldn't quit. A phone call was the only remedy. Everything told him not to make it. He made it anyway.

"This is Detective Hector Kovack, Chryse Regional Police, D-ville precinct . . ." Five minutes later, he went to work.

His cop key would open the airtight hatch to the bay, but it wouldn't do to leave a police-were-here trail. Kovack took a homemade digital pick from his pocket and started it

searching for the combination securing the hatch. He also produced a floater, a small, air-borne drone that would closely follow him and record everything he did.

The hatch opened easily, with no alarms. Now he was a burglar. That could get him medical leave, six months' treatment, and diminished advancement prospects. Or fired, depending on the treatment's outcome. Not as worrisome as the manslaughter charge hanging over his head but hardly a career enhancer.

A six-wheeled excavation vehicle was parked in the middle of the floor. An eight-foot auger was neatly stowed at the back of the vehicle, along with an assortment of dirt-moving drones.

Well that was easy, thought Kovack. Minutes for a hole instead of hours, with helpful robots to fill it in and erase all traces.

Electrostatic dust mitigation would have removed signs of recent use, but he gave the drones the once over anyway. He found some fibers in the scoop of one of the dirt movers. Could be anything. He picked up two of the fibers with tweezers, dropped them into an evidence bag, labeled it, and put it in his pocket. He made sure to leave most of them where he'd found them.

Next came the vehicle's interior. The unpowered hatch made a racket as he muscled it open, the sound echoing sharply through the bay. There was nobody around to hear it, but it was unnerving. Kovack reminded himself he didn't have to be sneaky. He climbed up into the vehicle's cabin and turned on the interior lights.

To his left was the windshield, driver and navigator seats, controls, and air hookups. Benches for the crew ran down either side of the vehicle to his right, with safety belts, more air and com hookups, and . . .

One environmental suit. Which was not strange. Commercial suits were one size fits all and a vehicle like this was bound to carry a spare.

Kovack checked the backpack's air and power levels. Both down a little, consistent with a couple of hours on the surface. He inspected the gloves but realized they'd have to be analyzed in a lab to find evidence they'd been clamped onto a human throat. The inside of the gloves likely held traces of the

wearer but he decided not to risk detectable tampering.

He went from the suit to the crew benches, surveying them inch by inch, carefully pulling up cushions and replacing them. They had been recently cleaned. That inspired him to look harder.

After forty minutes of nothing, Kovack was ready to move on to a cursory inspection of the remainder of the cabin before cutting his losses and taking his aching head home for the night. He lifted the cushions and swept his beam over them one last time, mostly to appease a compulsion so it would leave him alone. Right there, hanging on to a seam he'd inspected half a dozen times, was a hair. A short one. He bagged it and stepped over to the hatch. If he had the evidence he thought he had, forensics would be back with kits and expert knowledge.

He switched off the lights, poked his head through the hatch . . . and was instantly engulfed in red flashes and screeching claxons.

"Pressure breach! Pressure breach! Depressurization imminent!"

Kovack slammed the hatch and made sure it was sealed. Then he wondered if he'd sealed the hatch to the bay. Getting caught was a risk he was willing to take. Letting the air out of D-ville was more than he bargained for.

Through the windshield he could see warning lights in the darkness. Red, red, red! But also an amber indicator, shining placidly in the midst of all the panic. He found the vehicle's lighting controls, switched on a spotlight.

The labels on the panel next to the airlock's inner door were hard to read. Kovack pushed his face forward into the windshield and squinted.

The red lights showed the outer door was open. The amber light cautioned against opening the inner door. The bay still held pressure. Kovack turned off the lights, threw open the vehicle's hatch, jumped out, resealed the hatch, and ran for the exit like the criminal he was.

He found the hatch to the corridor unsealed. He dashed through, closed it, locked it behind him, and bolted from the scene.

Somebody was bound to show up to check on all the noise, but it would take time. Kovack retrieved the floater and locked down the recording, certifying it tamper-proof. Then

he jogged back along the route he took to get there, slowing to a casual walk once he was in view of cameras and people. Acting natural as an android with defective social interaction protocols. If only he could get his heartrate down below escape velocity.

"The hair is a match," Stoltz declared blandly. Now and then she shot a longing glance at the breakfast Kovack had interrupted, sitting on a corner of an examining table. Unoccupied, thank God. Coroners were not normal people. "I suppose I shouldn't ask questions?"

"Unless you like disappointment."

"You must be as tired as you look," Stoltz observed. "You're usually a way better smart-ass."

Kovack couldn't disagree. He'd gone straight home from the scene of the crime, limited himself to two drinks, and tossed till dawn. No hangover but whatever his body did all night it was the opposite of sleep.

"What about the fibers?"

"I only do bodies," Stoltz said. "Take 'em to the crime lab. Here." She put a couple of tablets in his hand. "Take these."

"I thought you only did bodies." Kovack swallowed the pills without asking questions.

"You have a body, Detective. A little livelier than I'm used to, but still a body. Start taking care of it."

Kovack decided not to trust anybody in the lab just now, so the fibers would have to wait. He went back to the office.

McGill was there at his half of the divided desk they shared, finishing his wimpy bagel with cream cheese and lousy coffee. Each and every day, the Lieutenant devised new ways to describe how good these things were on Earth and how pathetic they were on Mars.

"You need cows to make cheese," he complained. "This synthetic crap tastes like churned motor oil."

"Eat a lot of motor oil on Earth? Is that a Philly thing?"

"Smartass!"

"Thank you," said Kovack. Stoltz's pills worked wonders.

He started on the morning's pile of mail, decided he couldn't face it without coffee, made a quick run to the commissary, then settled down for real. He chucked most of the messages unread, including some important offi-

cial ones. If they were important enough they'd be back.

Before long he found a reply from the Lunar Protectorate Office of Civil Security. There was a lot of rigmarole, and the Lunies talked funny, but by the time the holo presentation concluded, Detective Kovack had a few things to think about.

The malcontents were indeed active on Luna, active meaning arguing in cafes, flaming each other online, and sending deranged complaints to unsympathetic bureaucrats. There had been some incidents of vandalism marked by the old circle-A anarchy logo, but no evidence of a serious, organized conspiracy. Lunar authorities were aware of the "Martian phenomenon," as they called it, but they'd seen nothing like the violence breaking out on the war god's red planet.

In the interest of compulsive thoroughness, they sent Kovack a complete accounting of all crimes committed over the last five terrestrial years. Then they wished him luck and wondered what was in the water on his crazy planet.

Kovack scanned the rap sheet, noting that killing was hardly unknown on the Moon. Three murders in the last five years, all conventionally motivated and easily solved. Nothing for him there. However . . .

Two kidnappings, three months apart. Both cases were still open. The victims, both young women, were recovered unharmed. They gave confusing descriptions and had no clue as to a motive. No ransom note. No assault or rough treatment, apart from restraint and confinement. It was as if the abduction itself was the whole point, like an experiment or a dry run.

It was not lost on Kovack that Dillon had recently arrived from Luna. So had about two hundred others, including a number of Martians returning from business trips, three Gilchrist employees among them.

He dug deeper into the kidnappings, chatting with the avatars of investigating officers encoded in the report. There was speculation that the malcontents were involved but no evidence. The MO was similar to Hobbs and the majority of abductions throughout human history. Victim isolated in a public place and spirited away. They had no suspects. Luna was an older, more mature society than Mars.

They had outgrown the impulse to monitor all people at all times for the sake of safety. With a population of one million, the expense and effort yielded a poor return on investment.

Kovack did find one thing to prolong the agony of complication. The Gilchrist Martians were on Luna before, during, and after the kidnappings.

All of which was probably coincidental, a wild goose that would cost valuable time to chase. Kovack stored it at the back of his mind for now but resolved to drop in for regular visits.

"What do you know about that?" McGill said, looking through the morning's bulletins.

"What do I know about what?" His Tracy peeped. "Excuse me."

"Good morning, Detective. I received your call last night. You have my permission, provided you are correct in your assumption. God help you if you're wrong. Good day."

"Possible break-in at Gilchrist Construction last night," McGill continued. "Probably a false alarm. The place was locked up tight when the responders arrived. If it was a break-in, I wonder if the crook got what he was after. The authorities frown on breaking and entering. I hope it was worth it."

"Could be," Kovack said. "Is the captain in? We need to talk to her."

"Fibers found in the scoop of one of the drones match clothing recovered from the crime scene," reported the lead forensic investigator, a sergeant with a prickly fringe of gray hair, vaguely yellow pouches under tight, vaguely brownish eyes, and nothing but business in his voice.

Kovack and McGill sat in Captain Darego's office, listening to the report, trying not to be killed by the silent lasers stabbing them from behind the desk. The captain had not spoken to Kovack since he requested the search that morning. Her last word to him was an order not to leave his desk. Requests to use the restroom were to be submitted in writing.

"Brenda Hobbs' DNA was all over the interior of the vehicle, including the E-suit. Hell, she must've treated that thing like it was her boyfriend. Smart girl. DNA found inside the suit matches the skin under her nails."

"Of course it does," said Captain Darego.

She had not taken one stony eye off Kovack since he entered the office.

"One more thing," said the sergeant. "There was more DNA on the gloves than Ms. Hobbs'. There may be a second victim."

"Tell me about it."

"Definitely female and Martian. That's all we know at this point. We'll know it all once you find the man in the suit."

"All right, Sergeant. Go find out more." She still didn't take her eyes off Kovack.

"We already know it's not Ozzie Gilchrist," Darego said after the sergeant left, "don't we Detective Kovack?"

"I'd say it's unlikely."

"What would you *not* say?" Kovack had taken a blowtorch to her unshakable cool. "What kind of deal did you make with Harvey Gilchrist to get his permission for your search after the fact?"

"I called him before I entered the repair bay," Kovack said, cool as a frosted pitcher of sangria. "He didn't answer, I left a message. . . ."

"The deal, Kovack! What was the deal?"

"There was no deal, Captain," answered Kovack. "I made no promises. I told him I was convinced Ozzie was innocent and a quick search of the repair bay would get him out from under the cloud once and for all."

"Is that what you believed?"

"Not exactly."

"You lied? Your plan was to backfill permission for a burglary, based on a lie about something you couldn't deliver?" She was loud, taut, on the point of boiling over.

"No, Captain," said Kovack. "I . . ."

"We, Detective!" Blam. Fist slamming the desk, flowers upset, vase shattered on the floor. "We! Chryse Regional Police broke into a private establishment to conduct an unlawful search, taking the presumption of the Regional Attorney's support with them . . ." She had to stop and take a moment.

"Captain," ventured McGill, gingerly, "if I may . . ."

"You may not, Lieutenant. Not until Detective Kovack explains why he is above due process!"

"Captain, my justification for a warrant barely amounted to a hunch. Judge Giff never would've granted it."

"We live in a society, Detective! You can't just . . . Never mind. Tell me everything you

think I need to know. I'll just sit here and not talk."

"I had reason to believe that the Gilchrist repair bay was a possible point of exit from the dome on the night of the murder," Kovack began. "But I had nothing that would convince a judge. I needed evidence. I went to the bay with the intention of breaking and entering and conducting an unlawful search. I take full responsibility. On the way it occurred to me that Harvey Gilchrist might be persuaded to permit a search. I called him. He was out, so I left a message explaining what I was about to do and asking his permission. I further stated that I believed Ozzie was innocent and a quick search, possibly followed up by a more thorough one, could prove it. . . ."

"You were going to search the place either way," said McGill. "You didn't wait for a reply in case he said no. What made you think he'd go for it?"

"He's a practical man," Kovack answered. "He'd know a search would eventually take place. What I proposed would be neat and make the least noise."

"Unless it's Ozzie's DNA in the suit," said Darego. "Then the Gilchrists flatten us and all your evidence is ruled inadmissible, possibly tainted. It still may be. And I'm sure Harvey knows his son is under no obligation to submit to testing."

"Ozzie already consented," said McGill. "Refusing would practically be an admission of guilt. Not a good look for somebody who wants your vote."

"So now we wait and see if the novel legal theory of retroactive permission will hold water," said Darego. "Or if it even matters to the reputation of the D-ville precinct!"

"Captain," said McGill, "with all due respect, I agree that Kovack is way over the line on this. He needs to be yelled at a lot harder, certainly disciplined. But I would respectfully remind the captain that Chief Landis charged us with solving this case as quickly as possible for the sake of public safety. We can't ignore Kovack's violations. We also can't ignore the valuable time he's saved by taking an enormous risk. Not to mention the discovery of a possible second victim."

"You once called Detective Kovack a bull in a china shop. Some jobs need a bull. We can clean up after him when he's through."

"Very pretty, Lieutenant," said Darego. "Taking lumps and facing music is a way of life for police. I accept that. But hear this and hear it good. I will not lead stormtroopers, no matter how they justify themselves! Lieutenant, you're dismissed. Kovack; get out of my sight!"

The two detectives returned to their respective halves of the desk and buried themselves in their screens, avoiding eye contact with the rest of the office.

Eventually Kovack said, "Thanks for the help, Lieutenant."

"Shut up, Hector. Try to remember you're a cop, not a goddamn action hero."

Not long after getting wire-brushed by his superiors, Kovack received a help-needed from Acuna. He went over to her desk, hoping for a friendlier environment.

"I could dig this up myself," she said, "but maybe you can save me some time. I was over at that pistol gallery in H-burg, Shooters. You know the place?"

"Yeah," said Kovack. "Replicas of old-style firearms, with blank charges for recoil and lasers to score the hits. I think McGill consulted on their police .38s. Strictly amusement. What were you doing over there?"

"Investigating."

"Investigating what?" Kovack said with a visible smirk. "Where to spend your pay in your free time?"

She let the fluffy bit of wit settle to the ground, then said, "Where else on Mars could killers learn to shoot and get in some practice? What, you never thought of that?"

"How can I save you time?" Kovack said. This day would never end.

"You can fill me in on how the Orchids communicate. I know they conduct as much business as possible in person to avoid monitoring. I assume Shooters is part of a network. Also the D-ville, of course, though I doubt they'll be back there for a while. Do we have details about other hangouts? I'm looking for a way to inject information into their communication stream. The captain has an idea about posting secret messages for them, but they have to be alerted to look for them. Shooters seems like a natural place for a cop to be, but I want to know if it's possible to, you know, let something slip and know it'll go where I want it to go."

"I don't see why not," said Kovack, "as long

as you're slick. They expect us to try stuff like that. They use the net to call meetings; we're still chasing their code algorithms. They use public places for dispersing coded instructions to cell members, but leadership has to be able to meet and talk freely. Probably in remote surface facilities or disconnected, abandoned sites. What do you want to tell them?"

"I want to call a leadership meeting," said Acuna.

"That's . . . bold. I don't know . . ."

"We're the police, Hector. We call the shots, not the spoiled kids. Nifty, huh?"

It was nifty. Maybe Irene Acuna didn't know what she was in for, but she was somebody he could get along with.

On Saturday Kovack put in ten hours at his desk coordinating data on Hobbs, running down victim number two, and picking McGill's brain. He could easily work from home, but he hated dragging police biz into his personal life.

There was one development: he was being followed.

Why not? The Orchids wanted him dead. Maybe they would try to terrorize him first, playing psychological games like characters in the old 2Ds they paid so much attention to.

Maybe they hoped he would lead them to Brenda Hobbs' killer so they could balance their books.

Maybe he would.

"The body is desiccated and well preserved," observed Dr. Stoltz. "She was branded. The alleged victim has apparently been missing for three months. Initial examination supports the likelihood of three months' surface exposure."

Another body sticking up out of the ground. Just the thing for a hungover Monday morning. A half-day's rest on Sunday softened his resolve to keep his nose dry and the law of sowing and reaping was in full effect.

This one was a mummy, casting a stubby, purple shadow in the heatless afternoon sun. Blowing dust and sand buried it nearly to the shoulders. Kovack imagined the once beautiful face blasted by UV and cosmic rays, eroding, shedding dry, frozen particles to spread across Chryse Planitia on the relentless wind.

A lot of work went into finding this one.

More bloodhounds unleashed upon the network, more data analysis, less sleep, more coffee, worse fast food. Kovack finally turned up one Hilde Grünehaus, an architect who had booked passage on a flight that departed for Luna three months ago. She cancelled two hours before liftoff. Ms. Grünehaus should still be on Mars but wasn't, at least not as far as anybody knew. That triggered permission to peep her chip, which led to a hole in the desert, about a hundred yards from Brenda Hobbs.

Stoltz's onsite analysis confirmed the DNA match with the gloves from the Gilchrist vehicle.

Kovack marched over to the crime scene technicians' station, his Mobility Assist Unit whirring, moving with all the grace of the Tin Man before he'd had his morning oil. He swore he'd get the intensive training to make him surface-able, big, and strong enough to haul around a pressure suit, backpack, and equipment. As soon as he quit drinking. And got some sleep. And ate better. And forgot about gunshots and cracked ribs. And got a better attitude . . .

"How about it, Hal?" he asked. "Any buried treasure?"

"Same deal as last time, Detective," answered Hal. "There's a bundle about four feet below her. Clothing, personal effects. Also, a pair of gloves. Nitriles."

"With fingerprints inside?" That could crack the case or it could be one more frustration. There was no guarantee the prints would be on file, especially since the ubiquitous chips were the default for identification. Kovack hoped for the best but didn't plan any parties.

He slogged through ankle-deep dust, back to where Stoltz made her arcane inspections of the last traces of a human being.

"Your boy's a real piece of work," she said, running a scanner over a section of skull. "Building himself a graveyard. I wondered if he collected trophies." She read a string of numbers from the scanner's display, swore in Low German, put the instrument away in her tool kit. "How much you want to bet there's another half dozen, right in our line of sight?"

"I don't think so," Kovack replied, sweeping the landscape for unnatural surprises. "This one was the first. A target of opportunity. He

found out she'd be off-world and incommunicado for the duration of her flight. Nobody would miss her till she didn't show up."

"If then. Maybe he quit her job for her when he cancelled her flight reservation."

"I'll look at that," Kovack said. "Maybe he left a trail. Find anything useful?"

"Yeah. A victim's body. Don't crowd me, Junior. Science takes as long as it takes."

Kovack decided he couldn't complain. Less than a week into the investigation and they had more data than they knew what to do with. The real challenge was organizing the haystack for analysis. He'd been reading up on serial killers who'd baffled authorities for years on Earth, some never being caught. Methods had come a long way since the likes of Jack the Ripper, Zodiac, and the Shanghai Surgeon. Chryse Regional was not doing bad for an understaffed, underfunded force.

He had a call. It was Dillon.

"What's up Tom?"

"Just an FYI," said Dillon. "Ozzie's thinking about filing a complaint for police harassment. I advised him against it, but he's convinced being a victim will get him a few more votes. The sooner you guys wrap this up the easier my life will be. How's it going?"

"I only know what I see on the screens," Kovack replied. Why was Dillon calling now? He pulled up news on his sleeve screen. A ten-minute-old headline announced the discovery of a second victim. Or a sixth, depending on who was keeping track. Media opinion was now divided regarding Orchids only vs. Orchids and a lone wolf.

He wished he was surprised by Dillon's call.

"Very funny," Dillon said. There was a pause. He was thinking something over.

"Listen, how about if we hang out tonight? Ozzie's whining is on my last nerve, and I'm sure you're working too hard. Could be a nice break."

"Can't tonight," said Kovack. "I'm working too hard. How about tomorrow?"

"That's no good. I'm working too hard. I'm grabbing the 10:45 looper to H-burg. Ozzie wants to show everybody how expansive his platform is by building a coalition with the farmers. Even though they can't vote in D-ville."

"You sure about that?" said Kovack. "That should be right up his alley."

"Nobody likes a cynic, Hector."

"Takes one to know one. Listen, Tom, watch your step out there, will you?"

"I don't have to," Dillon said. "Not with Chryse's finest watching it for me. See you in a couple of days."

That was that. The shimmer of dawn that started its painstaking crawl that night at the D-ville had arrived at undeniable sunrise.

He was investigating Tom all along.

The Orchids were never suspects as far as he was concerned. Everything pointed to Gilchrist and his circle, but Brenda Hobbs was not murdered for politics. Hilde Grünehaus certainly wasn't. Ozzie could be a well-disguised psycho, but his bodyguard Manders had confirmed his shaky alibi under intensive questioning, and it wasn't his DNA in the suit.

Kovack knew the truth at the D-ville because he knew his friend. For as long as they'd known each other he was never fooled by Tom's expertly crafted denials, evasions, or flat out lies. Playing along was the price for hanging on to a friend.

After their talk, Kovack dug in hard, searching for facts to prove himself wrong. Intuition was worth squat. Only facts could hang a man, and facts could line up in lots of different ways.

Or not.

Now Tom had shown his panic by calling with a lame story to try to get information. Detective Kovack could stop pretending to have a range of suspects.

He needed to sit down, but that was a complicated operation for the rigid MAU. So he stood, alone in the lethal desert of the practically airless world, thinking all the rotten, true things that would define him for the rest of his life. He destroyed his family. He killed his brother. He failed to protect his mother. Soon his last connection with his childhood would be arrested, tried, and convicted.

He needed a drink like a tree needs sun, like a man needs air and love.

It was the one thing he couldn't permit himself to have.

\* \* \*

Tuesday morning flamed through Hector's bedroom window like all the light in the world focused to a point the size of his pupils. The planet had tilted and swiveled, twisted and turned until this seasonal alignment with the Sun was accomplished to its

torturous perfection. It always took him by surprise.

He was not hung over but wished he was. Anything had to be better than the craving, the demonic drive to poison himself with the elemental rocket fuel called alcohol. McGill would be happy to talk him through it, any-time, day or night, but the hell with McGill.

Today he would gather every grain of information there was to gather from the quantum banks of Mars, Luna, and Earth. He would sort through the sparse collection of objects surviving from his childhood and give free reign to whatever memories, associations, or intuitions they inspired. All of this would be sifted through the single-minded filter of evidence and incrimination. A search of Tom's apartment wouldn't hurt, but that would have to wait until after the arrest.

He would plot and scheme. He would conspire. He would use every ounce of his intelligence to plan and the full weight of his authority to execute.

He would betray his friend. He would betray him hard, with no pity, no remorse, no regret. And he would pay for his betrayal, just as he paid for what he'd done to Victor. But it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered but justice.

Phobos Fats, the pool hall in Rec Sec, boasted two tables, sangria, near-beer, and no Earthlings. Not that the giants from the mother world weren't welcome. They had the most money to throw around, after all. They just couldn't get the hang of their mutated pastime.

Billiards on Mars was one of those technological miracles doomed to be taken for granted as soon as it's achieved. Through much calculation, manipulation of weights and surface textures, and a little magnetic force applied to iron-centered balls, the Martians arrived at a slow-moving, rule-laden game played on surfaces merely twice the size of regular Terrestrial tables.

Dillon was back from H-burg, and an hour or two of pool was his idea. He never picked a game he wasn't sure to win. In their checkered youth Kovack had often come maddeningly close to beating him, only to find that his friend let him run up the score so he could crash from a greater height.

He wasn't there to win a game. A nonchalant scan of the small tables in the muted light at the edges of the room confirmed that his shadow followed him in and now pretended to care about a screen and a near-beer. Kovack was ready for him. He hated carrying when he was off duty but not as much as he hated getting shot.

Dillon broke. The balls scattered lazily, the 2-ball stroled to the corner pocket and dropped in like it was falling asleep. Then he missed an easy shot. "Guess I'm out of practice," he said. "They don't even try to design ballistic games on Luna."

Kovack dropped the 9-ball, then missed an easier shot than Dillon's. He didn't feel the need of an excuse. There were excellent virtual options on Mars as well as Luna, indistinguishable from the physical game. He doubted Tom was out of practice.

"I'm gonna try to put this 7 in the side," Dillon announced, eyes on the table, sizing up the shot. It was hard not to make it look easy, but he did his best, letting out a little sigh when the ball rattled into the pocket. "You're quiet tonight," he remarked, lining up his next shot. The cue ball ricocheted off the 4 and rolled into a pocket. He retrieved it and passed it across the table.

"Just naturally blabby, I guess," said Kovack, who promptly sank the 12-ball, then scratched.

"Yeah . . ." Dillon said, taking the cue ball. "Interesting game you're playing."

"How's that?"

"Nothing." Dillon placed the cue ball then proceeded to mow down four balls in short order, leaving one more to dispatch before the 8-ball. He missed.

"Go ahead, hotshot."

Kovack sank four, missed the fifth.

"I don't know what the hell you're up to, Hector, but this game is over." He pocketed the last remaining ball with a bank shot from the opposite end of the table, then called, "8 in the corner."

"By the way," Kovack said, quietly so as not to disturb his opponent's concentration. "I need a sample of your DNA."

Dillon held it together well enough to scratch without shooting the cue ball across the room. "You need what?"

"DNA," said Kovack, retrieving the little

white ball. “Deoxyribonucleic acid. We use it for identifying murder victims and their killers.” He calmly placed the ball on the table, never once looking at Dillon. “We get it from saliva, hair, blood, stuff like that. Or we could use your fingerprints if you prefer.” Smack! The last ball vanished into a side pocket. Not as accomplished as Dillon’s shot, but Kovack wasn’t one for finesse.

“You . . . you can’t have it! I know my rights!”

“That’s okay,” said Kovack. “I’ll get you without them. Funny thing. When somebody invites you to check something it means they’re counting on you not checking. Amateur move; we check everything but especially things that are brought to our attention. Your watchdog log shows your apartment door opening and closing at 8:15, seven minutes before Brenda Hobbs disappeared. You figured that was good enough to place you at home when the crime was committed. It wasn’t. Your lights came on when the door opened, went out when it closed. Nobody home. They stayed out until the door opened again at 12:47. Once I get a warrant I’ll find the programmed command on your home-net; nothing really disappears from cyber-land.

“You borrowed Gilchrist’s auger for both murders. I’ll go over the airlock logs from three months ago when I get a minute and pinpoint exactly when you took poor Hilde Grünehaus for a ride in the desert. It worked so well you decided to make it your MO, so you sabotaged the airlock. Nobody hanging around the repair bay, nothing suspicious about the door opening and closing. You lured both victims to the repair bay—you’ll tell me how later—stripped them, drugged them, loaded them into the tractor and away into the desert. Brenda Hobbs was a handful. She took some of your skin. She also made sure to mark as much as she possibly could, including the E-suit. You’re stupid enough you probably thought she was into you or trying to buy her life with her body.

“Then came the brand. It’s rolled up in your cane, right? That’s why you’re never without it. I don’t know what the PHASE 2 crap is about; maybe the kidnappings on Luna were phase one. You’ll tell me that too.

“Then you drilled a big hole. Everything

you took from the victim was stowed in one of the excavation drones. The robots buried it, then you strangled them, dragged them outside and set up your sick display.

“I know how, Tom, but for God’s sake why? You’ll tell me that, too.”

“Will I?” Dillon was shaken but recovering quickly. “You think I’ll provide a motive to support your crazy speculations about means and opportunity? Maybe you have a pile of facts, but any connection between me and murder is nothing but speculation. Maybe I went right to bed without turning on the lights. Maybe I heard something in the corridor at 12:47 and opened the door to see what it was. And why the movie reveal, Hector? Why not arrest me? Drama is for audiences; serious people don’t stand around delivering exposition. What you have is a story, my friend, that’s all. A story all about you. It’s all you’ve ever had, all you ever will have.”

“Yeah,” said Hector. “You’re probably right. 8-ball in the corner.”

The 8-ball did as it was told. Dillon slammed his cue down on the table and walked out.

Kovack racked the balls, took some shots and ordered a near-beer. Then he made a call.

“Irene? It’s Hector. What’re you doing tonight?”

“Waiting for a call from a tall dark stranger,” she said.

“Oh, okay. Sorry to bother you. We can talk tomorrow. . . .”

“You’re hopeless, Hector. What did you have in mind?”

“I’m at Fats. How about shooting a couple of games?”

“As long as I don’t make you cry,” she said.

“Give me about fifteen minutes. . . . Wait. This is gonna be shop talk, isn’t it?”

“Well, umm . . . yes, it’ll be shop talk. But I’ll buy the beer.”

“Five minutes then.”

Kovack hung up then noticed his shadow was gone, presumably to follow Dillon. The drama had found its audience. So far, so good. The Orchids would probably watch him closely for a while, making sure they had the right man. Campaign workers were still under the protective eye of the police; he’d have to manufacture an opportunity for Dillon to get snatched. If everything went according to

plan, he'd have Dillon in custody before they killed him.

Irene Acuna walked into the pool hall with the long, confident stride and unearthly elegance of a woman who fully belonged to Mars. Feminine physiology often suffered in the first few generations struggling to adapt to strange gravity, raw, elevated radiation, and the constricted, one-size-fits-all technological environment. Irene was a twinkle at the end of the tunnel. Good health was her natural state rather than the hoped-for result of scrupulous conditioning, tailored nutrition, and prescribed drug therapy. Her bones were Martian bones, lightweight, durable, curved along different lines than the dense, heavy framework of her alien ancestors. It was anybody's guess if she was beautiful. Earthlings had neither precedent nor template for comparison. Martians, by and large, had not yet struggled through an enforced egalitarianism to discover their identity and form their own ideas about themselves.

Kovack had no use for biological science and aesthetics but, he had to admit, she was a pleasure to watch.

"¿Dónde está mi cerveza?"

"Right this way," Kovack said in the Columbian dialect learned from his mother. He led her to a small table, where two beers waited. Spanish was not common in D-ville. They could talk freely.

"What's up?" She sipped her beer with a sigh of approval.

"You ready to call your meeting?"

"Just about," she said. "The location is all set up with surveillance and we'll have plenty of troops concealed when they arrive. I let it slip that Joel Osterhaus told a shrink at AOM that he could break into the net from his room using no visible equipment. Probably through his chip or something. The vaguer the better. Turns out, the Orchids have a lot of confidence in Osterhaus."

"Joel and Victor built the Orchids' sub-net," Kovack said. "With his level of paranoia, it stands to reason he would've prepared to keep operating even if he was caught and incarcerated."

"They started searching the net for secret messages. Which Captain Darego and I supplied. We built up a narrative that Osterhaus

can snoop secure cop channels and pass stuff on to them. We tested it by giving some simple instructions, which they followed. Of course, 'Osterhaus' has no authority. He can only provide information and make recommendations. But I think the captain has them positioned to accept a suggestion that they meet to make some big decisions about the crap we're feeding them. We expect them to talk about David Han at length. You want to tell them something?"

"Tell them we know who killed Brenda Hobbs," said Kovack. "We know one of their soldiers is shadowing the suspect, and we intend to pick them both up. If they want him, they'd better nab him quick. They should deliver him to the meeting."

"Why the elaborate plan?" she asked. "If you know who it is, why not bring him in?"

"I don't have enough for an arrest," Kovack said. "And I can't compel him to give up DNA without arresting him."

"What do you have? A motive?"

"Not exactly."

"Means?" she said. "Opportunity? Evidence?"

"I have a theory that nobody else fits," said Kovack.

"Uh-huh." Irene took another sip of her beer. "You want to substitute solid detective work with a quick and dirty confession beaten out of him by the Orchids. It won't work, Hector. That's a confession obtained under duress. It won't even get you an indictment, but your scheme will get you kicked off the force."

"I'm not after his confession," said Kovack. "At least not until he offers it of his own free will after he turns himself in."

"I see. A visit with the Orchids will help him clarify his options. They kill him or we prosecute him. Hmm . . . Mighty thin ice, Hector. I don't think the judge will split the hairs you want split. And your boy could change his story once you save his life."

"It won't matter," said Kovack. "I know where the evidence is. Once he's in custody he can be searched. When we get his DNA, it's all over."

"You're not thinking this through. You're setting up a kidnapping, which you have just confessed to an officer of the law. If they kill him you'll be an accessory to murder."

“Don’t you think I know all that?” Kovack said.

“Then why . . .”

“He’s going to kill again! He can’t not. He can’t stop himself. Don’t you understand what that means? It means humanity’s history is catching up with us, here, on Mars. This guy, he’s like . . . like an animal, he doesn’t even have a rationale like the Orchids. And we grew him, right here, inside a secure society handcrafted to keep creatures like him *out!* He has to be stopped, whatever it takes.”

“What about that pesky law you swore to uphold?”

“I’m one drop of saliva or one fingerprint or one brief search away from nailing him,” said Kovack. “When I see this guy, it’s all right there in front of me. But the law stops me. It protects *him* instead of his next victim.”

“So screw the law, right? The only thing that can stop a man with a gun is a bigger man with a bigger gun, is that it Hector?”

“Look, Irene, I know . . .”

“And how do you know the law is stopping you?” she went on. “Did you try for a warrant to search Gilchrist? Or wait for permission *before* you went in? Did you make a case to Darego to bring your suspect in for questioning? Have you asked anybody about anything? Ever?”

“Irene,” he said. His eyes were on the table, his hands wrapped around his glass of beer in a death grip.

“Look at me when you talk to me,” she said.

He looked at her, all right. He looked at her with fury, with fear, with doubt he didn’t know he had. He looked at her with obsession, compulsion, regret. Most of all he looked at her with pride, sick, exhausted arrogance he’d gladly strangle to death, if he only knew how.

“I know I’m crazy,” he said. Just a fact. “I know it. But it doesn’t make me wrong. The killer has to be stopped, now. It doesn’t matter what happens to me. It doesn’t matter whose feathers get ruffled. It doesn’t matter what gets broken, what wreckage is left behind. He has to be stopped. And he has to pay.”

“Finish the thought,” Irene said. “He has to be stopped by you. You have to make him

pay. Not the law. Not the citizens you serve or the cops you serve with. You.”

Irene finished her beer and stood up. “You need help, Hector. I’ll be the first to help you. I won’t pass your message on to the Orchids. You never asked me. Get some sleep. Tomorrow have a long talk with the captain about how to proceed, then do what she says. Thanks for the beer.”

It was late when Kovack got home and went through his brand-new routine of not drinking before turning in. He was wide awake. A drink would help. His mind spun like a top. A drink would take care of that. He wanted a damn drink! A drink would fix that.

He climbed into bed with no drink and was asleep before he could complain about it.

A short, sharp buzz broke through the barrier of sleep. His weapon was in his hand before his eyes were open. He checked the watchdog screen to see who was at his door.

It was Irene. She was alone.

“Hang on,” he said. He turned on lights and went to the door.

“What is it, Irene?”

“I have an idea. Can I come in?”

“Sure,” said Kovack, standing by the door with his back against the wall, weapon raised and ready. “Come on in.”

The door slid open, and Irene walked in, looking for Hector. She got to the center of the living room, turned around, saw him in the doorway in his pajamas, weapon levelled. She glanced through the open door and laughed.

Kovack spun in time to catch the shock projectile in the side instead of the back. Lieutenant McGill was in the corridor, laughing as Kovack lost control and crashed, twitching, to the floor.

McGill entered the apartment, closed the door, and turned into a demon. Irene, likewise a demon, searched for the security cam, dragged Kovack into the center of its field of view and got out a gag and handcuffs.

Kovack absolutely, positively, could not let her cuff him. The juice from the projectile could keep him twitching for ten seconds to a minute, followed by a period of disorientation and deep fatigue, maybe unconsciousness. He had to act now. With a supreme effort, he flopped onto his belly, hands underneath.

The devil girl laughed, kicked him in the head to settle him down, then rolled him over to get at his hands.

She made a mistake. Kovack was not settled down. Blind with rage, he shrieked like a lunatic, arms and legs thrashing. The devil girl fell back, and Kovack's flailing left foot made solid contact with her head, knocking her cold.

In a panic, devil boy dropped the brand he was assembling and fumbled for the .44 concealed under his tunic. Kovack put everything he had into kicking the lightweight sofa that stood between them, screaming his brains out. Doors opened in the corridor; voices could be heard. The flying sofa caught devil boy across the legs, loosening his trembling grip on the .44, which jumped from his hands and tumbled to the floor.

The projectile's charge was spent. The room swirled, made no sense, quickly faded to hazy gray, on its way to black. Kovack heard the .44 go off once, maybe twice. Then he heard nothing.

"At least now I know you're serious."

Captain Darego sat behind her desk, with a new vase and new flowers carefully placed further from the edge. Her tone was uncharacteristically icy, an improvement over uncharacteristically furious.

Kovack's head was the size of the office, every inch of it throbbing. He had to keep reminding himself it was better than being dead.

"What do we know about these expert ninja assassins?" Darego asked.

"They're idiots," said McGill. "Useless under pressure. It didn't take much to knock them off balance. . . ."

"Excuse me?" said Kovack. His left eye was swollen shut.

"Tactically speaking," McGill clarified. "Mr. Orchid panicked when the super opened the door and he saw the crowd, so he shot Ms. Orchid and himself. Or tried to. Missed by a mile, both times. Like I said, useless under pressure."

"Blanks?" said Kovack.

"Yeah," answered McGill, "but alive ones. No fingerprints, of course. No chip. No DNA in the law enforcement database. Altered faces, so AI recognition won't help. Dental

records or retina scans may turn up something. If not . . ."

"We get court ordered therapy and tear up their minds to find their identity," said Kovack.

"Utopia!" sneered McGill. "God help us all!"

"What?"

"Rights, Hector. That's what. Even criminals have them. Of course, we don't have criminals on Mars, do we? Just patients. Utopians can justify anything, as long as it's for somebody else's own good. Sooner or later, Mars is going to learn some things the hard way."

"We are where we are, Lieutenant," said Darego. "Blanks mean cognizant avatars on the net. I'll contact the Regional Attorney's office to order a scan, but I assume the Orchids have updated the cogs' configuration. We'll need our gunslingers' IDs to track down their avatars."

"How does this affect Acuna's plan to call a meeting?" Kovack asked.

"It shouldn't," Darego said. "The media reported on the shootings and said they had no word on the perpetrators' condition. Osterhaus will tell them they're dead."

"They'll wonder why we don't tell that to the media," Kovack pointed out. "They'll assume we're playing games."

"All the more reason for a meeting," said McGill. "So far, they've been reacting. They'll want a plan to get themselves out ahead of us. Irene set it up for 3 A.M. tomorrow at the K5 remote weather station, ten miles northwest of here. The plan is we listen in for anything incriminating. If we hear something useful, we round them up. If not, we still have the option of arresting them for trespassing. Will you be in shape to join us, Deadeye?"

"Sure," Kovack answered. It was a bold declaration. A bottle and a week of sleep was about all he was in shape for.

Kovack returned to his desk to find a handwritten note waiting for him. Blue ink on white paper, both rare commodities on Mars. He reached to pick it up, stopped himself. Something told him not to touch it.

He sat down and read.

*We have Tom Dillon.* It was written in superbly neat cursive, possibly using a fountain pen. Nobody wrote like that anymore. He

could only read it because his mother had taught it to him and Victor when they were kids. They used it as a secret code.

*If you want him, come and get him. 3 A.M. tomorrow, weather station K5. If you want him alive, come alone.* It was signed *The People of Mars*.

He called Tom. He got a holo of his friend tied to a chair under a spotlight in a dark, empty room, hands behind his back, head hanging down, moaning. Savage red marks across his chest; the image was too small to confirm he was branded. After five seconds the holo vanished. He called again but was notified the number was no longer active.

On Saturday, at 2:55 A.M., Hector Kovack climbed out of the open E-Jeep parked a hundred yards from the K5 airlock. No Mobility Assist Unit this time; he didn't need a set of training wheels slowing him down. Amphetamines would supply all the juice he needed.

He told Darego everything. She didn't even bother flaming him. She'd had it with Detective Kovack. The captain sent him back to his desk then went to work turning the wrenches he'd thrown into features rather than bugs. Step one was for Kovack to walk into an ambush all by himself, unarmed, unsupported, and see what he could do with the homicidal maniacs who wanted him dead.

Kovack made footprints in the powdery dust, guided by the airlock beacon, thinking very little. He would get Tom. The Orchids wanted a recorded confession, delivered to a cop, handed over to the media to clear them of Brenda Hobbs' murder in the eyes of the public. They wanted to set the record straight, no matter how many innocent people they had to butcher. He could promise that. Then they may or may not kill Tom. He couldn't allow that.

He made it through the airlock without being shot in the head. "Must be killing them," he thought.

The automated weather station was short on human-friendly amenities. There was a small cafeteria, spartan quarters for maintenance crews or visiting meteorologists, a control room, and pressurized access to stores. Kovack's instructions only told him to show up. He was a minute early, so he pulled off his gauntlets, twisted off his helmet, and waited.

He was in a small, dark anteroom with three doorways. The place was cold and dry. It smelled like dust and electricity, plus the faint, ever-present sulphur-and-rust odor of the planet itself. The low hum of flowing power was the only sound.

At 3 on the dot the door to his left slid open. Kovack saw exactly what he expected to see; a figure in a black, hooded robe, with a mask that looked like him and an impatient 9mm in a gloved right hand.

The Orchid didn't bother searching the cop for weapons. Supremely confident or stupid, but right in either case. Kovack was unarmed. "This way."

He was led down a short corridor dimly illuminated by yellow emergency lights, to a small compartment used as quarters. Two wire-mesh bunks were folded against the wall to make space. There was a table with various articles including water and some medical gear, a bright white lamp in the ceiling, hooded and focused like a spotlight, and a holo camera pointed at a bloody, black-and-blue man tied to a chair. PHASE 2 blazed red and raw across his chest. The shaft of a black cane lay on the floor, with a folding metal brand screwed into one end. A stool for the interrogator sat outside the cone of light falling on the moaning man.

"You have one hour," said the Orchid. The voice was androgynous and without character, possibly AI filtered; they thought of everything. "Record his confession. Take the camera with you when you leave."

"What happens to him?" said Kovack.

"We'll decide that when his confession is aired."

"Not good enough. He leaves with me."

The Orchid made a small sound behind the mask, possibly a chuckle, then left them alone, locking the door from the outside.

Kovack put his helmet and gauntlets down on the floor and squirmed out of the environmental suit.

"Tom," he called, loud and harsh. "Come on, wake up!" He found smelling salts among the paraphernalia on the table, cracked a capsule and waved it under Dillon's nose.

"Leave me alone! I already told you . . ."

"Told me what?" said Kovack, checking the back of the chair to see if he could free Dillon's arms. His wrists were tightly bound with

stiff wire. He found the twisted ends and carefully started untwisting.

"Hector? Zat you?"

"Yeah. I think I can get your hands free. . . ."

"After you're done with that, go to hell."

"Everybody wants me to go to hell," Kovack complained, concentrating on the wire cutting into Dillon's swollen wrists. "Listen, I need to ask you some questions. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand?"

Dillon screamed as the bloody wire was unwound. Kovack tossed it onto the floor.

"Take it slow. Relax and flex the arms a little at a time." He found water on the table, tested it then held it to Dillon's lips.

"Am I under arrest?"

"No. You're not under arrest. But think about where you are and why. It'll be good for both of us if you could answer some questions."

Dillon winced and set his damaged hands in his lap.

"Okay."

"Do you waive your right to an attorney?"

"Unless you have one in your pocket. Ask."

"Did you kill Brenda Hobbs?"

"What's in it for me?" Dillon said.

"I can't make deals, Tom. After we're out of here it'll be a jail cell, arraignment, and a trial. And a trip to the hospital to get you fixed up." Kovack looked around the tiny room. "After we're out of here," he emphasized.

"Maybe that's not so bad," Tom said quietly.

"I could use some rest. But I can't stop until somebody tells me it's time. . . ."

"It's time," Hector said. "Did you kill Brenda Hobbs?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"What do you mean?" said Tom. "You know why. I never pick a game I can't win. Like when we were kids. Pool, soccer, hide and seek. Especially hide and seek. Nobody beat me, not even you. Then politics. Murder was the easiest. Just because they didn't want to believe it; that's all it took. They always said natural causes. That meant I was too good at it, too far ahead of them. Nobody could touch me. So I came home. There's no place like

home, Hector. I tried to make it a little easier for you, unmistakable, bigger clues. Fear, big and splashy, like comic books. You see how hard it was. Nobody even found Hilde so I stuck Brenda where she couldn't be missed. Then the Orchids stole my fear. Stole it!"

"Wait, what? There were more besides Hilde Grünehaus and Brenda Hobbs?"

"Not on Mars."

"How many did you kill on Luna, Tom?"

"Five. Five lovely ladies. But I was too careful. Too clever by half. I wanted them to work hard, find subtle clues and let fear seep into them like the fragrance of flowers taken away after a funeral. But you know these people, Hector. Hard heads, no fear, efficiency and neatness *über alles*. They'll never investigate a crime if they don't believe in crime. They stopped at the first plausible explanation.

"But you know what? The women knew, every one of them. They wanted . . . They were like these moths who understood fire and they wanted to flutter close enough to singe the tips of their wings then fly away, with their little burns as souvenirs. Bored with the strait jacket of other people's dreams. Connoisseurs of fine fears! Ha! Their desires were safe and phony as the technobubbles they had to live in. They didn't know the real fear starts when your wings are in flames and the fire is all that's left.

"Luna was loaded with them, Hector. I saw their cities when we came down, Mom and Dad and me, and I knew what they were and what I could do. I had power. . . ."

"Power counts, even in the hands of little old nobodies."

"You remembered," Tom approved. "That's because you know it's true."

"How did you get Brenda to meet you at the repair bay?"

"She was lonely," said Tom. "Not *that* way. That was Hilde, a freaky thrill seeker. Brenda was a poet in a sea of engineers. We had that in common."

"How did the Orchids nab you?"

"I shook off my bodyguard," said Tom.

"Why?"

For the first time since Kovack arrived Tom looked him in the eye. "I had an appointment."

"Ok, Tom." Kovack wanted to collapse, forget everything he ever knew about anything,

fall into dreamless sleep until the fractured world pulled itself together and started making sense. But he was full of amphetamines. He was investigating a crime. His friend was in imminent danger. "I think that's all I need officially but don't forget your rights. Be careful about what you tell me."

"I'm always careful, Hector. Not like you. You know they're not letting us out of here, right? Whatever they told you, they're going to kill us both."

"I know. Are you able to stand up? Wait, take this."

"What is it?"

"Pep pill."

"Shouldn't you be cuffing me, maybe shocking me into submission?" Dillon said, washing down the pill.

"You're not under arrest," said Kovack. "It's going to take both of us to get out of here in one piece." He treated Dillon's burns, abrasions, and lacerations as best he could with the E-suit's first aid pack then handed him a dirty shirt he found lying on the floor. A nice, expensive shirt that came all the way from Earth. Lucky Tom Dillon, the big shot. "Get dressed."

"When did you know it was me?" Tom asked, struggling with the fasteners on his shirt. His hands worked well enough, as long as he ignored the pain.

"Always," Hector said. "Before you did it. Before you thought of doing it. By the way you talked about your mom and dad behind their backs, with hate and condescension, expecting me to laugh and agree. I knew it by the way you treated the girls in our class and acted like it made you big, even after Sally Fry knocked your tooth out. They took you away for a week after that. You gave them what they wanted; you were a model patient, but I knew you were playing another game, making suckers out of them. All you really learned was how to bury hate and insecurity deeper, keeping it churned, ready for when it was needed.

"I knew it when my dad died and you said nothing, and my mom died and you said nothing, and my brother died and you said nothing and you should've hated me for killing him but you didn't. You never fooled me, Tom, not even for a minute. You've never been a human. I just had to grow up enough

to admit it."

"Saint Hector the prophet," Tom snorted. "Standing up to Achilles, defending the honor of Troy. Screw you, friend!"

Footsteps approached, running. Both men flattened themselves against the wall on either side of the door. Tom had the cane in his hands, raised like a baseball bat.

The door slid open, and the aimless 9mm blasted away. Three flashes, three panicked explosions before the shooter realized he shot at nothing. The Orchid made a bad call and came through the door to investigate.

Down came Dillon's cane on the extended arm, knocking the gun to the floor. Kovack grabbed the robe and slammed the Orchid into the wall. An amphetamine-fueled right cross finished the job.

Kovack kneeled and pulled off the mask. He didn't recognize the man in the robe. He grabbed the still-recording camera and pointed it at the man on the floor.

"That should do it," he said.

"That should do it," Dillon agreed. The gun was in his hand. The business end was inches from Kovack's face.

Kovack moved to a sitting position. "Go ahead, Achilles," he said. "Here." He tossed the camera to Dillon. "There's your confession. You have an E-suit here. Put it on, go out the airlock, walk straight for a hundred yards. There's an E-Jeep with maps, a cop key that opens every door on Mars, and enough charge to get you to a safe hide out. You can have this guy's holo mask. Play it right and you can keep them looking for months, maybe even get off the planet. Go ahead and shoot."

"You think I won't?"

"I think you won't. I think you need a victim's fear to get you over the hump. But I'm not always right."

"You don't care, do you?" Dillon said.

"I don't care." And he didn't.

"Have it your way, hero. Say hi to Brenda Hobbs."

Kovack didn't blink when the report rang through the compartment. Dillon's arm jerked upward; the gun went off. Then Dillon was on the floor writhing, with a shock projectile glowing in his back.

"We need to have a talk about unorthodox policing methods," said McGill, holstering his

weapon. He got the cuffs on Dillon's swollen, bleeding wrists, making sure they were good and tight, then turned his attention to Detective Kovack. "Close call, huh? Bet you thought you were dead when you heard me shoot him. You okay?"

Kovack heard shouting, running, more shock weapons, a few handguns. The pandemonium was over almost before it started.

"Maybe," he said. He was shivering like a puppy in a snowstorm. He couldn't stop. "Maybe I am."

It wasn't like Margie Bulack to hang in the background, keeping her profile low and quiet. The citation, delivered by Lieutenant McGill himself, affected neither her business nor her reputation; the first offense carried no penalties. But it stung just the same.

She delivered the lunch orders to the four cops buried deep in their cop stuff personally rather than leaving it to the drones. The D-ville's window screens showed a beautiful view of Dallas, Texas with a brand-new stadium and a big blue star hanging in the sky.

"Nice view, Blondie," grumbled McGill.

"It's the least I could do," said Margie. She didn't bother with a wise-guy smile. "Will there be anything else?"

"Not till the playoffs," said McGill. "Start saving up."

Detective Kovack sat at the table with McGill, Acuna, and Darego, looking comfortable as an ice cube in the sun. One look told Margie his whole story. She retreated to the kitchen, giving Kovack a lot of thought.

"You'll be happy to know, Lieutenant," said Captain Darego, "the two suspects from Kovack's apartment were identified by conventional means. One had a broken arm when he was a child, the other had a birthmark. We were able to get a warrant to search medical records."

"Still dicey," complained McGill, "but better than mindreading. How did we do on the raid?"

"We got six of the nine cell leaders," Acuna reported. "Three shot themselves dead, but we have their identities. We think they were the top-level leaders; we're following up. They haven't given up David Han's killers yet, but they will. We confiscated twelve handguns and got a lead on where they are being

made. I'd say I got everything I was after, with a lot of help from the other precincts involved."

"What about you, Detective Kovack?"

"It's all in my report, Captain."

"No, it's not," said Captain Darego. "Tom Dillon is a friend of yours, isn't he? You went after him mighty hard."

"Just like I did Victor," said Kovack. "It's my job."

"Is it?" said Darego. "If it was just your job, you wouldn't break laws and rules for fear of losing it. I never knew your family, and I never knew your friend, but I doubt you would raise the fist of the law against them for the sake of a job."

"You are a man of justice, Detective, even above law. You have my respect."

It was a fine thing for the Captain to say by way of setting the record straight, but Irene Acuna could see the weight of it. Her colleague could use some help getting out from under.

"You still owe me a game at Fats," she reminded him.

"I do," Kovack acknowledged. "I'll pay up soon. Right now, I have to get back to the precinct. Joel Osterhaus' trial is coming up. I . . . I have to get ready to testify."

He stood up. "Feel free to take my pilaf," he said, looking at McGill.

"Thanks."

On his way to the exit Kovack spotted Margie Bulack working in the kitchen. "Hey, Detective," she said, "Come here for a minute. I have something for you."

"What is it, Ms. Bulack?"

She handed him a bottle full of the purest, clearest liquid.

Kovack turned the bottle in his hands, thinking of the stinging smell, the fiery taste, the warm, growing amnesia taking him further and further away from himself, the only place he could stand to be. He'd earned that much, hadn't he?

After a moment of silence, he handed it back to her. "I think it's time we both grew up, Ms. Bulack."

"I'm glad you said that, Hector." She took the bottle, unscrewed the cap. "I think so too." Down the drain went Kovack's ticket to oblivion.

"Smart move, Ms. Bulack."

She took his cool, pale hand between hers. She was the color of fine cappuccino, warm as the Sun beaming its peace across the pleasant lands of the storied Earth. Her eyes were green, shining like the Earth's living seas.

"My name is Margie, Hector. Don't forget it."

He never did. ■

*Harry Lang's stories have appeared in Bewildering Stories, Quantum Muse, Story Unlikely, and Analog Science Fiction Magazine.*