

May 14, 2040

The Martian sky turns slate-blue at sunset. Near the horizon, the sun's rays push through a thick enough layer of atmosphere to scatter some blue photons, a phenomenon taken for granted on Earth, where it happens all day. The smudgy, halfhearted blue made Izzy De Maria think she wasn't that far from home.

And this time she wasn't, given her ability to literally walk back to California from the Martian surface. The network of instantaneous-travel portals made visiting Mars a much different feeling than when it took her months to get there, she was injured in a crash-landing, and she almost starved to death marooned on the planet. It was a great deal more hospitable now.

It helped that she could look around and imagine the stark, rusty ejecta and cliffs and canyons and gullies were part of the Arizona desert, ruddy and rocky and undisturbed. Crash landings and starving to death didn't encourage one to look around, let alone imagine anything.

She had zoned out while admiring the sunset and the landscape when a human avatar of the Pelorian Persisting appeared and called to her, mind-to-mind.

"Are you ready to go inside?"

"Sure," Izzy replied in kind. They were both encumbered by T-fields and breathing bubbles. "I wondered how I was going to get someone to let me in. I thought maybe sign language."

"We'll get you that Sidereal language upload first thing," Persisting said. "You may be pleasantly surprised when you find out how many Sidereals have had the English upload, though. Even those who aren't that thrilled about having a relationship with humans." There were only a few thousand Sidereals, Izzy knew. These days, they actually had a fairly good chance of encountering a human.

Izzy and Persisting shuffle-bounded in thirty percent gravity, kicking up grit and dust. “We,” Izzy said absently. “As in, we’ll get you the upload. You sound like you’ve made yourself at home.”

“It hasn’t been an easy two weeks,” Persisting said. “Pelorians don’t get along with the Sidereals. But we need an envoy here, and I drew the short straw.”

“Probably easier for you in human form with their pressure and oxygen level. Plus you’re super strong.” They both were, as products of much heavier Earth gravity.

“That, and being humanoid, or Siderealoid, I guess, looking more like them—they thought that medicine would go down easier.” He shrugged. “But I suppose I’m feeling particularly productive today. For whatever reason.”

“Which one are you?”

“Which avatar of Persisting?” There were several, Izzy knew. The original had been executed for treason by the Pelorians for aiding the enemy—humankind. That war was over now. “I don’t think you’d know who I was if I told you.”

“You’re not the one who’s good friends with Conn,” Izzy said.

“No,” Persisting said. “I’ve never even met that one.”

“OK. I guess you’re right, I wouldn’t know which particular one you are if you’re not that one.”

They came to some stairs down into the bowels of the planet. They descended carefully. The artificial light was weak, enough for shadows to cast the stairs and their users in dull relief.

“You’re going to manage perchlorate production and distribution,” Persisting said.

“That’s right,” Izzy said.

“That’s good,” Persisting said. “Dyna-Tech sends people who are only concerned about the weapons. I think the Sidereals are hyper-organized enough to figure out how to provide your company with perchlorates from the soil, too, but it can’t hurt to have someone here being a squeaky wheel.”

“We need reliable procedures in place before Mars goes around the sun.” When the sun was between Earth and Mars, as would happen within weeks, the portal network wouldn’t have the line-of-sight needed to operate. Mars would be human-free for months.

“I’m sure they’ll appreciate your efforts, and give you what you need.”

“You’ve gotten to know them pretty well?”

They came to an airlock. They entered. “It’s been a busy two weeks,” Persisting said, grinning.

The series of tunnels and warrens where the Sidereals made their home had an ambient air pressure like Earth’s, much stronger than Mars’, with a similar atmosphere composition to home as well. Once the pressure inside the airlock matched the pressure in the tunnels, they drew off their breathing bubbles and O2 tanks, shut off their T-fields, and emerged. A Sidereal in a cubby just the other side of the airlock took their equipment, for retrieval when they returned to the surface.

“A word of caution,” Persisting said, this time out loud. “You’re liable to encounter some opposition to your being here, from—”

A Sidereal figure was before them; where he’d come from Izzy couldn’t have said. She decided he must have been waiting for them. He growled something at them in the Sidereal language. Persisting, rather than translating, said, “—Cundrum. The opposition leader.” He gestured at Cundrum, by way of introduction. “You know Jefrillid? Jeffrey, as I think you called him?” Izzy nodded, eyes on the tall Sidereal. “Cundrum is who used to be in charge, before Jefrillid. He has designs on being in charge again, sooner than later.” To Cundrum, Persisting said something in Sidereal. Cundrum replied.

Persisting paraphrased his translation: “Neither humans nor Pelorians are welcome here, according to Cundrum. He’d prefer it if we’d turn around and go back outside. Without our equipment.”

Izzy had spent enough time around Sidereals to be able to pretend they weren’t alien. They were taller than the average human, owing to the lighter gravity on Mars, but they were shaped the same. Cundrum, on the other hand, seemed uniquely alien at that moment, the patches of deep gray on his red skin roiling and shifting shape, his eyes a sickly yellow. The red/gray color didn’t extend as far as his fingernails, which, lighter, looked like claws. To further intimidate, he moved closer, and loomed over them. He growled something else that Persisting didn’t bother to translate before replying in kind. Izzy wanted that language upload.

Whatever Persisting said, it made Cundrum stand aside, and Persisting quickly moved past him, gesturing for Izzy to follow. “What did he say?” Izzy asked.

“I’ve already provided a good summary,” Persisting said. “Let’s get you the language, so you can hear firsthand next time. Cundrum knows English, by the way. He just wanted you not to understand him, while you still don’t have the Sidereal language.”

“Is Cundrum going to be a problem? Interstellar Aerospace has a deal with Jeffrey—”

“Cundrum is very aware of that, which is why I think, for all his bluster, he won’t really interfere. He hasn’t with me.” Izzy appraised the avatar then. Pelorian avatars were made from dead bodies, so in a sense, she was walking with a ghost. This one approached six feet tall, and was thickly built, in all the right places to appear solid and strong. His dust-brown hair was receding, revealing creases and crevices; he looked like he was in his forties. His green eyes were narrow as he spoke about Cundrum. “He’s made enough noise though to get an invitation to the White House. That’s the last thing he said—the Sidereal equivalent of go to hell, followed by and I’ll tell your president that, too.”

“They must think he can make real trouble if they want to meet him in DC.”

Persisting shrugged. “I can only say how the Pelorians see him. Your government would be hearing from the Dyna-Tech people. Who still show up regularly, contrary to Cundrum’s express wishes.”

Izzy found little comfort in that.

May 16-June 1, 2040

Cundrum and his minions might have been passed off as annoyances by Persisting, but it became clear to Izzy quickly that they weren’t all talk. More than simply believing their isolationist, anti-human agenda reflected the will of the Sidereal people, they openly questioned the legitimacy of the election that had brought Jeffrey to power. Izzy had played a small part in that election, helping guard polling places from threats of voter intimidation by Cundrum’s own people. If anyone had a complaint about how the election had been conducted, it was Jeffrey’s faction, whose supporters had been discouraged from voting in election after election, including the last one. With human astronauts making Sidereals

finally feel safe voting, Jeffrey had come out on top.

That Cundrum would resort to violence or the threat of violence again was likely enough for the American government to get involved, and Izzy could understand why. The Aphelials, an alien race bent on wiping out humankind, weren't done with Earth yet, and it had only been a Sidereal weapon that had defeated them the first time. Jeffrey's people were willing to trade weapons (and perchlorates, chemicals from the Martian soil, which could be used to produce cheap but powerful rocket fuel—that was Izzy's purview) for nitrogen, the most plentiful gas in Earth's atmosphere, which the Sidereals could use as a power source. Some other consideration was involved, such as Pelorian forgers—machines that turned the rawest of raw materials into useful products and substances. But to those whose business it was to keep the Earth safe, it was nitrogen-for-weapons, weapons which would be crucial to humankind's defense when the Aphelials returned. The US government couldn't have xenophobic dissidents intimidating humans and threatening production and trade.

On her second trip to Mars—she came and went via portal, avoiding having to stay overnight in the Sidereal underground—Izzy was in a meeting with some of Jeffrey's people, going over perchlorate delivery expectations and the logistics of getting both nitrogen to Mars and perchlorates to Earth. The Sidereals seemed more than competent. Persisting hadn't been far off calling them hyper-organized. Things seemed to be going smoothly enough that Izzy began to doubt she needed to come to Mars as often as every other day as scheduled. But Luan Yongpo was the boss of Interstellar Aerospace, her company, and he wanted her there that often, so that was that.

During this particular meeting, two of Cundrum's thugs came barging in demanding seats at the conference table. They were rebuffed, but refused to leave. Persisting arrived then, almost as though he'd been waiting outside to see if those in the room could deal with the intrusion before acting himself. Persisting said he'd come from Cundrum, who had agreed to leave the meeting to be conducted in peace. The intruders seemed to believe him only reluctantly, but it made them stand down. As they left, Persisting smiled and nodded to the room, lingering with a friendly smile at Izzy. She was grateful for the Pelorian's efforts, and smiled back.

"The American president will make sure this kind of thing doesn't keep happening,"

one of Jeffrey's people said. To Izzy specifically, she said, "We need your nitrogen, and your forgers. Even Cundrum has to see that."

"We were in poverty and squalor when Cundrum was in charge," another added. "Only Cundrum and those like him were well off. No one is anxious to walk that path again."

Izzy nodded sagely, while harboring some doubt that a simple meeting with the president would solve everything. Lanihan had probably been briefed on the situation, but didn't understand it with the depth of someone who had been to Mars. Could he really be expected to wave his president-wand and make Cundrum go away?

Izzy's third visit to Mars made it starkly clear that Cundrum's people needed to be reined in. Once again, she was greeted just beyond the cubby where she left her O2 tanks and breathing bubble, this time by two of Cundrum's subordinates. They opened with bluster, like Cundrum himself had on her first visit. But they wouldn't step aside to let Izzy through.

"I'm expected. By Jefrillid," she told them. "I need to get through." The artificial light this close to the airlock wasn't much better than on the stairs down. The tunnel was also a tighter fit than the tunnels further on were.

"Jefrillid does like his humans. Human women, especially," one of the goons said.

"I don't know why," the other said. "You don't look that important to me."

"I can move you aside if I need to," Izzy said, hoping they were acquainted with how strong Earthlings were on Mars. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Are you threatening us?" one goon said. The other acted, seizing Izzy's arm and spinning her around. Before she could react, a small but very sharp-looking knife was at her throat.

"You need to learn manners," the Sidereal holding her said. He poked her neck hard enough to break the skin.

With a thud and a dull pop, Izzy drove her elbow into the goon's rib cage. His grip loosened. She spun around and pushed him hard against the stone tunnel wall. The breath was forced out of his lungs with a whoof. He crumpled, groaning in pain, yelping when his weight came down on the side where his ribs had been broken.

His companion's look was as dagger-sharp as the knife had been, but he stepped to the side and let Izzy through. She hurried past and then down the length of the tunnel, not looking back.

After that, an Interstellar Aerospace astronaut named Jamari Robideaux accompanied Izzy on her trips to the red planet. Safety in numbers.

During the period of May twenty-first through the twenty-fifth, when Cundrum was in Washington, his goons were conspicuously quiet. It was a welcome respite. Persisting was gone, too—he hadn't said anything to Izzy about participating in the DC meeting, but maybe he was. Or maybe he didn't have any Pelorian interests to guard without Cundrum's people causing trouble, and took a few days off.

Cundrum had been accompanied to Washington by two attendants. On Jeffrey's side, Jeffrey plus three had gone. Their return didn't immediately promise any improvement in relations, as Cundrum and Jeffrey publicly traded statements that said they'd come out of the DC meetings in the best position. On the other hand, Cundrum's two lieutenants, who could normally be counted on to be among the most vocal rabble-rousers, with or without Cundrum's orders or even his express approval, were oddly pliant and stayed out of trouble. If that was the extent of the success of the meetings, Izzy felt it would have been progress. What she got was more complicated, though.

Cundrum's people would still harass Izzy and Jamari when they came in from outside—vocally, at least. That was no different as May ended. Another meeting was interrupted, and was even more difficult to get on track without Persisting's aid. Yet change was in the Earthlike air of the Sidereals' tunnels and warrens.

Jeffrey and Cundrum had a public meeting May twenty-eighth, which was Memorial Day in California, and Izzy and Jamari were dispatched to attend on what should have been their day off. The meeting amounted to little more than a list of grievances each faction had against the other, many of which were esoteric enough to be beyond Izzy. What was remarkable about it was rather that the two were appearing in public together and airing their complaints in front of a smallish audience, which included two representatives from Dyna-Tech, and Persisting, who had returned to the red planet. Remarkable too was that the two sides agreed to meet again, privately, as though they had created some forward momentum. Maybe the president, or someone in Washington—Janus Gordon, the National Security Authority director?—had made more progress with the two than it seemed at first.

Izzy sought out Persisting afterward, soliciting his opinion. "I think it's all very positive," the Pelorian said. "I wouldn't be surprised to see some sort of power-sharing

arrangement come of it.” Izzy thought that sounded unlikely, but Persisting had made the political situation on Mars his business in a way Izzy hadn’t made it hers.

In fact it was that Friday, June first, when Jeffrey announced an accord between his faction and Cundrum’s. Jeffrey and his people would still be over what they called foreign policy—the relationship between the Sidereals and humans, and Pelorians. Cundrum would assume a larger role in the administration of domestic policy. Jeffrey had to know this wouldn’t go over well with many of his supporters, but he emphasized that with nitrogen flowing and the first of several promised forgers from the Pelorians operational, it would be easier for Cundrum to equitably spread the wealth. The days of scarcity in the colony were over, and with them went the incentive to take care of a select few and leave the rest in the lurch.

The colony’s council, which had been in charge of both foreign and domestic policy, would serve in a subordinate, advisory capacity. That struck even Izzy as dramatic, and Jeffrey seemed to be downplaying it. His statement wrapped up by assuring his human partners that weaponry and perchlorates would continue to be produced or provided. He thanked the Americans and their president for their role in brokering what would no doubt prove to be a positive relationship benefiting all Sidereals.

Izzy again approached Persisting, this time about his seeming to have predicted just the outcome that had materialized. The Pelorian shrugged and said he had his finger on the Sidereal pulse; that was his job.

“That seems like a weirdly specific prediction to make. And then it comes true.”

“There was talk of such a thing when the parties returned from DC,” Persisting said.

“You weren’t here.”

“I heard anyway. I have cultivated reliable sources here on Mars.”

Izzy let it go.

June 5-12, 2040

The pace of perchlorate delivery was to pick up some. Interstellar Aerospace wanted to get as much nitrogen to Mars and perchlorates to Earth as possible before the portal network went down. Izzy was explaining this in a meeting when two of Cundrum's people arrived, apologized for being late, and seated themselves at the conference table. Izzy looked around the room at those Sidereals she had started the meeting with, and all regarded her strangely. As though to say, Didn't you know Cundrum's people would be in this meeting too?

"How is this domestic policy?" she asked. "I mean—what business is it of Cundrum's?"

"The quality of life of the Sidereals digging the soil and sifting the perchlorates out and delivering them through the portal, of the Sidereals receiving and processing the nitrogen, that's domestic policy," one of the new arrivals said, not contentiously. "We want to make sure we're apprised of any change in production levels or acceleration of schedules."

Izzy didn't know what else to say, so she said, "Fine. But we've taken care of most everything already."

"We're sorry we're late," the other new arrival told her. "We were only instructed to attend ten minutes ago."

"By whom?"

"Jefrillid."

That was easy enough to verify, so it was likely the truth. Izzy shrugged and soldiered on.

After the meeting, she sought an audience with Jeffrey. He could make time for her in two days, the next day she was scheduled to be on Mars. She thanked him.

"It's not up to me how you share power," she said to Jeffrey two days later, in English. "Go nuts. I just want to make sure the people I'm suddenly letting into my meetings aren't there to undermine me in some way."

"I don't know what go nuts means, but I can assure you you're not being undermined," Jeffrey said. He was a standoffish sort, treating even questions and suggestions about how he did things like full-on attacks. He was true to form now. "Our alliance with Cundrum's faction is fragile, and will be for some time. We need to make an extra effort, on both sides, to ensure we're including everybody in what we do. I will appreciate your

compliance.”

“No problem, like I said,” Izzy said. “Just wanted to make sure it was on the up-and-up.”

“The up-and...?”

“Legitimate. I wanted to make sure you were aware.”

During the next meeting, Cundrum’s people were on time, and silent throughout. Izzy should have been grateful for this, but it only made her more suspicious. She decided to schedule a meeting with Cundrum himself.

Cundrum had no availability for her until the twelfth, and he only grudgingly agreed to meet then. “Jefferlid should be able to verify for you that my people are to participate in your meetings,” he told her, trying to avoid a meeting.

“And he did,” Izzy said. “I’m more wanting to make sure I’m getting your people what they need.” She thought that approach might make things easier. She was really after a sense of this Sidereal who had greeted her on her first day on Mars by telling her to go to hell. Had he really changed so?

The week between scheduling the meeting and the meeting passed without incident, other than some terrible personal news. Doctors mending her friend Conn after her space capsule crash-landing in Chicago had discovered she had Acute Myeloid Leukemia, almost certainly from exposure to cosmic radiation on her various journeys through space. Izzy herself had been bombarded with radiation for months on the way to Mars, but her mind was only on her friend when she heard the news.

“What can they do?” she asked Conn over the fone. “What are your options?”

“Chemo,” Conn said. “I start Thursday here in the hospital. About ten days later I can go home and get it outpatient. We’ll figure out what comes next when we see how I respond.”

“Persisting is still staying with you?”

“He’s taking great care of me, yes,” Conn said.

Izzy told of her own Persisting, managing Pelorian affairs on Mars. “He seems like the type who would do anything to accomplish what needs to be done,” Izzy said. “I’m sure you’re in good hands. Once I’m done with this Mars gig, I can help out, too.”

They talked, and cried, and commiserated for another half an hour. Then Conn had to

go, because she had several more calls to make. Izzy hung up sick to her stomach, and not knowing if she could endure a workday on Mars the next day.

But she set it aside, because she had to. She came to Mars June twelfth ready to confront Cundrum and take his measure. She was alone, numbers no longer necessary to ensure safety.

Cundrum's office was appointed in such a way, it seemed to Izzy, as to make it look like he was trying to impress humans. Or even imitate them. There was a picture of Cundrum with President Lanihan prominently displayed. Human art adorned the walls. Jeffrey's office made Izzy wonder how he ever got any work done; everything seemed so out of place, so alien in form and function. Cundrum's office could have been in California.

"I can't tell what you think of my office," Cundrum said, surprising Izzy with English instead of Sidereal. "You're looking at it very intently. Aghast, or do you like what you see?"

"I like it fine," Izzy said, meaning it. "It's a lot different from Jefrillid's office. That's all."

"I was quite taken with your planet," Cundrum offered. "The gravity almost killed us, but if you could look beyond that, it was a robust, very energizing experience. I'm recommending trips to Earth to just about everyone I meet."

How many new Sidereals do you meet? Izzy wondered, but didn't ask aloud. "I'm glad you had such a good time."

"What part of...I guess I just assume it's America? What part of America are you from?"

"Arizona," Izzy said. "My family is originally from Mexico, though."

"Both far from Washington," Cundrum observed. "It's a big place, Earth."

"That it is. Look, I'm sorry if my head's not really on straight right now. I just found out my good friend has leukemia. It's a cancer of the—it's a usually fatal disease. It's been a tough twenty-four hours."

"This is...who, exactly?"

"My friend Conn. The one who used the gravity gun to bring down the Aphelials over Chicago."

The Sidereal's roiling gray blotches slowed their morphing, and Cundrum drew back behind his desk. He regarded Izzy with a question on his face for several moments. Izzy wasn't sure what to say.

She tried, “I guess why I wanted to meet was—”

“You want to make sure you can trust me,” Cundrum said.

“You’ve done a pretty drastic about-face.”

“It probably seems that way, yes. But I’ve known all along that we need and want your nitrogen and the Pelorian forgers. I just never wanted us to be in an inferior position. I wanted to make sure we were equal partners in the endeavor. I’ve become convinced you want that, too.”

“It’s a sticky wicket,” Izzy said. “We obviously need your weapons, especially. Without them, we have no chance against the Aphelials.”

“I don’t see that as something that ought to make our relationship more difficult, as you suggest. I rather think that we need one another, and that’s a great place to be, in a partnership.”

“Politics make strange bedfellows.”

“We have a similar saying,” Cundrum said. “You might loosely translate it as a friend is an enemy pointed in the right direction.”

Izzy thanked the Sidereal. As she left his office, he said, “I’m very sorry to hear about Conn.”

“Thank you.”

She needed to talk to Persisting. Now.

June 14-18, 2040

She couldn’t find the Pelorian that day, the twelfth. When she arrived back on Mars on the fourteenth, she learned that Persisting had been sent home—politely ejected from the Sidereal colony.

She confronted Jeffrey about the seemingly sudden move. “It was cleared by your president,” Jeffrey huffed. “His presence was only causing anxiety and difficulty. Once we got the Pelorian forger and the promise of more, his job was done anyway.”

This development didn't make Izzy want to speak to Persisting less, but rather more. She had no luck finding out where he was on the fifteenth. She asked some contacts to do some digging for her while she went to Mars on the sixteenth, and they came through for her. Persisting, that particular avatar, made his home in the DC area.

Izzy flew there on the seventeenth, hired a ride to the appropriate address, and rapped hard on the door.

"Izzy," the avatar said in greeting. "What a nice surprise."

"What did you do to Cundrum?"

"I've no idea what you mean. Cundrum had me removed from Mars."

"That wasn't Cundrum," Izzy said.

"I don't follow," Persisting said, stiffly.

"I met with him," Izzy said. "He was shaken by the news that Conn has leukemia."

"Conn has leukemia?" Persisting said.

"Don't change the subject. Then I intentionally used English idioms in conversation with him. About face. Sticky wicket. Politics make strange bedfellows. He understood each one perfectly. Didn't cause him to miss a beat at all. Not like a Sidereal. Not like Jeffrey."

Persisting sighed. "You're better off not knowing."

"I'm better off guessing, you mean? I think that's not Cundrum at all. I think it's an avatar. But who? One of Janus Gordon's flunkies? Conn's a national hero; the world doesn't know she has leukemia yet. It would be quite a shock to any American." She growled in frustration. "You know what? Of all the reasons not to give the government avatar technology, the fact they'll use them to replace political leaders they don't like has to be near the top."

"I fear you're missing the bigger picture," Persisting said.

"Then enlighten me."

"It's simple. Cundrum was a threat to your national—your planetary—security. He had to be dealt with. And quickly, before portaling became impossible for months."

"So by killing him? What exactly was your role in all this? Did you make the avatar out of Cundrum's dead body? You weren't on Mars while Cundrum was in DC."

"You can guess my role; you already have."

"Were you ever even working for the Pelorians, or was that all a front for your work

for the US?”

“This is a dead end, Izzy. Blowing the lid off this isn’t going to serve anyone’s interests. It will make your country and your planet much less safe. By the time we can portal to Mars again you might have a leadership situation that’s quite different from what it is now, if this all gets out.”

“The two Sidereals who were in Cundrum’s party for the DC trip. They would have had to be dealt with too, I imagine.”

“I can’t urge you to drop this strongly enough, Izzy. If nothing else moves you, think about the trouble you’re getting yourself into.”

“How so?”

“The president of the United States implicated in the murder and replacement of the Sidereal opposition leader? The people of the world will probably throw him a party, but not before there are some awfully tense exchanges, and lots of questions to be answered. Political opponents of the president getting their fifteen minutes of fame. All that on top of probably not getting any more gravity guns. You’d be to blame, and the president would certainly know that.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Urging. Like I said. Drop it.” He gestured for Izzy to leave his place. With a severe look, she complied.

She returned to California in a daze. Persisting was right, of course—making this all public would make Earth less safe. It could cost Jeffrey’s faction their leadership position, and it could therefore cost Earth its weapons. And it would get her in a ton of trouble. She believed Yongpo would have her back professionally, but that would only mean so much.

Back at her apartment in Menlo Park, she had a hard time getting to sleep. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do, only that whatever it was would be painful.

She was going over her options in her mind for the fiftieth time when her fone rang. Which was quite a trick, since she had the ringer off.

“Hello?”

“Izzy De Maria? My name is Janus Gordon.”

She winced. “Hello, Janus.”

“You saw through our deception. I’d like to talk to you about how. Persisting filled me

in a little.” Izzy told her story.

“My fear, of course,” Gordon said, “is that a Sidereal will see through it as well. Fortunately, our Cundrum is playing a part no Sidereal who matters really wants him to stop playing, so he’s got that going for him.”

“Who is—” Izzy began.

“You deserve the truth. Well, I don’t know if you deserve it, but it serves my interests to tell you the truth. I hope that when you’re fully apprised, you’ll see how difficult it would make everyone’s life if you went public, here or on Mars.”

“OK?”

“Our Cundrum is an avatar of our Pelorian friend, Persisting.”

“Persisting?”

“An odd choice to lead the opposition on Mars? I thought so, too. But I came around to his way of thinking. Uploading a loyal Sidereal into our Cundrum avatar would mean we’d need a good actor, which we didn’t have among our options. Persisting, though, can act quite convincingly like he hates and doesn’t trust Jeffrey, because both of those things are true. Pelorians and Sidereals, they don’t get along. You probably knew that. But at the same time, he can serve Earth’s interests in his new role.

“So Persisting is Cundrum, now. Do you see how this could get a lot of people in trouble, with no real benefit in terms of the planet’s safety and readiness for the Aphelials when they return?”

Izzy didn’t say anything.

“I’m sure you can, you’re a devastatingly bright woman. A superstar astronaut. Good job, a decent guy you can’t decide whether to sleep with or not. Powerful friends. Plenty of cash, and plenty of leisure time to spend it in. Someone with a lot to lose.”

“Now you’re threatening me, right?”

“Oh, yes. Definitely.”

Izzy wanted to hang up then, half out of anger, half out of fear. But she was suddenly very clear on what she had to do. The last week had been a nightmare, one awful thing after another. She was in a position to do something about at least some of it.

“I want something in return.”

“In return for your silence?” Gordon said. He seemed to stifle a chuckle. “In exchange

for your silence, you get to keep everything you already have. What more could you want?"

"I don't think I like you very much, Janus," Izzy said. "For one thing, you act like you know me, because you know my financial situation, my so-called love life, who my friends are. But you don't know shit, Janus. What I know is right from wrong. Murder is wrong. And you're not going to make me agree that it's right by throwing a sheet over yourself and yelling boo. You don't scare me, Janus. Stick a knife in my throat? I'll break your ribs."

"I said you were devastatingly bright," Gordon said. "Don't make me a liar. Tell me what you want."

Izzy swallowed. "My friend Conn. I think you know her."

"I do."

"Her body's gone bad on her," Izzy said. "She needs a new one."

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“Lost Moon: A Girl on the Moon Story” (2015)

Girl on the Moon (2016)

Pauper (2016)

Girl on Mars (2017)

“A Friend on Mars: A Girl on the Moon Story” (2018)

Interstellar Girl (2019)

Fight the Future (2019)

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