The Children's Crusade

by Robert Reed

If one tallies weekly allowances, part-time employment, birthday and holiday gifts, as well as limited trusts, the children of the world wield an annual income approaching one trillion NA dollars. Because parents and an assortment of social service organizations supply most of their basic needs, that income can be considered discretionary. Discretionary income always possesses an impact far beyond its apparent value. And even more important, children are more open than adults when it comes to radical changes in spending habits, and in their view of the greater world.

Please note: We have ignored all income generated through gambling, prostitution, the sale of drugs and stolen merchandise, or currency pilfered from a parent's misplaced wallet.

We need to conspicuously avoid all questionable sources of revenue … at least for the present …

—Crusade memo, confidential

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The pregnancy couldn't have been easier, and then suddenly, it couldn't have been worse.

We were still a couple weeks away from Hanna's due date. By chance, I didn't have an afternoon class, which was why I drove her to the doctor's office. The check-up was supposed to be entirely routine. Her OB was a little gray-haired woman with an easy smile and an autodoc aide. The doctor's eyes were flying down a list of numbers—the nearly instantaneous test results derived from a drop of blood and a sip of amniotic fluid. It was the autodoc who actually touched Hanna, probing her belly with pressure and sound, an elaborate and beautiful and utterly confusing three-dimensional image blooming in the room's web-window. I've never been sure which professional found the abnormality. Doctors and their aides have always used hidden signals. Even when both of them were human, one would glance at the other in a certain way, giving the warning, and the parents would see none of it, blissfully unaware that their lives were about to collapse.

Some things never change.

It was our doctor who said, "Hanna," with the mildest of voices. Then showing the barest smile, she asked, "By any chance, did you have a cold last week?"

My wife was in her late forties. A career woman and single for much of her life, she delayed menopause so that we could attempt a child. This girl. Our spare bedroom was already set up as a nursery, and two baby showers had produced a mountain of gifts. That's one of the merits of waiting to procreate to the last possible moment; you have plenty of friends and grateful relatives with money to spend on your unborn child. And as I mentioned, it had been a wondrously easy pregnancy. Hanna has never been a person who suffers pain well or relishes watching her body deformed beyond all recognition. But save for some minor aches and the persistent heartburn, it had been a golden eight-plus months, and that's probably why Hanna didn't hear anything alarming in that very simple question.

"A cold?" she said. Then she glanced in my direction, shrugging. "Just a little one. There and gone in a couple days. Wasn't it, Wes?"

I looked at our doctor.

I said, "Just a few sniffles."

"Well," our doctor replied. Then she glanced at her aide, the two of them conversing on some private channel.

Finally, almost grudgingly, Hanna grew worried, taking a deep breath and staring down at her enormously swollen belly.

Seeing her concern, I felt a little more at ease.

Someone had to be.

Then our doctor put on a confident face, and a lifetime of experience was brought to bear. "Well," she said again, her voice acquiring a motherly poise. "There is a chance, just a chance, that this bug wasn't a cold virus. And since the baby could be in some danger—"

"Oh, God," Hanna whimpered.

"I think we need to consider a C-section. Just to be very much on the safe side."

"God," my wife moaned.

My temporary sense of wellbeing was obliterated. With a gasp, I asked, "What virus? What chance?"

"A C-section?" Hanna blurted. "God, when?"

The doctor looked only at her. "Now," she answered. And then with an authoritarian nod of the head, she added, "And we really should do it here."

"Not at the hospital?" Hanna muttered.

"Time is critical," the doctor cautioned. "If this happens to be a strain of the Irrawaddy—"

"Oh, shit—"

"I know. It sounds bad. But even if that bug is the culprit, you're so far along in the pregnancy, and you have a girl, and the girls seem to weather this disease better than the boys—"

"What chance?" I blurted. "What are we talking about here?"

The autodoc supplied my answer. With a smooth voice and a wet-nurse's software, it told me, "The odds of infection are approximately one in two. And if it was the Irrawaddy virus, the odds of damage to a thirty-nine week fetus are less than three in eleven."

Our doctor would have preferred to deliver that news. Even in my panic, I noticed the bristling in her body language. But she kept her poise. Without faltering, she set her hand on my wife's hand. I think that was the first time during the visit that she actually touched Hanna. And with a reassuring music, she said, "We're going to do our best. For you and for your daughter."

About that next thirty minutes, I remember everything.

There was a purposeful sprint by nurses and autodocs as well as our doctor and her two human partners. The largest examination room was transformed into a surgical suite, every surface sterilized with bursts of ionized radiation and withering desiccants. Hanna was plied with tubes and fed cocktails of medicines and microsensors. Needing something to do, I sent a web-flash to family and friends, carefully downplaying my worsening fears. And then I was wrapped inside a newly made gown and cap and led into the suite, finding Hanna already laid out on a table with her arms spread wide and tied down at the wrists. Some kind of medical crucifixion was in progress. She was sliced open, a tidy hole at her waist rimmed with burnt blood and bright white fat. I could smell the blood. I overheard the doctor warning Hanna about some impending pressure. And all the while, the autodoc worked over her, those clean sleek limbs moving with an astonishing speed and a perfect, seamless grace.

Thirty seconds later, my daughter was born.

With a nod to custom, our doctor was allowed to cut the cord.

Then both professionals worked with my daughter, stealing bits of skin and blood for tests, and in another few moments—a few hours, it felt like—they decided that Hanna's cold had been a cold and nothing more.

The autodoc began gluing my wife back together, and with a congratulatory smile, the doctor handed my baby to me. Veronica, named after her mother's mother. I had just enough time to show the screaming baby to Hanna, and then the ambulance arrived, flying the three of us to a hospital room where we could start coming to terms with the changes in our lives.

Veronica slept hard for hours, swaddled tight in a little blanket infused with helpful bacteria and proven antibodies. Hanna drifted into a shallow sleep, leaving me alone. I was holding my child, and the room's web-window was wandering on its own, searching for items that might interest me, and there was this odd little news item about a fifteen-year-old boy in France—a bright and handsome young man blessed with rich parents and a flair for public speaking. Standing in a mostly empty auditorium, Philippe Rule was announcing the launch of some kind of private space program.

It involved Mars, I halfway heard.

But honestly, I wasn't paying attention. I was too busy holding my happy, healthy daughter, watching her eyes twitch as she dreamed her secret dreams.

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Three times in the last twenty years, the great dream of humanity has been attempted:

A manned mission to Mars.

The Americans were first, and by some measures, they had the greatest success. Seven astronauts completed the voyage, only to discover that their lander was inoperative. Repairs were attempted while in Martian orbit, but with the launch window closing and limited supplies on hand, the *mission had to be canceled. An American flag was dropped on Olympus Mons, pledges were made to return soon, and after several months in deep space, and a string of catastrophic mechanical failures, three of the original crew returned home alive.*

Four years later, the European Union sent nineteen astronauts inside a pair of elaborate mother ships. One of the mission's twin landers exploded during its descent, but the other lander managed to reach the surface. Photographs made from orbit show a squat, bug-like machine tilted at an unnatural angle, its landing gear mired in an unmapped briny seepage. At least one of its crew managed to climb out of the airlock, crossing a hundred meters of the Martian surface. Then she sat on a windswept boulder and opened the faceplate, letting her life boil away.

The Chinese mission was the most expensive, and ambitious, and in the end, it was the most frustrating. The nuclear-powered rocket was intended to solve the difficulties of past missions. The voyage to Mars would consume only two weeks. With the added thrust, a wealth of supplies and spare parts could be carried along, and the inevitable problems of muscle and bone atrophy would be avoided. Depending on circumstances, the crew would stay on Mars for as long or as briefly as needed, exploring various sites while building the first structures in a permanent settlement.

Unfortunately, the ship that held so much promise survived only sixty-five minutes. A flaw in the reaction chamber triggered a catastrophic series of accidents, culminating in that brief, awful flash that lit up our night sky.

Since that tragedy, no nation or group of nations has found the courage, much less the money, to attempt a fourth mission.

This is wrong.

These countries, and the adults who lead them, are cowards.

Mars is out there. Mars is waiting, and we know it. It is a new world, and it is wonderfully empty, and you want to go there. I know that's what you want. You dream about walking in its red dust, and exploring its dry riverbeds, and building castles out of its red rock, and hunting for alien fossils. Or better still, you want to find living Martians hiding in some deep canyon or under the floor of an old sea …

I know you.

You want to do what your parents couldn't do.

Help me! Together, let's do this one great thing! If you give me just a little money … a week's allowance, or what the tooth fairy leaves under your pillow tonight … then maybe you will be one of the lucky ones chosen for the next mission!

The mission that succeeds!

—Philippe Rule, from the announcement

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I love my little sister, but it's hard to imagine us as sharing parents. We don't look alike—she is a wispy blonde while I am stocky and dark. Our interests and temperaments have always been different. And in most ways, we don't think alike. Both of us married for love, but it was a foregone conclusion that Iris' spouse would have money. Where Hanna and I have a comfortable little home, Iris needs two enormous houses, plus a brigade of AI servants to keep both homes pretty and clean. Instead of having one child late in life, Iris started early, producing five of the rascals. Being a parent is everything to my sister: She hovers over her babies and babies her children as they grow older. Every birthday is a daylong celebration, and every holiday is a golden opportunity to spoil her children while flaunting her husband's wealth. By contrast, I've always forgotten birthdays, and Christmas is an insufferable burden. I don't approve of outrageous gifts. Yet with a distinct and embarrassing selfishness, I wish she would send some of her wealth my way.

She is my only sister, and how can anything be easy between us?

I love my nephews and nieces, but according to Iris, I have never shown the proper interest in them.

Tom was her middle-born—an undersized kid with a bright, overly serious manner and a real talent for getting whatever he wanted. When he was eight years old, he decided that he wanted money for Christmas. Nothing but. He pushed hard for months, pleading and arguing, and begging, and generally making his parents miserable. And even when they surrendered, his demands didn't stop.

"He won't accept even one present," his mother complained to me. "Not from anyone. He says he'll throw any package into the fire."

"Give him fireworks," was my snappy advice.

Iris put her arms around herself, and shuddered.

Then with a more serious tone, I offered, "Cash is good. I always liked getting it when we were kids."

"I didn't," my sister snarled.

In secret, I was admiring the boy's good sense. His mother's gifts tended towards the fancy and the lame, and after a day of fitful abuse, the new toys usually ended up inside some cavernous closet, forgotten.

"This is our deal," Iris continued. "Every relative puts money into a common account, and Tom buys himself something. A real gift."

It was Christmas Eve. Hanna and I had flown into town that afternoon, bringing our baby girl. "So you want me to throw in a few dollars?"

Iris blinked, and a tension revealed itself. She looked thinner than normal, nervous and pretty in equal measures. As if in pain, she winced, and then with a stiff voice, she admitted, "He really likes you."

"Tom does?"

"He adores you, a little bit."

I always thought the kid was high-strung and spoiled. But everybody likes to hear that someone adores him.

"I told him you'd help. Help him pick a real gift."

I halfway laughed. "Okay. I don't understand any of this."

"This is part of our deal. We aren't going to let him just throw his money away on something stupid."

"'His money,'" I quoted.

Iris missed my point.

So I told her, "You're not negotiating with the Teamsters here. This is an eight-year-old child. Your child."

Iris was four years my junior. But there were moments when she looked older than me, her youthful beauty tested by childbirth and the burdens that followed. Her face had a paleness, brown eyes rimmed with blood. I saw the cumulative wear and tear. For an instant, I almost felt sorry for her. But then she looked at Veronica sitting in her bouncy seat, purring and blabbering. And with a cold menace, my sister warned me, "You wait, Wes. Wait. You think you know things, but you'll see how hard kids can be."

I nearly said an honest word or two. But a lingering pity kept me quiet.

Iris decided to smile, using her own brand of begging. "I want your help. Would you do this one favor for me?"

Grudgingly, I shrugged my shoulders, and with a whiff of genuine pain, I muttered, "Why not?"

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It was a very peculiar Christmas. Four children and an assortment of adults sat at the center of a cavernous living room, tearing open dozens of brightly colored packages, and in the midst of that relentless greed sat one little boy, nothing in his hand but a small Season's Greetings card and a piece of paper on which nothing was written but an account number and two passwords. Yet the boy was the happiest soul there. Even while his siblings built mountains out of the shredded paper and luminescent ribbons, my nephew clung to his single gift, grinning with the pure and virtuous pleasure of a genuine believer.

Once the gift-grab was finished, he approached me, whispering, "Uncle Wes? Can we go now?"

"Sure," I purred.

The family web-room was at the back of the house. With an unconscious ease, Tom took us to a popular mall. A thousand toyshops lined themselves up before us. But he hesitated. Turning abruptly, he spotted his mother watching from the hallway. "Go away!" he shouted. "You told me I could do this myself! Leave us alone!"

I will never let a child of mine talk that way to any adult. But honestly, I felt a shrill little pleasure watching my sister slink away, vanishing inside the illusion of a candy factory.

Tom turned to me and smiled. With a bottled up joy, he admitted, "I want to go to Mars."

I didn't understand, and I said so.

"Mars," he repeated. "If I give enough, and if I'm a good enough astronaut, I can go there."

The last few months had been a blur. Between taking care of a newborn and teaching a full class load, I hadn't found the time to keep up with the affairs of the world.

"Explain this Mars business to me," I said.

"This is my money," Tom replied, clinging to his tiny piece of paper.

All at once he was this earnest and pleasantly goofy little kid, buoyed up by his relentless enthusiasm. "Pretend that I'm stupid," I suggested, feeling a sudden affection for the goof. "Explain everything to me. From the start."

With a passion that I hadn't mustered in decades, the boy told me all about Philippe Rule. He described a future mission to Mars and all the good neat stuff that would come from it. Millions of kids had already given money; he would have to hurry to catch up. And then he told me how the Rule Project would use the money to build rockets and habitats and space suits—all that good neat stuff you had to have if you were going to travel across millions of miles of space.

"Okay," I said. "But why do *you* get to go to Mars?"

"A lot of kids are going," he countered. "Uncle Wes, there's going to be dozens and dozens of us—"

"Out of millions and millions," I cautioned.

"I know that," he claimed.

And I explained, "A million is a lot of people, Tom. If Philippe takes just one kid out of a million, what are your odds going to be?"

Eight-year-olds don't believe in odds. Feelings matter, and this eight-year-old had the sudden feeling that I was going to fight him. "This is my money," he repeated, waving that piece of paper under my nose. "I can do what I want with my own money!"

My affections wavered.

Quietly, I asked, "How much money is it?"

He showed the account number to a scanner, and after reading both passwords aloud, an account balance appeared before us.

I was appalled. My few dollars dangled at the end of that king's ransom.

"I know Mars won't be easy," Tom offered. "But I'm going to work hard. I'm going to be one of those astronauts."

"What else happens?" I asked.

He didn't understand.

"Your mother's going to ask to see your gift," I said. "What are you going to show her?"

He had a ready answer.

"This," he said, punching in a new address. An instant later, we were standing on the surface of Mars.

Beneath us was the eroded channel of an ancient river, its sediments peppered with tiny shellfish. A towering rocket stood before us, sleek and silvery against the dusty sky. Downstream from us was a crystal-domed city, implausible and lovely, a thousand little homes gathered around a pink-face lake—some tiny portion of the ancient Martian seas reborn inside a digital dream.

"I get to come here," my nephew gleefully reported. "Because I'm giving them money, I can walk anywhere on Mars. I'll meet kids like me. While I'm here, I'll train to be an astronaut. And there's classes about the planets, and games, and I'll learn everything about space and science and things like that."

The illusionary Mars was astonishingly vivid, and for a middle-aged biology professor, it was a little unsettling.

"She'll think it's okay, Uncle Wes. If you like it, and tell her so … "

Honestly, I was curious. Even a little intrigued. I took a weak breath, halfway expecting to find the air suffocatingly thin and brutally cold. Then with a defeated laugh, I said, "Sure." I put a hand on his bony little shoulder, telling him, "I guess I don't see the harm."

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Web-Mars is perched at the limits of representational technology. Millions of square kilometers have been created, using data from automated probes, telescopic observations, and Martian meteorites. But scientific accuracy cannot be our primary goal. This must be an optimistic, unlikely Mars. An elaborate fossil record waits inside the digital stone, describing a world that has been wet and warm for most of an interesting history. The dangers of hard radiation and peroxide poisoning are being ignored. Engineering problems will always be minimized. For example, terraforming will prove to be an easy trick. Over the next few years, the children will help build a shallow blue sea and a breathable atmosphere. Selected children—gifted in money or in ability—will have the opportunity to find buried tombs and other alien artifacts. Did Mars once produce intelligent life? Or did visitors from a distant sun set down beside its muddy rivers, leaving important traces of their passing?

Web-Mars will be an entertaining and gentle realm.

When children dream of Mars, this is the Mars they will see. This is the world they will believe in. This is what it will take to inspire them—for a day, or a year, or in some cases, for the rest of their lives.

—Crusade memo, confidential

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"Have you seen her?"

"Very?" I asked.

"I thought she was with you," Hanna explained. Then she sighed in exasperation, and with her hands around her mouth, she called out, "Very! Where are you?"

The playroom was enormous, and it looked empty. But you could never be sure. I walked twice through the armies of toys before my sister finally drifted into view, mentioning, "She's in the web-room with Tom. Sorry, I forgot to tell you."

"Thanks," I growled.

With a hard stare, Hanna delivered my marching orders.

It had been a difficult visit. My mother was dying, and most of my sister's kids had been perfect brats. Three days of uninterrupted rain hadn't helped anyone's mood. Plus Hanna and I didn't appreciate watching our five-year-old growing accustomed to this new life of abundance and anarchy. The sole exception was Tom. We only saw him at the dinner table, and he was nothing but polite, pleasantly uninvolved with the rest of his chaotic family.

I found the web-room open but guarded by a visual fog and the image of a handsome, suspicious young man. With a thin French accent, the man asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"My daughter's here."

"Is Veronica your daughter?"

I wasn't in a patient mood. I said, "Drop the screens. I want to see her."

Philippe Rule broke into a sudden smile. "She's a very bright girl, sir. You should feel proud—"

I stepped through the doppleganger, finding myself climbing stairs onto some kind of platform. No, it was a boat—a simple square aerogel raft drifting in the midst of a smooth ocean. In every direction, I saw the close horizon and a patchwork of thin clouds. The air tasted of saltwater and fish. The gravity had to be Earth's, but when I took my next step, the scene moved, producing a powerful illusion that sixty kilograms of meat and fat had been stolen from me.

It was almost fun.

And then I realized that I couldn't see anyone else. Hands on hips, I screamed, "Very! Come here. Very! Where are you?"

The fictional water splashed, and my daughter burst to the surface. Giggling, she grabbed at the raft and crawled up. She was wearing both a skin-tight stimsuit as well as one of her girl-cousin's old swimsuits, and she looked thoroughly soaked. But when I touched her, she felt dry and cool.

For no good reason, I said, "You can't swim without an adult."

"Daddy," she snapped. "This isn't water. So I wasn't."

Ignoring her seamless logic, I asked, "What have you been doing?"

"Watching."

"Watching what?"

"The fish!" Very was a small five-year-old with an infectious laugh and easy smile. Tugging on my arm, she told me, "You should see them, Daddy! They're pretty, and funny, and neat-strange!"

Curiosity licked at me.

But then Tom broke the surface, arms and legs pretending to swim as he came closer to the illusionary boat. I understood most of the trickery. But I barely saw the stimsuits, and the smart-wires were almost invisible. I had no idea how the AIs could so perfectly anticipate his every flail and kick, moving his thirteen-year-old body over to the ladder.

"Here it comes!" he cried out.

What was coming?

With a coarseness born from youth and excitement, he screamed, "Damn, it's a monster … shit … !"

A scaly head broke the surface. I saw jaws longer than I was tall, and great fishy eyes, and then a ropy body twisted, propelling the apparition past the raft, the long head dipping for an instant, bringing up a rainbow-colored fish with three eyes and a peculiar ventral gill.

For an instant, I was a biologist studying these marvels.

But then fatherhood reclaimed me. I kneeled and looked at my daughter, touching her again on that wet-looking, perfectly dry shoulder. "You know," I growled. "When you go somewhere, you have to tell us first."

"I'm still in the house, Daddy."

Here was the heart of it. To her old father, web-Mars was a separate place—a peculiar and potentially dangerous realm that happened to be a whole lot closer than the real Mars.

Ignoring my daughter's argument, I looked at her cousin. "Don't," I warned Tom. "Very's mother and I don't want her involved with this project. So I'm telling you: Don't bring her here again."

"Why not?" Thirteen and full of opinions, Tom grinned in an aggravating way. "All these things," he said. "These fish and plesiosaur and everything … they all come from fossil DNA—"

"No," I interrupted.

But he couldn't hear me. Dancing to the edge of the raft, the boy shook his dry leg, scattering slow drops. "I know this place, Uncle Wes. Better than anyone. You'd like it here. There's an old starship on the beach over there, and it's full of neat games and puzzles … I could take you, as my guest … if you want … "

With a quiet fury, I told my nephew, "Mars is nothing like this."

He stared at me. He seemed appalled, and then in the next instant, he was laughing at me.

"On its warmest day," I explained, "Mars was a very cold place. The old seas were covered with ice. Life was scarce, and it was single-celled, and there's absolutely no reason to think we could find starships there."

He laughed again, dismissing me with a sturdy shake of his head. "How do you know, Uncle Wes? Have you ever gone to Mars?"

I took my daughter by the hand.

"I'll be going there," he reported, nothing about his voice or manner betraying the slightest doubt.

"Good for you," I told him.

Then I hauled Very and myself out of the room.

Philippe Rule waved good-bye to both of us. "It was nice meeting you, Veronica," he called out. "And I hope to see you again."

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Truthfully, it never occurred to me that so many people would take offense with my work, and myself … these malicious ideas that my intentions are impure, or selfish … that all I want is to steal money from their children, or enslave them in some vague fashion …

But of course, I was a boy when this great adventure began.

Boys don't know much about anything, except for their own hearts …

—Philippe Rule, interview

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"This is the first year," I mentioned.

"The first for what?" Hanna asked.

"I'm actually noticing them," I told her. "At school. In my classes."

"Okay, I'll bite. Who are you talking about?"

"Rule's kids." I blanked my reader and set it on the nightstand. "This year's freshmen had to be twelve, maybe thirteen when Rule got rolling. Older kids were too skeptical, or too something, to buy into this business."

Hanna let her reader fall to her lap, saying nothing.

"If they were fourteen and older … I guess there were too many hormones raging inside them, keeping them safe … "

"Safe," she echoed.

That wasn't the best word, but I was in no mood to correct myself. "Anyway, I've got at least seven believers sitting in my intro class."

"How do you know? Do they wear uniforms?" She gave a laugh. "I know. Inverted fishbowls set over their heads."

I laughed, but without much heart.

"No, they just sit together," I explained. "Down in front, and from day one. Very chummy. I asked if they came from the same high school. But they aren't even from the same state. They met on web-Mars."

"Understandable," said Hanna.

Which irritated me. For a lot of vague and silly reasons, I growled, "Sure, it's understandable. We all know people that we've never seen in person."

"Seven," she remarked, "is not a lot of students."

I said nothing.

"How many are in that class?"

"Two hundred and six."

"A little more than three percent," she said.

And I gave her a hard smile, reminding her, "I'm also teaching that advanced placement class."

She saw my trap closing.

"Forty students," I said. "The best of the best."

"And how many believers?" Hanna asked.

"Half," I replied.

"Twenty?"

"Nearly." I shook my head, admitting, "They're wonderful students. In most ways, I can't complain."

"It sounds like complaining to me."

"I'm a cranky middle-aged man. Grumbling is my business."

Hanna just shook her head.

"No, these kids have a good working knowledge about genetics and evolution, and metabolisms, and how ecological systems operate."

"They sound perfectly horrible."

I let her have her fun.

"Okay," she finally said. "Where's the tragedy in having so many smart, wonderful students?"

"I wish I knew," I muttered.

"You know what bothers you," Hanna growled. Then she picked up her reader again, telling me, "You didn't teach these children any of those great lessons. Which means their allegiances lie elsewhere, and that's what has you pissed."

I gave a snort and a half-laugh.

"God," I said. "We can hope that's all!"

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Whenever we are sued, and each time some nation's anti-cult laws are unleashed … my organization and I are forced to defend ourselves, in court as well as the public eye. Time and again, we have opened our books and our facilities. Outside auditors have scoured every aspect of the Project, and there has never been any hint that money has been misplaced or misused. Nobody is growing rich on the backs of children. Believe me. And as for these allegations that I'm enslaving impressionable young minds … well, we can debate the meanings of "enslave" until we are breathless. Or I can gracefully accept responsibility for having a role, maybe an important role, in the development of millions of young and promising lives …

—Philippe Rule, interview

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"Of course it's mostly bullshit," my student remarked. "I mean, when I was a kid, the whole thing seemed awfully compelling. I believed everything. Everything. But if you're even halfway smart, you eventually realize it's just a fictional world, and a learning tool, and beautiful in its own right. That's what the web-Mars is, you know. Beautiful. In a lot of ways, it's a genuine work of art."

We were sitting inside my tiny office—a professor and his best student trading profundities and gossip. It's the old college tradition, honorable and occasionally useful.

"I can agree about the bullshit," I mentioned. "But really, I don't have too many strong feelings about Rule's project. As long as it obeys the law and leaves my family alone—"

"You've got a nephew, don't you? A kid named Tom?"

I tried not to appear surprised.

"Yeah, I ran into him this summer. Working at the Omega Site."

Professors don't like to confess to gaps in their encyclopedic minds. But my confusion must have shown.

"The Omega Site," the young man repeated, relishing his advantage. "It's the biggest artifact on web-Mars. A mountain-sized starship. Some billion years old, nearly." Then he seemed to hear his own words, and with a dismissive laugh, he added, "I know. The whole bastard's just eight years old, and it's nothing but someone's tangle of digital codes and puzzles and shit."

"So what do you do there?" I inquired.

The student was tall and leggy—a gifted junior on track to graduate a full year early. With a wide grin, he admitted, "We gather there. We talk. And of course, there's teams that you can work on, trying to piece together the mystery of that artifact."

Again, he was shifting back into the language of a believing child.

"And you met my nephew?" I asked.

"Yeah, he's what? Sixteen?" With a long-limbed shrug, he admitted, "The software put me on his team. By chance, maybe. But more likely, the AIs noticed I was at this school, and they assumed Tom and I would have common ground. Because of you, I mean."

"I don't see my nephew much," I confessed.

I never had, I could have said.

"How is Tom?" I inquired.

"Doing great," he sang out. "Yeah, in fact, he was my team leader." The young man giggled, pleased to report, "The kid's way, way up the chain of command. From what I hear, he's barely a couple, three rungs away from Philippe's inner circle."

"He's been at this for years—"

"And he's generous," my student interrupted. "His folks must have some impressive money. Judging by his gifts."

I didn't make a sound.

"Anyway," my student continued. "He warned me. Tom did. He said you aren't all that in love with our work."

"I just think it's a waste, in a lot of ways."

The young face absorbed the news without blinking. In fact, he seemed pleased to hear my harsh assessment.

"Billions of dollars have been poured into Rule's scheme," I continued. "And what do you have to show for it?"

"The launch pad in the Pacific," he offered. "Factories and test facilities in twenty countries. Millions of devoted supporters, and millions more who give a few dollars to be able to play on web-Mars."

"What exactly have you launched from your Pacific base?"

"A shitload of automated probes—"

"Half of which didn't even make it to Mars." I shook my head, reminding him, "Three landers lost contact with the Earth. And that was just this year."

"Space is a tough neighborhood," he admitted. "But we're learning. We've had some successful launches with our heavy boosters. And our orbiting habitat has kept its monkeys alive for nearly three years."

"All those billions spent—" I began.

"Eight years ago, we had nothing," he countered, beginning to bristle. "We've gotten less than no help from every government. Every piece of machinery has to be built from scratch, by us. And since nobody lets us have nuclear rockets—"

"Do you blame us?"

"Not that much. No." He laughed with a forced amiability. "It's just that we're forced to make some fat concessions. Chemical fuels only, and payload limits, and once we get into space, there's all sorts of orbital restrictions. We're going to have to be clever to get around your stumbling blocks."

"I haven't put anything in your way."

He looked at me for a long moment, and then remembered to smile. "You know what I mean."

"Mars is going to throw up its own barriers," I reminded him.

My student seemed to recall where his grades came from. "I can appreciate your perspective," he said. "I really do. And I'm not like your nephew. Not much. The Project is just one possible route to Mars. Someday, with us or without us, someone is going to walk on its surface and return home again."

I hesitated, and then asked, "What does Tom do exactly? As a team leader, I mean."

"He oversees the puzzle solvers."

"What's the puzzle?"

"I can't give you details," he told me with a sharp, virtuous smile.

"Just the basics, then."

"We're trying to learn everything we can about the pilots and the crew of that ancient starship."

"You're talking about fictional aliens," I reminded him.

Shrugging his shoulders, my student said, "Point taken." But he was still flashing the incandescent smile of a true believer.

. . . . .

Every reporter asks about our timetable. How soon, and how many? Well, let me just say this: I don't know exactly when we will leave for Mars, but it will not be tomorrow. And I don't know how many will be going on this great mission. But everyone will be invited, and that's all that I can say about that …

—Philippe Rule, interview

. . . . .

"You look beautiful," I offered.

Very gave me a disapproving frown. Then she turned to her mother, asking, "How do I look? Really."

"Don't you believe your father?" Hanna inquired.

"He always says, 'Beautiful.'"

"You think I'm dishonest?" I teased.

"Mom? Just tell me!"

"We have arrived," our car announced with a soft little voice.

The park lay far below the surrounding land. This had once been the basement of some great old building, but my sister and her husband had bought the ground for the simple purpose of building a sunken garden—a wealth of color and fishponds meant to bring good fortune to those about to be married within its borders. My sister was standing in the parking lot. She saw us roll up and greeted us with one arm waving, demanding our immediate attention. My oldest niece stood before her, dressed in a shimmering, almost metallic white gown. The girl looked tired and happy, and nervous enough to puke, and spoiled in that deeply intoxicating way that only brides can be spoiled.

"You look fine," Hanna finally told our daughter. "I think you're even lovely."

With a musical chirp, our daughter said, "I know," and laughed, leaping from the car. "Thanks, Mom."

Veronica was twelve and absolutely in love with life. She sprinted past her distracted aunt and down a set of limestone stairs—a pretty tomboy forced to wear a pretty girl's frilly dress—and watching her, I felt the old aches and worries, and a sturdy clean pride that took too much credit for my daughter's happiness.

Very was going to trip and fall down those stairs.

I knew it. With every careless stride, that horrific image presented itself to me. But somehow she survived to the bottom, bolting across the grassy glade toward a pair of cousins, and my consuming fear simply changed its face now. I breathed, and breathed, and with an old man's gait, I started after her.

"You're late," my sister observed, not quite looking at me.

And before I could reply, Iris barked, "Flatten, dress. Get the crease out, under my hand. Here!"

The dress complied.

My little sister rose to her feet, satisfied for this very brief moment. She looked exhausted but focused. "I can't find Tom," she began. "He's going to be an usher. He's supposed to fly in this morning. From Paris, I think. But I haven't seen him. Would you go look for him, Wes?"

I must have hesitated.

"Or you can baby-sit Dad," she offered. Then with a malicious grin, she added, "He's been smoking his favorite weed again. By the way."

"I'll find Tom," I replied.

"Hurry," she called. And then with a distinctly more patient tone, she began talking to the wedding dress again.

The garden was filled with newborn flowers—enormous and colorful and oftentimes impossible species born from biology and electrochemical metabolisms. In nature, nothing could so brilliant, so gloriously wasteful. But this foliage was tied into the city's power grid, feeding on raw electricity. Sunshine was little more than a convenient museum light helping each plant display its majesty and wild colors. Perfumes and more subtle pheromones gave the air a rich wondrous stink. On this business of modern horticulture, I have always been of ten minds. Nine minds are against it, but there is always this other voice, whispering, "Stop now, and look. Isn't it incredible?"

Rows of white chairs and a simple white archway had been erected on the biggest patch of an emerald-green moss. A few guests had already arrived, standing at the edges, impatiently waiting for someone to tell them where to sit.

Under my breath, I whispered, "Tom."

Louder, but not loud, I called out, "Tom."

His brothers stood beside a rectangular fishpond, girls on their arms. Everyone looked happy and distracted. Then I came up behind them, and the younger brother told me, "Very just flew through here. Then she flew off. I don't know where."

"I'm not looking for her," I confessed. "Where's Tom?"

"I don't know," he replied.

His girlfriend brightened. "I really want to meet him," she sang out.

"You will," he muttered.

Then she had to ask, probably for the umpteenth time, "Does Tom really know Philippe Rule?"

"Oh, yeah," he replied, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, those two are always hanging out together. Rule's got Tom sitting inside his wallet."

The brothers enjoyed a harsh laugh at Tom's expense.

The girl smiled nervously, trying to understand the meaning.

I grinned and moved on. Wasted stares at strangers taught me a lesson. I hadn't seen my nephew since last Christmas, and then only when the families met in our respective web-rooms. He was a twenty-year-old man now. He could have grown a beard, or he could have put his hair to sleep. I wasn't entirely sure what face I was looking for. And with that revelation, I temporarily quit my search, standing in the shadow of an odd little tree—a synthetic species that might not exist anywhere else in the universe.

My distractions ended with the sturdy thump of a car door.

There was a second set of stairs rising out of the sunken garden. Maybe there was a second parking lot, and maybe Tom had just arrived. Pushed by a tattered sense of duty, I climbed. But halfway up, an ornate peacock-like bird strode out of the flowerbed, stubby wings rising as its tail spread wide. A marveling wash of colors startled me. How did it change its colors so quickly? The scientist in me needed to solve that little puzzle, and that delayed me for another few moments. Mirrors. Its tail feathers were covered with flexible organic mirrors, and with an expert's grace, it moved each feather, borrowing the glories from the surrounding flowers.

"Neat," I said.

Then I shooed the bird aside, finishing my climb.

Three vehicles were parked in the tiny lot. The first car was obviously empty. The second car had darkened windows, and with a boldness that surprised me, I tapped on the glass. There was motion inside, and then the window dropped with a slick hum. A young woman held her shirt against her chest, while the man beside her, using a cutting voice, said to me, "Move along, old man."

I took his advice.

The last vehicle was a blister-van. It didn't look like anything my nephew would drive. But I walked up and called out, "Tom?"

"There is no Tom here," the van answered.

"Do you know him?" I inquired, giving his full name.

With mysterious tone, the van said, "Yes, I do. But I can't help you find him."

Back to the garden, I decided.

Walking past the first car, a notion took hold of me. It was a little ladybug car, and rusty red in color, and its windows were dialed to clear, showing an interior that looked clean and new. Showroom cars don't look any better, I realized. Standing in front of it, I said, "Tom. Your mom's hunting you, and guess what. She's getting pissed."

Very slightly, the car shivered.

Then the left front window dropped, and my nephew stuck his head out. "Uncle Wes!" he cried out. "How are you?"

I came around. "Fine, Tom."

The car was a rolling web-room. With a glance, I knew where he was. The view inside stretched for miles. Some kind of robot, elaborate and contrived, stood guard beside a glittering archway. I had no idea what anything meant, but there was a blue sky wrapped around a shrunken sun. I gave web-Mars a quick look. And then Very leaned forward, emerging from the back end of the car, grinning broadly as she said, "Hi, Dad!"

I said, "Shit."

With about the worst possible tone, I said, "Get out."

If anything, Tom seemed pleased. He opened his door and climbed out, and my daughter followed. He smiled, and she smiled, and the combination of those two faces made me crazy.

Again, with feeling, I said, "Shit."

Veronica laughed at my anger.

"You know our rules," I began. "Until you're grown and living on your own, you have to ask for our permission before you go anywhere!"

For a moment, she said nothing.

Then her smile brightened, while her slate-blue eyes grew a little sorry. With an amazing indifference, she confessed, "I did ask you."

"When?"

"Years and years ago," she told me. "'Can I go to Mars with Tom?' I asked. You and Mom, both."

"And what did we say?"

"'No. Never.'"

I discovered that my voice had been stolen away.

"But then I went anyway," my daughter told me, absolutely unconcerned by this breach of the law. Standing high on her tiptoes, she kissed my nose, and once again, she said, "I asked. Didn't I? And you said, 'Never.' Which was silly. So I decided to do what I wanted anyway."

A long moment passed, and then I said, "Shit," once again.

But nobody was with me. Except for the web-car, which shut its door and closed its window, offering me not even one polite little word.

. . . . .

Under the watchful gaze of various government agencies and the press, we designed and constructed seven scientific probes—fossil-hunters and water-hunters and deep-boring machines. And then with the simplest sleight of hand, those probes were removed from their rockets and dissolved in liquid steel baths. Machine assemblages built in secret replaced each probe. Each machine was designed entirely by mathematical models. Untested technologies were married to forty flavors of theory. The rockets were launched over a period of three years. One of the boosters failed, but that left six redundant packages streaking towards Mars. Each one of those payloads failed to enter Martian orbit, a different malfunction blamed for each loss. Misleading telemetry data helped keep any suspicious minds confused. The only true question was whether these machines, once reaching their target, would work properly in the alien environment.

But then again, these were the second-finest machines ever created by living minds.

—Crusade memo, confidential

. . . . .

I thought I was the first one up that morning. My watch roused me with an adrenalin cocktail, and I sat up and rubbed at my eyes for a long moment. It was a little before six o'clock. My advanced placement class started early, at seven-thirty, and what with breakfast and my morning rituals, I didn't have time to spare.

Shuffling towards the bathroom, I noticed the light beneath my daughter's door.

While the toilet was flushing, I knocked on her door—lightly, fondly—and she instantly said, "Come on in, Dad," as if I was expected.

Very was sitting at her grandmother's old roll top desk. She was dressed for school, which was exceptionally strange at that hour, and she was reading, which was perfectly ordinary. I found myself staring at that composed and handsome young woman. She had her mother's features and my dark hair, plus a watchful, perpetually amused expression that was entirely her own. One of her little hands hovered above the reader, prepared to blank it. But then she decided to leave it on. The hand dropped into her lap, and she smiled at me, and watched me, and I thought she was waiting for me to say, "Happy birthday."

So I said, "Happy birthday, darling."

With a genuine astonishment, I said, "Eighteen years old."

How could she have gotten to this moment so quickly? It was a marvel and a tragedy, and I felt like crying.

"Thank you, Dad."

Her web-wall was dialed to Mars—the real Mars, bleak and dry and brutally cold. The image was a live feed from a Rule-owned weather station. It was a favorite of hers. Jagged rocks and alluvial sands filled a wide, dead riverbed. I found myself staring at the scene, and with a distracted voice, I asked, "Have you decided yet?"

She knew what I meant.

Quietly, she said, "I have. Yes."

I smiled and looked at her. "Which college wins?"

Her smile turned a little sorry, a little sad. But then with a positive voice, she told me, "Later. I'll talk to you and Mom together. Later."

"Fair enough," I replied.

A dozen schools were chasing her. All were better schools than the college where I taught, but part of me—a selfish, paternal heart—hoped that Veronica would live at home for another four years, and before I retired, she would sit in a class or two of mine.

"You're up awfully early," I observed.

"I couldn't sleep."

Nothing made me suspicious. I nodded and glanced at the reader on her desk, seeing nothing. The reader was blank to begin with, or some other hand had wiped it clean.

"Dad," she said.

I looked at her mother's eyes.

"You're going to be late for school, Dad."

"Happy birthday," I said again.

"Thanks," she told me. And then with her hand, with a motion almost too quick to be seen, she rubbed at her bright, watery eyes.

. . . . .

Our little house sits a few blocks from campus. It makes for a pleasant walk, particularly on warm mornings. Ten minutes from home to office, usually. Which is more than enough time for the world to change.

Students were waiting at my office door.

I started to say, "Good morning." But something in their communal expression made me uneasy. With an uneven voice, I asked, "What's wrong?"

"Something's going on," a young woman warned me.

"It's huge," a boy purred. "Just huge."

"What is?" I sputtered

"The ship," he told me, amazement swirled with a dose of fear. "They spotted it last week, coming in from somewhere … I don't know where … and the President just made the announcement—"

"What ship?" I asked.

Then a third student blurted, "It's a goddamn alien ship. It's huge! And guess where it's heading … !"

We headed for the classroom. I dialed the web-wall to a news-feed, and we found ourselves staring at the image of a tiny, tiny bullet. The ship was gray and smooth-faced and spinning slowly as it plunged through space, moving past the orbit of the moon. A tiny bullet in the depths of space, but according to radar, it was nearly ten miles long and half again as broad.

According to the purring voice of a commentator, the ship was silent, unresponsive to every hail from the Earth.

"Aliens," a dozen voices muttered behind me.

I turned and looked at my class.

"No," I whispered.

"Look who's missing," I urged them.

Half of my students were somewhere else.

"Where's the Rulers?" they muttered—the current shorthand for the Martian believers. "What do you think it means?"

I didn't answer the question.

On old legs, I was already running, fighting to get home again.

. . . . .

My sister finally answered our calls. Iris appeared sitting on one of several sofas in the middle of her enormous living room. With a glance, I knew she had been crying. Her face was stern and cold, and the red eyes had a fire. Her voice failed when she tried to speak. Then she swallowed and straightened her back, and she looked past me, asking, "What?" with a disgusted tone.

Tom was missing, I assumed.

I didn't mention her son. Instead, I confessed, "We're looking for Veronica. Hanna and I are. Would you know?—"

"God, no." My sister flinched, and shook. She brought her hands up to her face and held them against her mouth, wrapping fingers together before dropping them into her lap. "Well," she muttered, "this makes it even worse."

Hanna was sitting beside me. She grabbed my knee, and squeezed.

"Of all the stupid things," Iris muttered. "The injustice of it all … !" She shook her head, dropping her eyes. "You put your hopes into something. Something important. Something great. All that time invested. The energy. All the money that you've just pissed away … "

Hanna interrupted. "Is there any way that you can reach Tom? Very left here with some other kids, and she didn't show up at school—"

"I heard you before," my sister growled.

She looked up, her fierce eyes fixed squarely on me. "He's only invested his entire life trying to reach this day. Tens of thousands of dollars. Our money, and his. And shit, they didn't even select my own son—!"

I felt myself falling.

"Did you know? You didn't, did you? Not even Philippe was picked! He's going to watch this mission with the rest of us!"

"What … ?" I sputtered.

"Which is even worse," she said, laughing harshly. "It's a thousand times worse than Tom's situation. I mean, it always looked like his project, his baby, and it never was … "

Hanna and I held each other, falling together now.

"You want to talk to Tom?" my sister asked. "He's upstairs somewhere. Crying. I've got the house watching him, in case. In case." Then she shook her head, crying for herself. "Those bastards," she wailed. "Those damned machine bastards … !"

. . . . .

If humans haven't the will to journey to Mars, then it remains for someone else to do the impossible and glorious, for themselves …!

—from the Crusade's mission statement

. . . . .

The mountain was no mountain, and its red flanks weren't made of anything as simple as stone. A billion years of thin winds and the occasional rain had cut into the ship's sides, revealing a ceramic exoskeleton. Tiny gray machines poked out here and there. A simple diamond arch served as a doorway. Tom stood before the arch, waiting for us. With a soft, almost matter-of-fact voice, he explained, "Most of the ship is underground. When it landed, mass and momentum carried it into the crust. Then the alluvial soils were washed in around its sides." He paused for a moment, and then added, "That's what the puzzle told us. Of course, it's all just a made-up story. Someone's little game."

Tom looked tired. Otherwise, he seemed very much the same: A boyish man in his middle twenties, with an astronaut's clipped hair and a small, exceptionally fit body.

Hanna told him, "Thank you."

He nodded, glancing into the darkness inside the Omega ship.

"I know this is difficult," she added. "You've got to be disappointed, and we can only imagine—"

"I don't know if I can take you inside," he interrupted. "I mean, I'm not all that sure about my clearance status anymore."

"But Very's in there somewhere," I said. "You're sure of that much, right?"

He nodded again, and bit his lip, and breathed. Then with a fearful slowness, he stepped through the archway, a faint pleasure showing when he reached the other side.

We followed after him, the tunnel brightening around us. I noticed very little. Somewhere during the long illusion of a walk, the ship's ceramic skeleton became something else. The walls were composed of densely packed horizontal beds, paper-thin and varying in color but not in texture. Tom touched the walls with an habitual fondness, and then quietly, angrily, he said, "This is them."

"Who?" Hanna asked.

"We didn't realize," he offered. Then he glanced back at us, eyes forlorn and lost. "For years, every team missed the obvious. What this ship was saying to us. What this puzzle really meant."

I didn't care about meanings; I wanted to see my daughter.

"The dead aliens," he said. "There were thousands of bones. Thousands of old skulls. This ship is big enough to house a small city. But when we sat down and actually worked out the numbers … well, most of the ship is this. These bands of doped ceramics and such. It took us forever to see what was simple. But then of course, they knew it would surprise us. They know us. Better than we know ourselves, I bet."

I touched the wall, my stimskin feeding me a cool, slick sensation.

" 'Everyone will be invited,' " Tom quoted. "That's what Philippe Rule promised. And I think the poor shit actually believed those words."

The tunnel twisted to the left and widened.

"The poor shit had this crazy idea about flying to Mars, and he had rich, indulgent parents." Tom glanced back at us, admitting, "That sounds a little too familiar." Then he laughed for a moment, with a gentle bitterness. "Philippe told his parents about his dream for Mars, and they rented an auditorium and hired media help. AI Web-managers, mostly. What nobody knew then was that the AIs were already shopping for someone like Philippe. A figurehead. A face. Some innocent to help raise the money and make their work look legal."

I quickened my pace, moving up beside Tom. Ahead of us, with a smear of bright yellowish light, the tunnel came to an abrupt end.

"These aliens," he muttered. "The Omegas. We studied them in teams. Each team was supposed to work independently. There was this race going on. Each team wanted to be first to figure out this alien society. We studied their bones and homes and how they lived, and we explored the starship, and for years, we tried to understand something very basic: How did the Omegas pilot this ship? There were no obvious controls. No physical access to the engines or the reactors. Every team proposed a telepathic answer, and the AI game-shepherds would tell us flat-out, 'No.' So we went back to the evidence again, and again. We were kids working at something beyond us. And then, we weren't kids anymore. We were adults, and experienced, and one at a time, each team figured it out for itself."

Tom hesitated.

"Cargo," he said, followed by a long painful sigh.

"There was this quiet guy on my team," he said. "He hadn't said five sentences to me in all those years. Then last year, while I was presiding over one of our endless bull sessions, he made a bizarre suggestion. The Omegas didn't have any power over the ship, he said, because they didn't have any real function. The ship was nothing more, or less, than a great hive filled with artificial intelligences. And the ship's organic entities were nothing but a kind of fancy cargo. Something carried for reasons of commerce, or at the very best, out of respect for their long-ago creators."

Hanna joined us, laying a sympathetic hand on her nephew's shoulder.

"'Bullshit,' I said." Now Tom slowed his gait. "I told him he was crazy, and it was a stupid, ugly idea. But the guy wanted to offer his answer for judging. He called for a vote from the team, and after a lot of speeches, he won his vote. Barely. Everybody who voted against the proposal is going to remain on the Earth. Probably for the rest of their lives. But if you voted for that bullshit idea, you gave yourself almost a two percent chance of being invited. By our masters."

Tom came to a halt, leaning against the delicately bedded wall, panting as if he was exhausted.

"What about Veronica?" I asked.

He didn't seem to hear my question.

With a flickering pride, Hanna pointed out, "Very has always had a fair mind. She probably just wanted to give the idea a chance—"

"No," Tom interrupted. And he laughed at us. He shook his head and laughed with a sudden force, explaining, "She's why the vote went the way it did. Your daughter liked the idea … it made so much sense to her … which is probably why she isn't going to be with us much longer … !"

. . . . .

"I'll come home for a visit," Very promised. "Before we launch, and probably more than once. I just thought it would be best to meet with the others, and to get my head ready for what's coming."

"How soon would you leave?" Hanna blurted.

"A few months from now. At most, a full year." The image of our daughter wore a bright white spacesuit, her helmet dangling back on a hinge. Behind her, stretching on for what seemed like miles, were people similarly equipped, all listening to robots talking in professorial voices. "The ship's interior isn't quite finished," she explained. "The microchines and robots need another few weeks to make it perfect. And of course, some governments are going to put up legal barricades, which the AI lawyers have to defeat. And even with the best com-lasers, it's going to take time to download the crew." With a respectful nod, she said, "Most of the world's AIs are planning to send copies of themselves."

"Everyone will be invited," Philippe had promised.

Hanna gave a low, sorrowful moan.

"After Mars?" I asked, with a ragged hope.

Very could have lied. She must have considered kindness, telling us, "I'll come right back again." But the girl had always been honest, and she knew it would be best if she were the one to break the difficult news. "This isn't going to be a quick trip to Mars," she cautioned. "After a year or two of exploring, they plan to leave. They'll drop past Venus and then swing out towards Jupiter. They need to use its gravity well to help us accelerate. They've decided to see the worlds circling the Centauri suns."

I felt sick. Cold, and sick, and furious.

"You'll die out there," I muttered.

Hanna flinched.

"It's going to take you hundreds of years—" I began.

"More than ten thousand years," she said, correcting me. "It's going to be a very long voyage, and you're right. You are. After an adventurous life, I'll die of old age, and we'll barely have reached the comets."

I didn't know what to say.

"But Father," she purred. "Think of your descendants. Imagine them walking on all those strange, wonderful worlds."

"They'll be cargo," I snapped.

Very absorbed the insult without blinking. She almost laughed, telling us, "Our benefactors prefer to think of us as emblems. As treasures. To them, we're holy objects tying them to their first lucid thoughts."

With an easy shrillness, I said, "The Children's Crusade."

Very closed her eyes, and nodded.

"That's what the AIs dubbed this secret project. And that's just part of the mud that's coming out now."

"I know—"

"And you know what that name's taken from? In the Middle Ages, the children of Europe were lured away in an awful crusade … cynically used by the powers of the day … dying for no reason, or sold into slavery—"

"But Dad," Very whispered.

Then she stepped close to me. Her image lifted on its toes, touching my image on the nose. She always kissed me that way. I felt it, the illusionary touch of her dry lips. "Daddy," she purred. "What were those children promised? For going on their crusade, what was going to be their reward?"

Hanna answered, whispering, "Salvation."

"There is no salvation!" I growled. "Not in any bullshit crusade!"

My daughter laughed at me, and stepped back. "But what if there was?" she asked. "What if a heaven was possible, and it was real, and what if that heaven was offered to us? Really, where's the sadness here? That all that talk of salvation was a lie, or that you have spent your entire life not taking that staggering, wonderful risk …?"

The End

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