

The Martian Land

by Vysotina Alisa

A small skycar, shining and sparkling in the sunlight, flew above the red desert. Bare hills drifted by, and Martian houses, abandoned, but not forgotten slid under, watching the intruder with their empty-eyed dark windows. It flew past the dried canals, faced with brown stones, leaving a trace of whirled red sand behind. It was not welcome here, in the Martian Land.

A man in the skycar dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. During a long journey from the station, the skycar had heated up and it was incredibly hot inside. He was annoyed by the prospects of spending the whole day in the Martian Land instead of working in a comfortable office. The man looked at the digital map on the dashboard. According to the map he was to arrive at the destination point in about ten minutes. He leaned back in a pilot's chair, breathing deeply and loosened his tie. It was a horrible, horrible day.

Finally the skycar began to slow down and a woman's voice from the speakers announced landing. Through the windshield the man saw Martian houses: a dozen of nacreous shells, with small round windows were covered with thin red dust, that turned them from white to pink. A small house he came to visit, was standing aside from the others. They were really strange, these houses. They repeated the shape of the hills, and curves of ancient canals; they were graceful, but plain, and there was something sublime and majestic about them. They didn't look like anything on the Earth. The man shivered at thought that he was about to meet the unknown, and his primal instinct deep inside was telling him that the unknown was always something fraught with danger.

He fetched his black leather briefcase and jumped out of the skycar. The red Martian dust rose up under his feet and covered the bottom of his trousers, making the alien intruder a more natural part of the desert. With eyes closed, he took a long breath of thin Martian air. The air was still, and he couldn't feel even a waft of wind on his face. Irritated, the man moved towards the house, aspiring to finish the work as soon as possible. He came up to the shell-house and touched its round door with his palm. The door responded to the touch with smooth stone coldness and a tiny but persistent vibration that went across the shell's walls with a low humming noise. In a minute, the door had moved its flexible petals aside and behind it appeared a shell-house host. He was a tall Martian, with a brownish skin, dressed in loose turquoise robe, embroidered with a beautiful curling ornament that ran down from his shoulders with hundreds of creases. His curly russet hair, that framed his thin long face, was shining in the sunlight. The Martian looked at the man and smiled with his twinkling yellow eyes. The man started to think, looking at him silently.

'Good day, Mister Yii. I am James Hampton, from Quasar Inc. I am here today to discuss the construction of the launching site,' he thought as clearly as he could.

The Martian looked at him, puzzled, not trying to send a telepathic reply. James waited for a few moments, and decided to explain himself more plainly.

'Look, Mr. Yii, you are the only one left in the city,' he thought. 'We need to settle the terms of your moving out, because the construction work starts tomorrow. We can't delay it any

longer,' after thinking that, James moved his eyebrows significantly, as if he were trying to make his thoughts more persuasive.

The Martian was still looking at him, waiting for something. Then he did the strangest thing, that any Martian could possibly do.

He opened his mouth and said, 'liaqasi, iimiacin uusiqou?'

The man looked at the Martian, startled, not believing his own ears. He was ready for anything: telepathic disputing, neglection and even rudeness, but actual talking? No one had ever heard Martians talking, they used telepathy to communicate with each other and, somehow, with Earth men too, perhaps by reading their minds and sending back a telepathic reply - nobody could say for sure. He never knew that a Martian spoken language existed at all. The sounds, produced by Mr. Yii, that seemed to be the Martian speech, were a melodious singing full of vowels. Mr. Yii's voice was soft and mellow, but he produced some kind of an echo, as if the Martian were speaking through a giant metal tube.

'Ixumiawecinaixio ioaai'aw,' the Martian said after a pause.

Jason, still shocked and confused, didn't know what to do, but he realized that standing there and staring at the Martian would be inappropriate.

'I can't understand what you're saying,' Jason said with some diffidence. 'Telepathy?' he asked, feeling stupid.

'Weaikuaw ituaruwe,' replied Mr. Yii and disappeared inside the shell-house. The door closed its petals after him.

Jason was left standing in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the silence of the desert. He looked around, as if he were trying to find some explanation of what just had happened. The desert gave no answer, except for a sudden gust of wind, that stirred his hair and made Jason cover his face with a sleeve to protect his eyes from the biting sand that rose in the air. In a moment, the air was as still as it had been before. Jason looked at his trousers and jacket, covered with red dust. It was his best suit, and Martian dust was very hard to wash out. He wouldn't even have been there, if Peter from the Communications Department hadn't been ill. It was even not his job to communicate with Martians, but his boss had insisted on it, because of the launch site construction deadline. A few minutes passed, but the Martian didn't show up. Jason felt a surge of anger rising in his chest.

'Damn it!' Jason swore loudly, spat on the red sand and moved towards the skycar, having a strong desire to get back to the office and tell the boss what he frankly thought about communicating with Martians.

'Damn it,' he muttered a bit more calmly, turned back and went to the shell-house.

Jason raised his hand to touch the door once more, but before he could say knife, the shell petals moved aside and Mr. Yii showed up at the door.

'Vasaaquo ikuaw,' he sang, holding out a small silver tablet to Jason.

Jason couldn't read Martian well, but he knew some basic words from the training course for Mars. He took a cold tablet and looked at the intricate ligature. The text had Mr. Yii's name and some other things he couldn't understand. But he got some main ones, including 'disabled', 'verbal', 'non-telepathic'. Now the Martian's strange behaviour became more clear. Jason had never heard of disabled Martians before. It seemed that Mr. Yii couldn't use telepathy for communication, and it made Jason's mission almost impossible to complete, because neither of

them could speak or write each other's languages. He glanced at the Martian. Mr. Yii was watching him closely and his face was a mask, void of emotions, except a pair of perceptive eyes. For a moment Jason was hypnotized by the beautiful twinkling of tiny golden sparks inside the smiling yellow eyes. He blinked a couple of times to shake off the numbness. Jason was aware that Mr. Yii couldn't understand him, but going away without saying a word seemed impolite.

'I guess I should come back with someone who can translate.'

He turned away to go, but the Martian reached out and took him by the hand. Martian's hand with long thin fingers and a slender wrist was very cold and smooth, as if Jason was touched by a marble statue.

'Cinmiaweavese sseauu, quoiou'aw fusi,' the Martian's voice was calm and confident.

He released Jason's hand and waited standing motionless. There was something about this Martian, that didn't let him leave. Maybe it were his yellow eyes that were glittering with wisdom, or maybe a scarcely perceptible sense of desperation and fatality deep inside them. Jason sighed.

'All right. You see,' he looked around in search of something he could draw with, but it was foolish to hope to find a stick, since there were no trees at all. He took out a telescopic pointer from his briefcase.

Jason drew a shell-house on the sand. 'A house,' he said, pointing at the Martian's house and then at his clumsy painting on the sand.

Mr. Yii watched his every movement closely and then said, 'Uuisk.'

He took it as a sign of understanding. He drew a Martian beside the house. 'Yii,' he explained pointing at the real Martian, and then at the drawn one.

'Uuisk,' Mr. Yii repeated again.

Jason nodded and crossed out the house, drawing a road over it. 'We put the road to the launching site here', he commented. Then he drew a big house and an arrow from the Martian to the new house, redrew the Martian at the new place, and then crossed out the old one. 'Yii goes to a new home where all the other Martians live,' he explained, feeling very stupid. His efforts seemed to be pointless, but he decided it was too late to draw back. Jason opened his briefcase and took out his digital tablet. He turned on the presentation, and there appeared a beautiful picture of a magnificent five floor house model with laughing and smiling Martians all around. He showed it to Mr. Yii.

'You see? A new place to live for Martians. For Yii. A big house,' he said, holding out the tablet to the Martian. But Mr. Yii was not looking at the tablet. He stood still, preoccupied, looking at the drawing of a crossed out house and a crossed out Martian on the ground.

'Mr, Yii,' called Jason one more time. He couldn't understand the thoughts behind Mr. Yii's big pensive eyes, but it seemed to him, just for a moment, that the shimmer of golden sparkles in the Martian's eyes had faded.

Suddenly the Martian started, and an impenetrable expressionless mask together with a usual smile in the eyes returned to his face. 'Iosiouwe,' he called and stepped inside the house.

'Iosiouwe,' he repeated, making an inviting gesture with his elegant hand.

Jason was filled with doubts. The prospects of finding himself face to face with the Martian in his house gave him chills. He had never been inside any Martian house before, and he didn't

know what to expect. There were no cases of clashes between the Martians and the Earth people, nor they had ever behaved hostile towards humans, but who knew, what was on that alien mind? Jason shifted from one foot to another and glanced at the safe skycar.

'Cinmiaweavese,' sang Mr. Yii, asking in the softest and tenderest manner. The sunbeams grazed on his bronze skin, making it glow.

'Alright,' agreed Jason. 'What the hell am I doing,' he muttered to himself, and entered the house.

The door of petals closed behind him and he immediately regretted his decision in a cold sweat. It was dark inside and he was gazing around with his eyes wide open struggling to see anything. Suddenly, from nowhere, a dim warm glow appeared. Jason looked for the source of light, but there was none, as if the walls themselves were glowing. He was standing in the middle of a big and almost empty room with a round ceiling. He saw pictures of Martian household items and he could recognize some. On the table to the right lay an open book. Mr. Yii must have been reading when Jason touched his door. Martian books were made of tissue-thin silver pages, that sang when Martians touched three-dimensional letters with their thin gentle fingers. Next to the table there was a strange shaped bookcase with some small items in it that Jason couldn't identify. Now the soft yellow light was bright enough so he could see the paintings on the walls. Martian paintings, that were made with large dabs of bright coloured paint and were close to impressionism. It was known that they mostly used fingerpainting to create their pictures, and that usually portrayed landscapes, and abstract ideas like sadness, or dreaming, or delight. On the opposite wall a purple mist Martian slept on was swirling, shaping quaintly.

Mr. Yii pointed at the place by the table with a graceful gesture of his open palm. Jason sat in a comfortable chair and put his digital tablet on the table.

'I know that you don't understand me,' he sighed, 'how can I persuade you to move out?'

Jason made an indefinite gesture with his hand, pointing at the ceiling, walls and floor. 'The house,' he said, looking around, and then made a cross with his hands, 'destroy, tomorrow. You need to move out.'

Mr. Yii was watching him patiently. Jason decided to make another attempt to explain himself. He turned on the tablet, and a beautiful picture of the new Martian house appeared.

'Mr. Yii moves here,' he completed his explanation pointing at the Martian and then at the picture.

'Teesi,' refused the Martian and made a negative gesture with his hand. 'Iku siaitusiwe uusiqou,' he explained, came up to the strange bookcase, and took out a figured stand with a few black glass octahedrons on it. The lights twinkled on octahedrons' edges, hypnotizing and alluring to touch them. Mr. Yii placed the stand on a table and took out one octahedron with his folded hands. He squeezed it gently between them, and inside his folded hands a dim shining was seen. The Martian opened his arms. A light, formless at first, rose from the octahedron, and started to gain shape. Jason gazed at the marvellous metamorphosis of the light. In a few moments he could distinguish dizzy figures in the light, and finally it gained the proper shape. It was a hologram of Mr. Yii's house. He was sitting at the table, with his hands stretched above the opened book. A Martian woman was sitting on the purple mist, looking at Yii. There was one more living thing in the room: a little Martian child played with cubes and cylinders on the floor.

When the picture became clear, it suddenly started to move. Holographic Mr. Yii was caressing the book page gently, playing bewitching sounds that couldn't be heard in the hologram. The woman leaped from the mist and in a few tripping elegant steps she came up to Yii and bent forward to him, putting her hand on his shoulder softly. He continued playing the book like a little harp, though his intelligent eyes smiled warmer. She nestled her cheek up to his, having a look at the book. The boy was playing on the floor engrossed by a fascinating Martian toy. Everytime he touched a piece of toy it changed its shape unpredictably, from a cube to a flat triangle, from a triangle to a prism and so forth, but he seemed to understand the rules of the game, because he was managing the strange construction set very skilfully. Suddenly, he turned to his parents, distracted by something, and stretched out to his mother, smiling. She came up to him and picked him up, cuddling him close. Playful sparks were glittering in his eyes, and his short curls were shaking as his mother was dandling the baby in her arms. After that the hologram blinked and the movement started all over again.

Mr. Yii squeezed the octahedron in his hands again, and the figures of the Martian family began to melt, and then disappeared completely. He put it back on the stand. He was still enthralled by the memories, his shining golden eyes softened and moist. The Martian took another octahedron from the stand. Jason watched him, fascinated. Mr. Yii pressed his hands together, and the light of echoes appeared. It pictured Martian hills and the endless desert, rugged with dried canals. A family of three stood beside the house. Mr. Yii was holding a long lace that led to a beautiful skilfully made kite which was drifting in the wind above them. The woman and the child were standing next to him, embracing. The wind stirred the woman's hair, as she watched her husband with her eyes half closed from the sun. A silver chiffon scarf, that twined round her refined neck, fluttered in the wind like a beautiful butterfly. The child moved away from his mother, and came up to Mr. Yii, reaching towards the lace. The Martian smiled, and held it out to his son. The child grabbed it with laughter, and ran around, holding his hand with the lace above the head, his eyes filled with joy and excitement. The woman came up to Mr. Yii and put her hand on his waist. They were watching their happy child with affection, and their silk robes fluttered in the wind. The hologram blinked, and Mr. Yii squeezed the octahedron in his hands to make it disappear.

He hesitated for a moment, and then took out the third octahedron. Out of his hands a new living memory appeared. It pictured Mr. Yii's neighbourhood at the time when it was still populated by Martians. Martians from the whole neighbourhood were sitting on the sand before their houses. They greeted each other, and talked, their eyes were twinkling anxiously with excitement. It looked like something important was about to happen. Mr. Yii and his family were in the center of the memory, sitting together, a child on his mother's lap. The woman was drawing something in the sand with her fingers, deep in her thoughts, but the boy was watching the night sky closely. Mr. Yii was talking to one of his neighbours, when his son jumped up from his mother's lap and pointed at something above. Everyone turned their faces towards the sky in silent expecting. All eyes were riveted on the black mass, speckled with millions of tiny lights. A star fell, cutting the night sky in a half. Then another one. Hundreds of glittering meteors were scratching the sky with their burning tails. They flared and faded away, reflecting in the child's rapturous eyes. The woman laid her head on Mr. Yii's shoulder and he took her hand in his. The hologram blinked and vanished in Martian's hands.

Mr. Yii put the last octahedron in its place and carefully put the stand away. He caressed the octahedrons with his fingertips in a gesture full of affection.

'Teesi,' he repeated again, turning off the digital tablet with the picture of a perfect Martian life.

Jason guessed where Mr. Yii's son and wife were. Soon after people from Earth arrived, it turned out that Martians had different reactions to the common chicken-pox. It burned them black and turned them into fragile ashes. It had killed every third Martian before the Earth scientists discovered a cure. Jason watched the noble Martian who was still looking at mysterious octahedrons as if he were saying a silent goodbye. He understood the reason why Mr. Yii showed him all these memories. A hatred was rising inside him towards himself and all the people from Earth, who had invaded this beautiful planet, killed a third of its population, ruined their magnificent houses, and placed their dirty traces everywhere. Together, the Martians and their red desert planet were the seamless whole that had been torn apart by human greed and ignorance. Unlike humans, Martians lived in harmony with the world, embracing its beauty and splendour. How absurd was the thought that proud Martians would ever live in ugly cities of metal and concrete, that Earth men had built for them.

Jason couldn't force himself to look in the Martian's eyes. He stood up and moved towards the door. Mr. Yii came out with him. They stood outside silently, each one lost deep in his thoughts. Mr. Yii was looking at the shell-house with adoration in his smiling twinkling eyes. A few minutes passed. The Martian turned to him and gently put his cold hand on Jason's shoulder.

'Aiiuwe,' he bade his farewell, turned away and went to the desert.

Jason knew that the hand on the shoulder and the farewell were the words of forgiveness to the humans. Martians forgave the Earth men for everything they did. But after Jason experienced all these things he hadn't felt before because of his arrogance and selfishness, he didn't want to be forgiven.

Jason watched a tall figure of the Martian getting smaller and smaller while he was moving away to the empty desert to meet his lonely death. He watched and watched, till the shimmering figure disappeared on the horizon.