

Kwame sat in the sun, his legs dangling off the cliff, staring into the expanse before him. The cliff upon which he was perched looked over the canyon. The ground seemed to cave in on itself below him, a massive cavernous hole in the ground spread out in all directions, carved into it were innumerable shapes, the result of millions of years of erosion. The ground swarmed in and around itself, creating a city of jagged edges and plateaus. It looked like a painting — inside the canyon ran countless mountain ranges, for miles.

Kwame finished his beer and dropped it into the canyon below him. As usual, he waited and waited and waited, then a faint *clink*. After the bottle crashed at the bottom, Kwame promptly stood up, wiping the brittle red dirt off of his faded light blue jeans, and took another beer from his backpack, opening it with the silver ring on his middle finger. He gulped some of the beer — it was cold until it reached his chest, where it filled him with warmth. Kwame dusted off his old school all-white Air Force Ones, donned his pristine Knicks varsity jacket, and slung his black backpack across his back. He pressed a few buttons on his watch and waited a few seconds. The blue skateboard-esque object he'd left a few feet away from him vibrated and began to float toward him. He stepped atop his hoverboard, quickly balancing himself, and zoomed away from Tycho Canyon, towards Kepler City, the planetary capital of Mars.

"Where've you been?" Imani asked him, her disdainful face a perfect replica of their mother's. Kwame shrugged. She stood, impatiently tapping her foot, one hand on her hip, lips pursed. "You're always late to things, but I'm still surprised you came late to this." She paused and reexamined her brother. "Are you drunk?"

Kwame stood before his sister — his moral authority and his judge — a bit uncouth, his afro standing wildly on top of his head, his eyes a bit bloodshot, and his body a bit slack. She was

the personification of composure. She had tied her long red braids into a bun on the top of her hair, and on her neck shined a silver locket. He smiled that half-apologetic smile that effortlessly painted itself across his face, almost always succeeded by a disappointed leer from his dear sister.

"A little high too," Kwame said, and his sister sucked her teeth. "I don't know what you're so mad about. I'm here, ain't I?" As Imani's eyes burned through his own, Kwame responded with a look of disinterest and resignation. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be wasting my damn time here, could've got my diploma in the mail." Imani immediately softened her countenance, and grasped her brother's hand.

"That's not true," she said. Suddenly the all-too-familiar graduation song began to boom through the auditorium, and they surveyed the crowd around them. Thousands of people had come to watch their fruit, the result of their years of struggle and strife on Mars graduate from Kepler Interplanetary Institute.

The countless faces, beaming with pride, seemed to all be vibrating with anticipation. The graduates were sitting together in the middle of the auditorium, all wearing red robes, a testament to the vermilion shade of their home planet. He and his sister sat next to each other, minor elements in that sea of red, and in front of the crowd, a large metallic platform rose from the ground, on top of it sat a full orchestra, the origin of the swelling song.

As the song began to crescendo, a second platform rose behind the first. On this platform stood the professors, those at the top of their fields, tasked with educating the next generation of scholars, thinkers, and world-changers. Among them sat a distinctly familiar face. His face was a dark shade of brown. Silver, metal-rimmed glasses rested atop the bridge of his nose. As soon as the

platform rose high enough, he frantically scanned the crowd until he saw Imani and Kwame. When he saw them, a massive grin stretched across his face, and he blew them a kiss.

"Dad is so weird," Imani said, shaking her head.

"Gotta love the guy though," said Kwame, with a smile as big as his father's painted across his face.

The conductor stood, his body rigid and measured. He commanded the cacophony with calculated sways and precise movements. Sound seemed to be bursting from his arms and hands — his body a conduit to the ethereal. And then silence.

To Kwame, the platform was a stage for performance. Provosts and Deans took to that floating stage and proceeded to perform a vaudeville comedy of a ceremony, and the sea of red remained pacific and wholly focused on getting their hands on the key to their futures. The throng of families around the stadium revelled in the pomp. Each attempt to pander to the crowd was greeted by raucous applause and laughter. They talked of commitment, of growth, of grit, and the families ate it up. They talked of humanity as a concept, of humanity's indomitable spirit, of the strength and curiosity that allowed them to bravely and heroically colonize their nearest planetary neighbor in Mars.

Kwame and his sister stood together in their childhood home in the suburbs of Kepler City in silence. The house was large and had always been kept clean. The living room was spacious. A long, plush couch sat against wall and opposite was a blank white wall. Book shelves lined the rest of the walls, every row filled to capacity. This house held the totality of their childhood memories in its foundation. In its walls lived the echoes of their lives, the residue of their struggles. The kitchen housed the countless family dinners after school. Their bedrooms were home to countless tears and

laughs — the joys and pains of life seemed to swirl together and become a stew of bittersweet experiences.

On the floor, a cleaning robot, a circular vacuum that seemed all too capable of doing non-vacuum things, moved swiftly through them.

"Hello, Kwame. Hello, Imani," the robot said, uninterested, not stopping to engage in any pleasantries. The noise seemed to jar the two siblings from their trance.

"Well, you know Dad's always late," Imani said. "So let's watch a movie." She walked into the kitchen, grabbed some chips and returned to the living room. "Television, on," she said.

Suddenly, the wall opposite the couch erupted with sound.

"Kuriosity Television - Mars' best since 2083," it said.

"What do you wanna watch?" Imani asked.

"Anything." Kwame started. "Start without me though, I'll be down in a bit." He walked upstairs, still surprised by how tiny his childhood home was in comparison to the way he remembered it as a child. He went into his room. His room was just that: his. There were old posters and records bought from vintage stores that wanted to recreate the feeling of living on Earth. On his wall hung moving holograms of Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and Carmelo Anthony. There were old records — none of which he had any way of playing — by Johnny Mathis, Ella Fitzgerald, and The Ink Spots. From his ceiling hung a globe of humanity's first home. He sat down on his bed and sighed.

"Phone on."

In his earpiece, a short melodic tone played, and a calming female voice replied.

"Phone, on."

"Play the last message from Mom."

*Kids, I wish I could tell you in person how much I love you and how proud of you I am, but all of this is happening so fast. I want you to know that you and Imani are incredibly brilliant and incredibly beautiful. I am so sorry. Very soon, they're going to take me away to Earth. I won't have the chance to be your mother anymore, you'll be confused, and upset, and you'll have the right to be. I know you won't understand, but I did the right thing. There's so much more I wish I could tell you. I love you so —*

The message abruptly ended before she could end her final declaration of love. Kwame sat in his room and listen to his mother's last message over and over again, trying to visualize his sweet mother, afraid and desperate to leave a message for her children to hear. He thought of her fiercely loving smile, the joy he felt when in her embrace.

Their father, Jerome, arrived tardily, as he was wont to do. His children were sitting together drinking and starting their third movie. They had amassed a healthy collection of empty wine bottles throughout their long wait. Their father wasn't very tall, and he sauntered around with a perpetually goofy smile on his face. In his hands he carried a large painting covered by tan paper.

"I see you started the party without me," He said.

"I'm excited to see what you painted this time, Dad." Imani said.

"And I'm excited to show you." He unwrapped the painting and revealed a large black expanse onto which Jerome had painted the cosmo — stars and strips of light, presumably other galaxies, other stars with their own orbiting planets, their own people and struggles and turmoil. In the center of the painting was a sphere, what Carl Sagan dubbed 'the pale blue dot.' In the center of the painting was Earth. Space seemed to swirl around humanity's original home; it was the center of

the universe. "I've been working on this for awhile. I know painting's a bit antiquated and all, but the labor of painting itself was something I thought was important for the piece," Jerome explained.

"It's really dope, Pops," Kwame opined enthusiastically.

"Yeah, I really like it a lot," Imani said. She poured her father a glass of wine. "Put it on the wall and come sit with us already." Jerome smiled his typically big, cartoonish smile and pushed the painting onto the wall and heard a loud click as the magnets in the frame latched onto the wall.

"Marla always loved these movies." On the screen, multicolored spaceships zoomed through the cosmos, with skilled pilots inside, shooting and dodging and rolling. He drank his wine and sat, content, with his two children at his side.

"Don't you two have CTEs tomorrow afternoon? I'm proctoring one session."

"I don't," Imani replied. "I've already got a job. I'm working on research with Professor Thelwell."

"I am one of the many who have no idea what they're doing yet," Kwame said.

"I keep saying this, son, but I know some people, and could get you a job," Jerome said, his furrowed brow noting his concern for his son.

"Nah, Pops," Kwame said. "I'll be good. I'm honestly a bit optimistic about it." His father and sister both gawked at him, mouths agape.

"Really? My brother, the reborn optimist."

"Don't get your hopes up," he scoffed. "This is my last chance to figure out what I'm trying to do with my life."

Their relationship had been strengthened by Marla's absence. Jerome grew into a more mature father as a single parent. Luckily enough, his wife's sequestration to Earth came at one of the

most successful times in his art career. He'd earned a great deal of money from his work as a comic strip artist and, more significantly, a gig as an artist for a popular advertising agency. His career allowed him to take time from work and spend time with his kids, who needed him then more than ever.

In the basement of their home, he set up a studio for his kids alongside his own. He nurtured the burgeoning creativity and curiosity in his children in the only way he knew how: through the visual arts. Throughout the years, throughout the countless hours the three of them spent drawing, painting, and listening to music, they proliferated a wealth of paintings, of varying levels of quality. Their basement was the nexus of their relationship; their most tender moments happened within its walls. They talked about life and love, waxing lyrical about the troubles of relationships — Jerome was often painfully honest about life as a 'half-widower' as he called it. They spoke of Kwame's struggles as a short kid playing basketball, Imani's problems with math. Their relationship grew to such strength that it became a physical place in and of itself, their love seemed to take physical shape.

The next day, Kwame zoomed through the streets of suburban Kepler. It was a weekend routine he'd been repeating since his mother was taken. As the sun rose, he'd smoke in his room and take to the streets, high, smiling, and ill advisedly wearing headphones. He rode through suburbs, which were built after colonization as models of the suburbs of Earth. The televisions are always on, the garbage trucks come on Tuesdays and there was always a store no farther than 5 miles away. Kwame enjoyed riding his hoverboard, feeling the wind in his face, and speeding past the stores and recreational centers in his town. He wore a pair of black goggles to protect his eyes, and when he wasn't on it, he'd wear them on his neck as a fashion statement. He enjoyed watching the families, in

their flying minivans, going to soccer practice or to play anti-gravity laser tag, secure in the safety of their suburban dream life. He spent his entire morning watching other people go about their quotidian routines. He watched young couples nervously and coquettishly eating brunch together, their relationships a blossoming flower. He watched husbands and wives with their gaggles of children, their stern looks of consternation and their joyous laughs occurring in equal measure.

While he spent the morning watching other people live their lives, Jerome and Imani spent theirs cooking. Pancakes, bacon, and eggs were their standard fare — a tried and true formula for success. They'd perfected the formula through years of trial and error, from when Imani was a small child, and she couldn't crack an egg without getting shells in the bowl. A decade of burnt bacon and amoeba pancakes transformed into a burgeoning, well-cheffed family tradition.

Imani had transformed into a stellar cook through her burnt trials and bland tribulations. She spent her childhood sitting in her father's lap reading recipes and mixing ingredients. By her teens Imani had taken the mantle from her father and assumed the majority of the cooking responsibilities in the household. Imani, to her chagrin had developed an affinity for caretaking through her cooking. After her mother left, she handled it much better than the wayward Kwame, and even better than her outwardly stolid father. In her lap fell Kwame when he felt helpless. Her hugs and encouragement kept her father moving through the storms of self-doubt.

When Kwame got home, the house smelled of bacon. As he walked through the door, he could hear the familiar sound of grease popping and laughter.

"Your mom would have loved this."

His sister and father stood around the stove, in the center of the kitchen. On the kitchen table sat two large plates, one with eggs and the other with pancakes. The eggs were golden and



fluffy, and chock full of melted cheese. The pancakes were nearly perfect circles — even the smoke emanating from them seemed to be well-shaped. The three of them sat around the table and began to eat. Jerome looked up from his plate and began to speak to his children.

"Marla really would have loved to know you two as adults," he began. "You have both been the best things that ever happened to me. I'm honored to have raised the two of you." Tears started to stream down his face. "You two are the light of my life." He grasped their hands as if in prayer. Their father, the half-widower, sat, tearful and thankful in their presence.

As Imani and Kwame cleaned the kitchen, their father prepared to leave. He took great pains to look around the house, to touch the walls, to smell the air. He walked around the house, to the room he used to share with his wife and saw the lone picture he had of her. She was laughing, through a smile composed of two reluctant, pursed lips, a vision of levity. It was rare for Marla to indulge the way that was always easy to Jerome. They lived on opposite poles — hers was the more serious, the more organized. While they were together, their personalities clashed and eventually melded. Jerome remembered the intensity with which she hated when he left the cabinets open. They spent years together before they had kids. They'd met at Kepler Interplanetary Institute, she a budding aeronautics student with an affinity for exploration, he a painter, whose most compelling urge was to get high and wax lyrical about things of which he had no idea.

He grabbed the photo of his laughing wife and walked downstairs, tears in his eyes. He watched his two adult children laugh and clean. Kwame had his goofy smile, but his was less intense. The look in his eyes made his face a more tender version of his father's. Imani had her mother's reluctant smile, covered by the reticence to give in to absolute joy, coupled with a relentless love. He smiled as tears rolled down his face, left the house, got in his car, and drove away, toward Marla.

"I'll see you later, the CTE's beckon," Kwame said after they'd finished cleaning.

"You're gonna kill it," Imani said as she hugged her brother. After Kwame left, Imani made her way to the basement. She hadn't returned in a while as finishing school had occupied most, if not all, of her time. When she got downstairs, she was immediately taken back to her childhood, to those nights sitting with her father and her brother, painting endless stories onto canvas. She laughed. It was obvious Kwame had visited the studio recently. Paint buckets and brushes were scattered across the floor, pieces lay unfinished yet beautiful on easels throughout the studio. She walked to the back, where a door automatically slid open to reveal a room filled with paintings. Paintings on the walls, on the floors, paintings stacked to the ceilings. She looked for a specific piece, one she'd hidden years ago. When she found it, she yelped with excitement. It was a painting of her mother, a copy of the photograph her father had taken those years ago. For years, she would take the painting from her parent's bedroom whenever her father wasn't around and paint the painting. It took her a few years and a few tries, but eventually she produced a beautiful painting, one she felt did her mother justice. She stared at the painting. In the paint that glossed the canvas were the innumerable tears that ran down Imani's face during her life. Imani wrapped her painting back up and put it in back in the throng of other paintings. She grabbed her keys and left to finally find her mother.

The Career Trajectory Examinations were held on campus at Kepler Interplanetary Institute. Kwame arrived uncharacteristically early. He'd always enjoyed how green the campus was. Tall, strong trees lined the sides of the immaculate fields of grass — each individual blade looked as if it were cut with a pair of scissors. The campus was inviting. The buildings were short and looked a bit like houses — all except the administration building, which was gaudy in comparison. It sat at the

center of campus and was the tallest building. It was designed like a courthouse, large, grey stairs leading up to the entrance. Before the stairs stood a large monument, a floating, rotating replica of Mars. Under the colossus read: "When humanity called, Mars answered."

Kwame walked into a large auditorium. The ceilings seemed endlessly high, as if they stretched into the heavens. In the other seats were other misfits, the outcasts. The CTEs were used as a last resort — most students, like Imani, had figured out their next move after the Institute. This was for those who needed help in the job search, those who needed a push to figure out what exactly it was they wanted to do.

Kwame sat at his desk. On it was a rectangular black pad. When Kwame touched the screen, his name immediately appeared, recognizing his fingerprint. He began to navigate through the test, answering questions that rang like a personality questionnaire. He saw himself, sitting in an armchair at an interview. Kwame saw himself answering these questions to an employer, telling them why his skills would help the organization, or why he is someone they should hire, or what kind of cream cheese he likes on the bagels in the break room. He saw himself joking about football games with coworkers, drinking on Friday nights, enthusiastically swapping stories about mildly inconvenient moments that happened throughout that particular week. As he saw himself, his future self, he stopped. He put his pad down, stood up, and walked out.

The air was fresh when he walked out of the building. He couldn't bare the feeling. He knew what he wanted to do. He didn't need a test to tell him the singular desire that had been boiling within his heart had been on his mind since childhood. He didn't need a questionnaire to demystify what was going on in his mind. He knew what he wanted to do. Kwame set off on his hoverboard toward his mother.

He arrived at a large complex. On the building read: Kepler Aeronautics & Space Travel. In front of the building stood two security guards at a kiosk. He walked inside casually past the security guards.

"Wassup, Kwame?" One of them asked, jovially.

"Is Jean around?"

"Yeah, he's in there. Your pops and your sister both came to see him a little bit ago." Kwame stopped in his tracks. He smiled and looked at the guards.

"About damn time," he said.

He walked inside and immediately the din of construction assaulted his ears, and he immediately felt at ease. He remembered walking through the complex as a young child with his mother, picking up every sharp thing he could, drills, screws, saws — his curiosity proved dangerous. She would tell him what everything was, which engineer did what, which spaceship was going where. Kwame walked through the complex aimlessly, lost in reverie until his sister's voice jarred him from his trance.

"Mom would always tell me that I would be a great engineer," Imani said. "She would walk me through here and show me all the men, and she would stand with her chest puffed out and her eyes unwavering and she would tell me that I would be better than all of those men."

"She was right." They walked into a small office. There sat Jerome and Jean, two similar looking men, who, though neither of them could very often be seen with a serious countenance, they were at that moment accomplishing the feat.

"Look, Jerome. I have a pod ready, you came and asked for it, and now you're mad I've got it?"

"I can't believe you've been planning this with my daughter! Why didn't you tell me? This is so dangerous!" Kwame looked at Imani and watched a sly smile creep across her face.

"Does it matter anymore, Dad?" Imani asked. "It all worked out, didn't it? We're all here. Just like I thought, Kwame isn't going to be smart and take the CTE's, and you were waiting until we graduated from Kepler to try." Jerome sighed. "I've always known, and now, because of me, we can all do what we've always wanted to do: get my mother."

That night, Kwame packed clothes for Earth.