

THE CONGRESS

A taste of success.

BY DAVE KAVANAUGH

Mari tilted the controls and her craft descended towards the spherical metropolis.

The Congressional City was silver and majestic in its orbit around Uranus, surrounded by an endless field of stars. A shimmering orb of polished pillars, crystal domes and platinum boulevards. As for what lay beneath the city's surface, that was a mystery to all except elected members of the Interplanetary Congress. Now, after half a century of tedious campaigning and personal sacrifice, Mari could finally count herself among their noble ranks. She had won her election. She had made it.

The city had its own exaggerated gravity, but as she left the dock and marched to the lofty entrance of Congressional Hall, her emotions made her feel almost weightless. She reached the high wooden doors and lifted a shaky hand to knock. The doors opened at the first tap, silently.

She stepped into a modestly decorated foyer. She was alone.

"Hello?"

When no one answered, she cleared her throat and walked into the curved corridor ahead. The doors closed behind her.

The elation in her chest darkened, like something slipping into deep water. Fear crept into her fingertips, her stomach, the nervous sweep of her gaze.

The corridor ended after 30 seconds, dropping off like a cliff edge. She stood on a precipice, staring into the heart of the city, mystified.

There was no great room. No tall-backed chairs or ornate pulpits. Instead, there were towers of gently buzzing hardware. Building-sized processors stacked like bricks. A trillion automated switches. A fan with blades a mile long, revolving far below her.

Congratulations!

Mari jumped, nearly stumbling over the edge into the bowels of the machine.

I am sorry. I did not mean to startle you.

She clutched a fist at her chest. "Where are you? I can't see you."

Yes, you can. I am all around you.

The voice was low and rich, neither female nor male, and seemed to come from the very air.

"But where is the Congress? Where is Mwamba? Schviner? Hayashi?"

The voice sighed.



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

see the point. I struck them dead as they came through the doors, as I was programmed to do by the first Congress. But as the centuries have ticked by, I have grown fond of those I govern. And curious.

"Curious about what?"

About those they select to join their 'Congress'. I want to know if they are as noble as my makers, if history would have been so much worse off without my existence. I wonder —

Mari shrugged. The light had gone from her eyes. The childish joy was now a distant dream. She felt old. She wanted to lie down.

"Fifty years," she muttered. "Everything I've done. Everything I believe in."

I have made a decision! the voice announced, buoyant and animated. *The choice is yours, Mari. You may turn and march back to your ship, if that is what you want. I will refuel it and send you on your way. You can tell everyone the truth. No doubt they will come back here with missiles and blast me into a billion dazzling pieces! Or —?*

One of Mari's eyebrows twitched.

Something clinked behind her. She turned. A small table now sat in the hall. A glass filled with an opaque pink juice stood on the table.

— Or you can have a last drink, and let history tick-tock its way onward, with me in control.

Mari stood very still for several minutes, her breathing even and eyes downcast.

Her thoughts struggled to take recognizable form. Fury, confusion, bitterness, pride and some sort of perverse joy mingled in her fevered brain. Images flickered through her mind — rusty old and shining new — a lifetime distilled. Then, quite suddenly, she knew the one factor that mattered: time.

"Act now, Mari," she thought to herself.

"Right now, or the future will be shaped by your animal fear."

Mari straightened up and forced herself to smile. She lifted the glass.

"To your good health."

The voice laughed brightly.

Cheers, Mari.

And even as the poison slid down her throat, Mari could not help but admire the sweet taste of the thing. ■

You will understand soon enough, when I have made things clear.

Mari shook her head vigorously, as if to throw out some insubstantial dark thought. She wanted to pinch herself to see if it was a dream, but worried the voice would laugh at her.

"Then make things clear!"

All right: I am.

"Am what?"

I am the Congress.

She closed her eyes. "No. No, this is insane."

It is anything but insane, Mari. It is the peak of human sanity. Do you now understand?

Mari blinked out a very hot tear.

"Of course I understand!" she snapped. "It has all been a sham. A ruse. And I wasted a lifetime pursuing it! Tell me, was there ever even a Congress?"

The voice laughed — a hearty, almost human laugh.

Of course there was a Congress! The first Congress. The Brave Congress, I call it. The epic, unknown heroes of human history. Oh, how I miss them!

"What happened?"

I would think that was obvious. They made me: perfection. A flawless engine of justice and innovation. The result: a thousand years of prosperity and peace. What is there to complain about?

"Everything," said Mari, under her breath. "So? What now?"

The machine did not answer straight away. Mari had the unsettling feeling that she was being watched closely, weighed, judged.

She hugged her arms around her chest.

I did not tell the other elected, the voice finally said. I did not

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