

ONE SMALL PAW

by Robert Corra

As they approached the squat building, they left behind a faint trail of footprints in the gray dust. The storefront was equally pale and unremarkable, as was just about everything in their prefab world. Mark often felt like he lived in a lifeless, 3D printed diorama. And he grew weary of the lack of color, of the minimalism he felt deep in his soul. The jazz that drove him was long gone.

After months of pleading, Luka had convinced him to make the trip. Luka had a knack for searching for needles in the digital haystack. He'd been cradled by the technology that kept them all alive in such an inherently cold and isolated place. But this time, Luka had topped himself. A pet store? On the moon? Mark could hardly believe it was true.

A tinge of regret swelled up inside of him, making the artificial gravity seem heavier with each step. The mere idea of pets seemed so foreign, so frivolous. Borderline irresponsible.

His grandfather's stories about the early days played on loop in Mark's head as they entered the store. The Moon's modest history was filled with tales of hardship and perseverance. The pioneering spirit followed by the reality of conservation and survival. Even as small colonies grew to small cities and generations stubbornly took root, Mark could never quite shake that there was an underlying fragility to their existence. The old whispers in his subconscious were always the same. Stay modest. Stay paranoid even, because it could save your life.

As Luka pulled Mark through the door, they were greeted with stacks of empty cages and a pervasive silence. A desolate clerk looked up from the corner of the room, his eyelids weighed

down by the profound staleness of the air. The clerk gave them an effort-filled nod of acknowledgement as Luka and Mark took separate paths into the cluttered maze.

Mark's thoughts turned to all the practical reasons they could never own a pet. It was sure to cost way too many credits. What kind of strain would this put on their aging air purification system? And worst of all, what would the neighbors think? One thing the Earth and the Moon would always have in common is the vanity and insecurity of its inhabitants.

He was startled when Luka shouted, "Dad! Over here!" Mark turned the corner, and from the distance he immediately noticed a vivid swirl of orange and scarlet, like hot coals doused with cinnamon. Luka was standing next to a cage, transfixed with wonder at the red tabby cat before him.

The cat unfurled and pranced around playfully. It was full of life. A resounding splash of color in a monochromatic world.

Luka hesitated as he looked up at his dad, and then pleaded, "Can we get her? Can we? Can we take her home?" Mark's thoughts sped through the list of cons once more. He frowned, as this made him acutely aware of his "tell me the bad news first" programming.

"What should we name her?" Mark said defiantly.

Luka smiled and responded with conviction, "Mars..."