



PUBLIC  
DOMAIN

# CLASSIC CAGE

*A Play in One Act*



FRANCIS  
BASS

# **Classic Cage**

**Francis Bass**



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## **Characters**

TARA CAGE

55. Female.

CAGE MICHAELA

52. Female.

LIU CHANG

58. Male.

PAO ELIZABETH

30. Female.

WASHINGTON JACOB

47. Male.

## **Setting**

Mars, 2063 AD (with video feed from Earth.)

*Set: The stage is divided in two. The stage left half is on Mars, stage right is on Earth. At left are three chairs pulled around a small table. This is a shared meeting room in a coworking space. At right is one chair and a desk, and behind this a bed. This is the home office/bedroom of TARA CAGE.*

## **SCENE ONE**

*The right half of the stage is not lit, while the left half is. CAGE MICHAELA and LIU CHANG enter, MICHAELA carrying a laptop. TARA CAGE is already seated on the right side of the stage, in the dark.*

### **CHANG**

I don't know, Michaela. The last few proposals you've passed along to me, they've all been the same. She hasn't written anything I can work on since *Letters from the New East*. I just ...

### **MICHAELA**

Chang, I hear you, I understand you, and I can tell you right now, that's why I wanted the two of you to talk in person. It's really gonna eat into my budget, paying for this faster than lightspeed connection, but, it's worth it. I think you're gonna be really interested in what Tara has to write, and—

### **CHANG**

If it's another somewhat autobiographical, fictional account of the decline of the US, or the destruction of the Gulf Coast, I don't wan—

### **MICHAELA**

No no no! It's not, it's another travel book! We're getting back to Tara's roots, you know?

### **CHANG**

*After thinking about this for a moment.*  
Really. Truly? What about?

### **MICHAELA**

*Setting up her laptop on the desk.*  
Well I'm just her agent ...

**CHANG**

And her sister.

**MICHAELA**

... wouldn't you rather hear about it ... from Tara herself? Here, I'll bring her up on the big screen.

*MICHAELA sets to work on the laptop, configuring the call. Small pause.*

**CHANG**

Faster than lightspeed communication, huh?

**MICHAELA**

Gonna cost me my kidneys, but hey—it's worth it, right?

**CHANG**

Then there will be no lag, no latency, right? No waiting for light waves to travel ten minutes from Earth to Mars, or—

**MICHAELA**

We won't just be exchanging monologues, that's correct.

**CHANG**

That's good, Michaela, very ...

*Beat.*

I appreciate you doing this, I do, but I want to be honest with you. This is ... I'm at the end of my line now, truly. Tara hasn't put out a book in years. Every time I've exchanged emails with her, she's said she doesn't want to write all her old cheerful stuff anymore, she wants to write, I don't know, dark stories, "realistic" stories. And I'm just—I'm sure there's an editor out there that wants that, but I'd frankly be of no use to her. So, unless, magically, she's now totally cheerful, totally back to her old self, I just—

*Lights up on TARA, as the connection goes through.*

**TARA**

*The AI version of TARA. Beaming, overjoyed*  
Chang! It's been way too long, I don't think we've spoken in real-time since you visited Luna, how the hell are you?

**CHANG**

Eh—Tara! I'm good, I'm doing well, how are—

**TARA**

And how's the family?

**CHANG**

Good, they're good, they—it really is wonderful to see you so happy.

**TARA**

*She shifts to real TARA, who is considerably more morose.*  
Happy?

**CHANG**

Well, yes, you ... you seem quite, uh, back to your old self.

**TARA**

Huh?

**MICHAELA**

Alright, well, good to see you Tara, but let's speed this along, eh? I'm not made of money, you know.

**TARA**

You didn't have to do this. It's quite extravagant, FTL communication, and I'm not sure for what purpose.

**MICHAELA**

So! Tara, Tara and I have been working on this proposal, on this idea for a new travel book from the infamous Cage Tara, so, let's get to it!

**TARA**

*After staring blankly for a moment.*  
Okay, well my idea / was to travel to—

**CHANG**

*Muttering to MICHAELA.*  
I thought you said there would be no lag.

**TARA**

That wasn't lag, I was just



*A shift, back to the happier AI version of TARA.*  
Composing my thoughts. So, here it is, the big idea  
*Shift to real TARA.*

I go to the UK and retrace the route from *Letters from the Old Kingdom*.  
But, know me, now everything's godshit, so. A new take on it.

*CHANG is utterly bewildered.*

**MICHAELA**

And and and Chang, I thought, though obviously this is something you'd have to talk to your publisher about, but I just thought, *hey*, we can re-release *Letters from the Old Kingdom* alongside this new book—I'm sure there are plenty of people that would love to go back and re-read it, being her most popular book and all, I mean, this is perfect, right?

**TARA**

*Shift to AI.*

We could even put out some nice hardcovers, some deluxe physical editions, know me? Wouldn't that be swell?

**CHANG**

Swell?

**MICHAELA**

Terran US vernacular. It means good. Or cool, or—

**CHANG**

I am aware—what is happening here? Is this one of those, predictive AIs?

**TARA**

*Shift to real.*

Oh Jesus Fuck, really?

*Shift to AI.*

Sure is!

**CHANG**

I thought predictive AIs were only used when there was lag, to bridge the gaps in conversation. But you said this was real-time communication, no lag.

**MICHAELA**

It is—god, I can't imagine using a predictive AI to cover latency this far out from Earth. It'd have to fill a gap of ten minutes, and—

**CHANG**

*Gesturing to happy TARA.*

Then what is this!

**MICHAELA**

Well, the real-time communication isn't perfect. Sometimes it cuts out, you know, just because the signal's not great or there's interference or— anyway, it uses predictive AI to patch those gaps, just like old latency-patching AI did.

**CHANG**

So why is the AI getting it so wrong? Isn't it supposed to learn from people's past conversations, learn personality, likely responses, all that? Imitate them almost perfectly? I mean, Tara, are you noticing any drastic changes in behavior in either of us?

**TARA**

No, not at all. Everything's perfect

*Shift to real.*

except the AI Michaela swears a lot more. I take it that's pulled from non-professional conversations.

**MICHAELA**

*A chuckle.*

Well, now that we've cleared that up, let's get back to the pitch, eh?

**TARA**

Swell. The book would make very deliberate comparison to *Letters from the Old Kingdom*, maybe even direct quotes. Critically examine my optimism, over-simplifications,

*Shift to AI.*

Really, know me, really put the thing into perspective. Like a retrospective. It'd show how I've aged, how I've matured, but still try to capture the beauty of the UK, even with all the sea-level rise, really try to show

*Shift to TARA.*

how godfucked that place is now. Maybe try and show how shit it was

even back in 2040.

**CHANG**

Excuse me, but I don't think everything is cleared up. If our AIs are working fine, why is yours oscillating so much?

**MICHAELA**

Well I think—

**CHANG**

And, more importantly, which one is the AI?

**MICHAELA**

*To CHANG.*

Well I just imported all of my personal communications AIs into the program, so—obviously that means that it's got a lot of good, current data on you and I, but as far as Tara, the last time I used real-time video chat to talk to her was when I visited Luna five years ago.

**TARA**

Ten. Can we please just use Earth years?

**CHANG**

I thought you were familiar with Mars years. You use Mars years in your books.

**TARA**

I did. Because everyone told me that's what I had to do since I was publishing on Mars, since that's my main—my only—market.

**CHANG**

Then I assume that the more, uh, happy Tara is the AI?

**TARA**

Uh-huh.

**CHANG**

Well, then I think that's all I really need to know. I know this connection is expensive, I don't want to burn minutes.

**MICHAELA**

Wait, you've hardly even heard her out!

**CHANG**

What more do I need to hear? It's the same thing I've been passing on for the past few—the past *five* years.

**TARA**

This is real Earth. This is not some bullshit oohing and ahing at the history and the culture and all this other shit, that has not meant *anything* in the face of climate change, of overconsumption, of a depression that's been going on for almost ten fucking years! This is

*Shift to AI.*

A look at real Earth, and I say, real Earth is something special.

**CHANG**

Will it be in your old style? Will it be positive, optimistic?

**TARA**

Well, all I can promise you is that

*Shift to real.*

no. What is there to be optimistic about? Have you read any interplanetary news lately? It's a shit

*Shift to AI.*

Know me? It's bad. But I can make it good.

**CHANG**

I'm getting conflicting messages here. Look, if you want to go to some poor parts of Earth, I'm all for that. If you want to write fiction, I'm for that too! People on Mars still love all your books, you've got a lot of loyal fans who would probably love to see some fiction from you. But the thing I can't do is help you with this ... nihilistic ... that's just not what I work on. It's not what I read, it's not what I'm good at. You can take it to any other editor, and I wish you luck with that, but I'm not your guy.

*To MICHAELA.*

Thank you. See you around.

**MICHAELA**

Wait, here's another—just throwing this out here, what if Tara came to Mars? A travel book about Mars! I mean, that would avoid the uh darker subject matter, right? Mars isn't perfect, but there's no drowning cities or Second Depression here!

**TARA**

*Shift to real TARA.*

Mike, that is not what we talked about.

**CHANG**

And who would pay for this trip? Pak & Lee? We can pay airfare, but interplanetary travel ...

**MICHAELA**

Well, yes, the publishers would need to at least defray the costs. But think—Cage Tara goes to Mars! *Letters from the Great Experiment*, we could call it, or—

**CHANG**

I ... I think you'd better talk to your sister about that first. It seems like a big risk, bankrolling a roundtrip from Earth to Mars—even as close as we are right now—on the assumption that Tara will touch down at Pavonis and instantly return to her old self. On the assumption that Martians would even *want* to read a Cage Tara book about their own planet instead of Earth.

**MICHAELA**

Tara, come on, tell him.

**TARA**

We did not talk about that. And as far as Mars,  
*Shift to AI.*

you go to Mars and remake the world anew, I'll save the old world here.

*Pause.*

**CHANG**

Right. Well, contact me if you get anything worked out.

**MICHAELA**

I ... Of course. See you around.

**CHANG**

See you Tara. Michaela.

*He exits.*

**TARA**

Bye.

**MICHAELA**

*Once CHANG has left.*

God damn it. Are you fucking kidding me, Tara! You couldn't have put on a good face for five god damn minutes! Shit! I went out on a limb for you, I spent all this money to get an FTL connection, and what do you do? You mope and moan and swear, you make me look like an ass, and you manage to scare away your editor. *For good* this time. I'm not asking you to sacrifice your art here or write something you hate, I just needed you to put a little more shine on it, just an ounce of positivity, would that kill you? Christ's sake, your AI was doing a better job selling the project than you were!

**TARA**

Huh, connection's kinda choppy right now.

**MICHAELA**

What? No it's not. What are—

**TARA**

It's just, your AI, the words it—

**MICHAELA**

That's not my AI Tara, that's me! Actual me. I'm swearing because I'm pissed at you!

*She sits down.*

**TARA**

Should we hang up? I don't want to waste your money.

**MICHAELA**

No. I get the first fifteen minutes for a flat rate. Funny thing, I really thought we'd go over fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes without you blowing everything.

**TARA**

I can't help it, Mike. I'm not going to write another godbricked travel book. And I don't know what you expected to happen pulling that Mars stuff out your ass at the last minute. As if we'd discussed—

**MICHAELA**

We have discussed it! I mean. A year ago.

**TARA**

My house is on fire. I don't want to go to the beach while my house is on fire. / Not that we still have beaches.

**MICHAELA**

That's not fair. Look, Mars would be good for you. It's not perfect, but everyone here has enough food, work, shelter. I'm tired of seeing you so cynical. I don't want to lose you to the misery of Earth, okay?

**TARA**

And a trip to Mars is the answer?

**MICHAELA**

A trip ... or something more permanent ...

*Pause.*

Look there's a lot to see here, a lot of inspiration I think—there's Marineris—the metropolis—there's the Deimos physics labs, there's the Hellas farms—we even have football teams now!

**TARA**

*Shift to AI.*

Swell!

**MICHAELA**

I can't tell if you're being sarcastic or if that's the AI. Why is this connection so bad?

**TARA**

*Shift to real.*

Probably on my end. Power's out so I'm using a screwDriver to hitch internet.

**MICHAELA**

You ... what? Never mind. Is the power out because of a storm, or because you didn't pay your bill?

**TARA**

Power's out because I live in Florida.

**MICHAELA**

Listen, if you need money—

**TARA**

I can take care of myself. And you see my royalty checks, you know I'm still getting money from *Old Kingdom* and *Swamp*.

**MICHAELA**

Yeah, and I see how little it is. You're still getting royalties, but less and less every year. And I can always loan you a little, but only so much. MRC taxes always leave us around the same amount of disposable income, so ...

**TARA**

So I should churn out some bullshit so Pak & Lee can cut me a check,  
*Shift to AI.*

And I can pay off my credit card debt—maybe even have enough to pay for a trip to Mars myself!

**MICHAELA**

Still not sure if that's sarcasm.

**TARA**

It's not!

**MICHAELA**

Tara, robo-Tara, whoever, that's not—of course I'd love for you to have enough money to come here—but I'm just saying, don't starve yourself just because you don't want to—

**TARA**

*Shift to real.*

Just because I don't want to spread a false image about my home? It's self-destruction one way or the other.

*Shift to AI.*

I want to write what's true. What's real, know me? I want people on Mars

*Shift to real.*

to actually know what Earth is like. Not their culture-porn history-porn exoticist idea of Earth, *real Earth*. Have you forgotten what that is?



**MICHAELA**

No! I remember it—

**TARA**

It's been, what? Thirty years now, since you left? Even if you do remember Earth, what you remember is probably all gone by now. Which is why I need to write this book, and you need to help me get it published. On Mars. I can get it published here, I'm sure, I just won't make any money. On Mars I can though, and I can actually open people's eyes. There's all these people like you, who left

*Shift to AI.*

when they were young, and they don't know how much Earth has changed in thirty years. It's changed a lot, I say!

*Shift to real.*

Every year. Worse and worse.

**MICHAELA**

Meet me halfway, Tara.

**TARA**

Making it a travelogue is halfway. How much farther do I have to come?

*Beat.*

How about this, you find an editor, or a publishing house, over there that is actually *open* to this kind of stuff, and maybe the Mars travelogue can be my next book.

**MICHAELA**

Wait ... really?

**TARA**

Really.

**MICHAELA**

Okay. Okay, yes, I will—But be nicer, okay. More friendly?

**TARA**

*Shift to AI.*

Sure thing! That's the only way to do business, I say!

**MICHAELA**

Not you, robo-Tara. Real Tara.

**TARA**

*Shift to real.*

I said okay, what more do you want?

**MICHAELA**

No, it was—the connection cut out, the AI answered me with its ...

**TARA**

Oh, right. Maybe you should just replace me with her.

*MICHAELA laughs, and TARA cracks a smile. Then, TARA shifts to AI, and laughs uproariously.*

**MICHAELA**

*Suddenly not laughing.*

Alright. See you around, Tar.

**TARA**

See you Mike!

*Lights down.*

## **SCENE TWO**

*Lights up on the left half of the stage. MICHAELA is bent over her laptop, reading a manual on predictive AI.*

**MICHAELA**

Okay okay ... “the predictive AI should not be used in instances of time latency greater than thirty seconds, and will work best at latencies under ten seconds.” Yeah, we’ll see about that. “The AI not only patches over gaps, it also *blends* the AI’s speech with the real speech to create seamless transitions between the two, for an overall blah blah blah ... If the AI begins to exhibit strange behavior, this is likely the result of the AI patching over latency and bad connections for too long, and struggling to transition back to the real speech.” That’ll give me ten minutes before it goes haywire. Then the signal from Earth will catch up. Assuming Tara picks up right away. “... AI cannot deliver information it does not have, so

it will not lie, or make guesses.” What does it do then when someone asks it something it doesn’t know? ... “It will also not—”

*Enter ELIZABETH PAO and JACOB WASHINGTON. MICHAELA jumps, rapidly closing the manual on the computer and turning around.*

**MICHAELA**

Hello! I’m Cage Michaela,  
*Shaking their hands.*

you must be Washington Jacob, and Pao Elizabeth, excellent! You came at a perfect time, I’m just now calling Tara—you know, sometimes it takes a moment to get the connection established with these real-time connections.

**WASHINGTON**

Of course. I’m just happy to have a face to face conversation with Ms. Cage, after the ... proposal she submitted ...

**MICHAELA**

Yes, well, I know that it may have seemed strange, it’s a bit different than anything she’s ever written before, but I really think a, uh, a face to face conversation with her will clear everything up.

**WASHINGTON**

Well, Ares Press is perfectly happy to publish something which deviates from the norm a bit. Within reason.

**MICHAELA**

Of course. Now, before we get into the call, I just want to say, I will be trying to uh, move things along as best as I can. You know, FTL connections aren’t cheap. I get the first ten minutes at a flat rate, but after that they start charging by the minute, so—

**WASHINGTON**

Of course.

**ELIZABETH**

Yeah, that’s fine. No problem. I just can’t believe I’m going to get to talk to Cage Tara—the real Cage Tara!

**MICHAELA**

Yes ...

*The connection is established, and AI TARA appears on the screen.  
Lights up at right.*

**TARA**

Hello!

**ELIZABETH**

Oh my—

**MICHAELA**

Hey, Tar!

**WASHINGTON**

Good day, Ms. Cage. I am Washington Jacob, Head of Acquisitions at Ares Press. This is Pao Elizabeth—

**ELIZABETH**

Hi!

**WASHINGTON**

Who would, if we accepted this proposal, be your editor.

**ELIZABETH**

I'm a huge fan of yours, Ms. Cage—

**TARA**

Tara. Whenever I hear “Ms. Cage” I think people are talking about my sister.

**ELIZABETH**

*Laughs.*

Anyway, I've read uh, I've read *Letters from the Old Kingdom* and *Sketches from the Swamp* and, oh, I just, I adore your work, it'd be an honor to be your editor.

**TARA**

Oh, that's wonderful to hear. I'm so glad you've enjoyed those books!

**ELIZABETH**

I've always wondered, when you write these books—

**MICHAELA**

Mmm, shall we get down to business?

**ELIZABETH**

Oh, sorry.

**TARA**

Let her ask the question!

**ELIZABETH**

No, no, it's fine. I don't actually—you're right, let's get to business.

**TARA**

*With a smile.*  
Maybe later!

**WASHINGTON**

Well, as far as business. That is really *my* chief concern here. This vision of Earth—or of the UK, in particular, I suppose, that you have presented in your proposal. This is not something that a general Martian readership is really going to enjoy or even understand I'm afraid.

**TARA**

Well, that is the point of writing it. I say, I think I can show some of the darker sides of Earth, some of the bad that has happened, and get people to understand the bad with the good.

**WASHINGTON**

Are you familiar with the book *Famine*?

*TARA stares blankly. To MICHAELA.*  
What's happening? I thought there was no lag.

**MICHAELA**

No no. No lag, no—heh, lag out here'd be—and it'd probably—eh, no, she's listening, right Tara?

**TARA**

Absolutely!

**WASHINGTON**

Well *Famine*, as I'm sure you know, is incredibly popular on Earth. A blend of non-fiction and novel about a famine in the UK, back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Comparing those times to the current state of Earth. It has hardly sold at all on Mars. Why? Because no one wants to read about Terrans struggling to survive. Those stories are set on Ceres, or Ganymede, or the Oort station—even Mars, in the early years. But Earth is for color, culture, history. Understand? I'm not denying the truth of what may be happening there, I'm telling you how people see it on Mars.

**ELIZABETH**

And, if I can—I just, well, my take is, I think that that's a fundamental part of Earth, you know? Of what makes Earth *Earth* and not Mars or Luna, so I—I'm all for telling the truth, but I think that *is* the truth, right, that Earth is still beautiful—the good with the bad, like you said!

**TARA**

I am on your wavelength a hundred percent, Elizabeth. The way I see it, this book would really use the recent developments around the British Isles to put all the greatness there, the pubs and the castles and the old gas-powered buses, it would put all that in greater relief. It would make that ancient culture stand out that much more.

**WASHINGTON**

*Taking out his phone to review the proposal.*  
That is all well and good, but in your proposal—

**MICHAELA**

Of course, the proposal is just that—it's just a proposal, it's just what it could be, but hey, we're all here right now, we can shape this thing as we go, right?

**TARA**

Yes!

*Pause.*

**WASHINGTON**

*Consulting the proposal.*  
In your proposal, it would appear that the “recent developments” as you say—ehh, flooding of London, erosion of Dover, the “path of devastation

of Hurricane Vlad”—all these things would be the main focus, is that correct?

**TARA**

I suppose so.

**WASHINGTON**

Do you suppose it or do you know it?

**TARA**

I suppose it!

**WASHINGTON**

Are you willing to budge on that?

*Pause.*

Because, it is not sufficient to season a book of pessimism and misery with little bits of your characteristic cheeriness, what we need is the opposite.

**MICHAELA**

If I may, to a certain extent that simply isn't possible. Earth is not what is used to be, and ignoring that would be flat out lying, right Tara?

**TARA**

Yes. Climate change and the Second Depression have affected everything. They're unignorable.

**WASHINGTON**

Well PenRan Mars just released a book by a Martian writer, Banerjee C., about his visit to Bangladesh. Not pessimistic at all. Very successful. How did he do it?

**TARA**

I don't say it can't be done. I say, let's find a better balance.

**MICHAELA**

This is Cage Tara we're talking about, surely she's built up enough good faith that she could release a book that isn't just a non-stop party, right?

**ELIZABETH**

I think so. I'd love to read that—as long as, I mean, as long as it's not a

*total* downer. At that point it wouldn't even be a Cage Tara book, you know?

**TARA**

Of course.

**WASHINGTON**

Your proposed title for this book is *Return to the Old Kingdom; A dystopic travelogue*. And this would not be a "total downer"?

**MICHAELA**

I think we should really move away from the proposal.

**WASHINGTON**

Why did you send out this proposal if it doesn't accurately reflect your desires for this book?

**MICHAELA**

Well, like I said, we're really open to taking things in, in whatever direction you think will connect with the most people.

**WASHINGTON**

Then let's abandon the proposal altogether, because it will connect with no one on Mars, I can assure you of that.

**MICHAELA**

Well, eh, altogether? I mean—

**WASHINGTON**

Elizabeth was born and raised on Mars. Never been to Earth. Elizabeth, what did you think of the proposal?

**ELIZABETH**

I—I mean, I—

**WASHINGTON**

Be honest.

**TARA**

Yes, please!

**ELIZABETH**



Well. Okay, then, honestly, when I first read it, I thought, *this doesn't sound like Cage Tara at all*—obviously, hearing you describe it now, it's completely—

**WASHINGTON**

Elizabeth, the proposal. What caught your attention, what didn't you like?

**ELIZABETH**

Sorry. Well, not that I didn't like it, so much as, I didn't really understand the “downfall” of Earth? I think that phrase was used a few times, or “steady decline” or something, which—I know Earth's going through some rough times, but it's still incredibly prosperous, and full of life. And also there was one section, where you described something about ... naïve idealism? In reference to *Letters from the Old Kingdom*?

**WASHINGTON**

*Consulting his phone.*

I have that right here—“This frame would also allow for reflection on the state of naïve, idealistic optimism in which I penned the original *Letters*.”

**ELIZABETH**

I just found that—well, I guess I was confused, because *Letters* never seemed naïve to me, it um, could you explain what you meant by that?

*TARA does not respond.*

**MICHAELA**

Um, before that, can I just—what exactly, is the point—just because, we are pressed for time, and—

**WASHINGTON**

The point is that Elizabeth represents the ideal audience for this book. A long-time fan, and a native Martian. And she had considerable issues with the proposal. The point is, if you say we should not scrap all of the proposal, what exactly are you advocating that we save?

**MICHAELA**

Well that's what this meeting is for, trying to bridge the gap—find a middle ground, you know? Balance the good and the not-so-good of Earth, right?

**ELIZABETH**

And it could be that I just missed something, or—I uh—but, what *did* you mean when you said “naïve optimism” or um, whatever it was?

*TARA is silent.*

Ms. Cage? Um, I mean, Tara?

**TARA**

Yes?

**WASHINGTON**

*Becoming more put-off, suspicious.*

What did you mean by “naïve optimism”?

*Beat.*

You wrote it, so you must have some idea of—

**MICHAELA**

Uh, let me try and rephrase the question, so that the—so she can—um, Tara, do you remember what you said to me while you were writing *Letters from the Old Kingdom*? What you said about all your hopes you had, for your writing, I remember you sent this video message, and—

**TARA**

Yes, of course. I said something like,

*The following is near verbatim the original video chat, almost as though the AI is simply replaying the old video.*

I know this isn't exactly what I had in mind when I decided to be a writer, but I think I can still make a difference doing this. Earth needs help, but it can't just help itself. We need Mars and Luna too, we need people to understand all this beautiful heritage they have here. If I can get people to understand what's great about Earth, if I can get people to understand why I stayed here while you went off to Mars, I think I can get them to understand why Earth is worth saving. Because it is worth saving, and if we all just run off to other planets to start new societies, we'll never make Earth a better place. I know you want me to move out there, join you on Mars, but right now, I have this opportunity, to, know me, to be part of something. I say, twenty years from now, I think you'll be coming back home. We'll have gotten sea level rise back down to 20<sup>th</sup> century rates, unemployment will be single digits again, life expectancy will stabilize around seventy, and you and I will remember this little book that got people on Mars to care about Earth. I won't be able to keep you away

from home, Mike!

*Beat.*

That's about right, I think.

**MICHAELA**

*She has not thought about all those old, failed hopes in a long time.*  
Yes, well. Mmm. Yes. I believe. That. That would be the naïve optimism she's, eh. She's referring to.

**ELIZABETH**

I see—so not just optimism *in* the book, but her optimism around writing it, too?

**MICHAELA**

It shows up in the book as well—but yes, you're getting it.

*Collects herself.*

Excuse me. So. I don't mean to rush you two, again, but—let's—

**WASHINGTON**

Frankly, I don't care about the truth. I don't care about the statistics. I care about what Martian readers are going to be interested in, and a “dystopic travelogue” is not it.

**MICHAELA**

Then let's ditch that subtitle—tell you what, imagine *Letters*, but with a few more, uh, darker spots—but, in those darker spots there's light, because Tara will then show how people are trying to make things better or, or even how readers can help out, donate or volunteer remotely. The book would actually be, not—I see the misunderstanding here, the book would not be a rejection of that optimism, but a *renewal* of it, a *renewal* of the belief that things on Earth can be improved. How about that?

**ELIZABETH**

That would be wonderful.

**TARA**

Yes, that would be swell!

**MICHAELA**

Mr. Washington?

*Pause.*

**WASHINGTON**

I can ... see that working. Yes. Though those dark spots should be kept to a minimum—tell me, does “dark spots” sound like Earth to you, Elizabeth?

**ELIZABETH**

Well the ... not if every chapter is the same like that, always focusing on what has gotten worse—because lots of stuff is the same, and other things have gotten better.

**MICHAELA**

They haven't, but I see your point, and I think—

**ELIZABETH**

Yes they have. Uh, haven't they?

*TARA does not respond.*

Things are always getting better on Earth. Since the beginning of time.

**MICHAELA**

Not exactly, but that doesn't—I agree, it doesn't have to be a present theme throughout every single chapter, there can be some entries that are just fun, or comedic, or poetic—more in the style of Tara's typical works.

**WASHINGTON**

That, that is perfect. I'm sure I can get approval on this acquisition, if I explain it like that. Elizabeth, you'd be happy to serve as editor of this book?

**ELIZABETH**

Oh, absolutely.

**WASHINGTON**

Good. And Tara, to clarify, this is your idea of how to write the book, yes?

**TARA**

What's that?

**MICHAELA**

With—not bringing up negative things *all* the time. Right? You wouldn't

want to write it like that, right?

**TARA**

Oh, of course not!

**MICHAELA**

Great. Then, you guys can just send over the paperwork and we'll get cracking.

**WASHINGTON**

Yes. I imagine you'll need some kind of advance to cover travel expenses?

*TARA doesn't respond.*

**MICHAELA**

Yeah, yeah that'd—yes.

**WASHINGTON**

Well before any of that, I'd still like to clarify a few things with you, Tara.

**TARA**

Absolutely!

**MICHAELA**

Uh, if it's all the same, maybe we could do that another time. You know, we're coming up on ten minutes here, so ...

**WASHINGTON**

You're not trying to rush me here, are you Ms. Cage? I do not rush into anything.

**MICHAELA**

No no no—it really is just that, I'll be honest, getting this connection was a bit of splurge for me, so I don't want to go over budget.

**WASHINGTON**

If it really is such a trouble, we can work it into our negotiations. But as long as I can talk face to face to Cage Tara, I would like to do so.

**MICHAELA**

Well, honestly, I don't think I have much extra money in my CSP account, so the connection will just cut off at some point.

**WASHINGTON**

That's fine. Now Tara, as to the language used, in the sample you provided for the proposal,

*As he talks MICHAELA worriedly checks the time on her phone. She's running out of time.*

I noticed what must be American slang. Is that what that was?

*TARA doesn't respond. WASHINGTON consults his phone.*

Specifically, words like "gofool" and "bricked." / The issue is not using Earth-specific terminology, but rather the—

**MICHAELA**

*Under her breath. By this time, enough time has elapsed that if TARA had picked up right away, her signal would be reaching Mars now.*

Don't pick up don't pick up don't pick up, just let it ring—

**WASHINGTON**

Excuse me, Ms. Cage, is everything okay?

**MICHAELA**

Oh, just, a reminder popped up, that someone is supposed to call me right about now. I'm really sorry, I just—

**WASHINGTON**

If you have to take the call, we can continue in here. I'm sure Tara can speak for herself.

**MICHAELA**

Yes, I—no, well, as long as they don't pick up—I mean, don't call me, I—we should be fine. I can just stay here.

**WASHINGTON**

Very well. To return to the point—

*At this point TARA starts acting strange. She is still the AI version, though now she is trying to transition to the real version, even though the real version is ten minutes behind and radically divergent from the AI's conversation.*

**TARA**

Are you really returning to the point?

**WASHINGTON**

I ... excuse me.

**TARA**

*Exuberant.*

Let's talk about something else!

**WASHINGTON**

What else would you—

*TARA abruptly scoots back from her desk and slouches down.*  
What is going on here?

**TARA**

If I'm going to do it he said that it would.

**MICHAELA**

Uh ... this is ...

**ELIZABETH**

Tara, is everything—

**TARA**

Ms. Cage? This is the last day that she went in.

**ELIZABETH**

I didn't say M-Ms. Cage, did I?

*TARA pulls a cup of coffee seemingly out of nowhere and drinks almost all of it.*

**WASHINGTON**

Is this a joke? Is this funny to you?

*TARA cackles three times louder than anyone should ever laugh.*

**MICHAELA**

*Raising her voice to be heard over the laughing.*

You know what, I think this is the connection going bad—and it's just filling in with the AI. Obviously the AI is corrupted or something!

**TARA**

Yes! No!

**WASHINGTON**

Did you know this would happen? Why didn't you—

**MICHAELA**

Look, why don't we just end the connection, and we'll just—

**WASHINGTON**

You're trying to rush me again, aren't you?

**TARA**

No, that was because that was why that was because of it.

**MICHAELA**

I'm not, but clearly this connection isn't working, so we should just go ahead and—

**WASHINGTON**

We will wait for the connection to get better.

*TARA laughs again, though not as loud.*

**MICHAELA**

What if it doesn't get better? This is costing me my kidneys, you know, I can't just—look, we'll give it a few more seconds, but if it doesn't get better—

**WASHINGTON**

There's something odd about all this, Ms. Cage, and I don't like it, so either we wait *until* it improves, or we will walk.

**MICHAELA**

Oh, come on, isn't that a bit dramat—I mean, that's—

**WASHINGTON**

Ares Press has a promising stable of travel writers, and while we'd love to work with Ms. Cage, we can still walk away. But you—how many other publishers have you been to before us? / How many people have rejected your proposal outright?



**TARA**

What's that? I can't wait for the next book that it was.

**MICHAELA**

I mean, we've got. Options. But fine! We'll wait! Just, it could be a while, Tara does live in Florida, so the you know they've got very little energy security down there, her power could be out and—

**WASHINGTON**

A power outage? You expect me to believe Cage Tara suffers power outages?

**MICHAELA**

Wha—yes! Yes, that's—that's not a lie!

**TARA**

The moon!

**WASHINGTON**

And the rest of it was?

**MICHAELA**

Are you serious? You don't believe—

**ELIZABETH**

It does seem a bit ... I mean, why would Cage Tara live somewhere that has power outages? And Florida? Florida is full of solar power farms, it isn't like, like a poor—

**MICHAELA**

It is! The whole Gulf of Mexico region experiences constant rolling blackouts, do you know *nothing* about Earth?

**TARA**

Did you decide that how.

**ELIZABETH**

Well she didn't mention that in *Sketches from the Swamp*.

**MICHAELA**

Because it wasn't happening back then you cab! That book is twenty years old, everything has gotten worse in that time!

**TARA**

“Cab” is southern US slang meaning someone who’s exceptionally ignorant or stubborn. I’m not sure what the Martian equivalent would be.

**MICHAELA**

*After collecting herself.*

I’m—I’m so sorry, Elizabeth, I didn’t, I just—

**WASHINGTON**

*To MICHAELA.*

Wait.

*To TARA.*

Ms. Cage do we have ... are you connected again?

**TARA**

Yes, I’ve been connected.

**MICHAELA**

You ... you are? Well. Great! The, eh ... what?

*To ELIZABETH.*

I’m really sorry Elizabeth.

**ELIZABETH**

No it uh, heh. What were we, were we talking about? Before the ...

**TARA**

We were talking about the words. The US vernacular. You were saying?

*Pause.*

**WASHINGTON**

Yes. Good. Well. Yes, the ... the Earth-specific vocabulary is quite fine, but US-specific is not likely to be known by Martian readers.

**TARA**

Well I can’t remove that entirely, but I can work with Elizabeth to make it more accessible.

**ELIZABETH**

Oh, good, great!

**WASHINGTON**

Good, that is ... along the lines of what I was getting at. We can't expect Martians to be fluent in US vernacular.

**ELIZABETH**

Oh but I do know—we do know some expressions—like swell, I know swell!

**TARA**

Swell!

**WASHINGTON**

Good. Then also there is the length of the project. I believe the proposal says between 40,000 and 70,000 words, which is a rather large window. If we could narrow that down to something more specific ...

*As WASHINGTON talks, MICHAELA stares in utter confusion and the lights dim. Lights down.*

**SCENE THREE**

*MICHAELA and TARA are the only ones on stage. Lights up on left.*

**MICHAELA**

Hey, Tar. Sorry for tricking you. I'm sure you've figured out what I did, but if not ... I called you on a sub-light-speed connection, so that your AI would patch over the lag. I'm sorry, but the AI just does a better job than you at selling your stuff, and we were getting rejection after rejection after rejection—I was getting desperate.

*Beat.*

I don't know what you did over there, on your end—if you throttled your connection or something? Thanks though. Even after the initial lag period ended, things went smoothly, more or less.

*Beat.*

I was also hoping, you know, by doing this—by securing this deal with that AI, which is *based off you* ... I was hoping that you'd see how much you can get done, if you just got back a little of that old optimism. I know you don't want to lie, but do you have to reject your old self entirely? Your

optimism was unfounded, so what? Do you think pessimism is the answer?

*Beat.*

Easy for me to say, right? Up in Mars? I left Earth because I thought it'd be better to remake the world somewhere else than fix the one we already have. We Martians are such idealists, right? The Great Experiment! A new, more just world! But really, Mars is just a planet populated by all the people who gave up on Earth. Not very. Not very optimistic ourselves. And then we all try to ignore that, get rid of our guilt by pretending the Earth is just fine, everyone's got solar power on tap and beautiful seawalls with graffiti murals ...

*Pause.*

I guess I uh ... I guess I understand why you don't want to come to Mars.

*Beat.*

You know, I don't know if you could tell on your end, but during our conversation, we talked about—I got the AI to sort of replay, or remember, an old video log you sent me, talking about how you wanted to help Earth with your writing. You even said, things were going to be so good in twenty years that I'd be coming back home! And maybe I should. Maybe ... well I'll attach it along with this video. You can give it a watch.

*Beat.*

If you decide you want to pull out of this deal, if you decide that what we've agreed on with Ares Press is just too compromised, we don't have to do it. Obviously you can scuttle all this whenever you want, but just ... watch that video log of your old self? Cool? Cool. See you.

*Lights down on left. Pause. Lights up at right.*

## **TARA**

Hey, Mike. I'm sorry if everything went godshit on your end. I realized what you were doing after about a minute—I realized it wasn't really a real-time communication, that I was talking to your AIs and you were talking to mine—I realized that because your AI was swearing. And I got pissed at first, but I got it—"the AI could sell this book better than you," right? Well, I *do* want to get this book published, I want to write something people will actually read. So after being upset for a moment, I just thought, how would this AI, or even just me twenty years ago—how would she respond? And I mimicked that, so that the AI on your end didn't split itself apart. I don't know if it worked—and if it did, I don't

know what all AI Tara agreed to. I just know, what I ended up agreeing to, and it was easy enough to talk about it with you, to take myself back to my old self talking to you, but ...

*Pause.*

You know, I forgot how, back then, I really expected you to come back. Well I guess I didn't forget it, because as I was imitating my old self, you made some comment about me coming to Mars, and suddenly I was just saying it, *I* was the one trying to get you to come to *my* planet. As if you would really ... and what I'm getting at is, what *if* you came with me? What if you came home, and we went to the UK together? For the book. You, with all your memories of Earth thirty years ago, could remind me of old Earth, and you could see how Earth really is now. Compromise, know me? I don't know if I can live up to AI Tara's promises, her upbeat attitude, doing this alone, but if you come along, then. I'll do it.

*Beat.*

I miss you.

*Pause.*

Oh! I just got your message. Well I'll watch that. And when you get this, just uh, let me know what you think, about coming here. I know that's the exact opposite of meeting you in the middle but, there's nothing between Earth and Mars but vacuum. Or the Sun, sometimes. Anyway. See you.

END OF PLAY.