

Spear

The war drum above their heads carried the two operatives forth to a tune whose lack of music communicated neither celebration nor menace, but simply a statement of fact. She was suspended halfway out of the helicopter's door, the slender threat of her rifle trained on a prey that was both fleeing them and yet, unconcerned with their presence, seeming to amble along with a stumbling, confused gait that spoke to an almost joyous wonder which they, in their lofty perch, were oblivious. Her footprints trailed out behind her like a comet's tail as it streaked toward heaven's fire at the bottom of the well.

"I have her pinned." Rook said over the radio in a flat tone that befit her, her armament, and probably the whole operation.

"That's good. Take out her power supply, and be careful. She's got to be alive." In whatever sense of the word applied. Able to tell tales, the inverse of dead.

A great unsettling was felt first in her shoulder, then in the vehicle, as the anti-material rifle voiced its judgement through one hot-loaded SLAP round. Overkill, at least for a presumed civilian android, but they had little intel on what had happened, and nobody wanted to make guesses as to what

it was, rushing across the beach down there. The bolt hit its mark, pinning her like a fly on a killing board, and the android fell forth onto her face, the wet smack of rough sand not audible, but imagined and unpleasant.

“I’m confirming a target down.”

“Ha! You’re awesome, Rook!” They banked to the side, Rook shifting her weight in the harness while the helicopter slowed down, spiraling toward their waylaid goal. But then it stirred, against all knowledge of the thing, and began to stand with a shaking and wobbling, defiance but without anger or even acknowledgement. Accepting. Absolving. Hobbling away, fuelled by some motive beyond their understanding, with a determination and reverence to it that were just as incomprehensible.

“Rook! You said she was dead!” Not dead. Not alive.

“Power supply was moved. Or she has a backup. In a TK503 it’s in the hips. That should be a mobility kill anyway.”

“Quit making excuses, get her legs!”

No words, but another report. The lurch of the light helicopter indicates its preference toward life as a surveillance vehicle. Falling and falling, onto what’s left of her knee, and then into the slurry of sand and salt and water. She pushes on, another

report takes the other shin off. By now they're almost down, a massive dust devil cushions their landing and the panicked loose ends of Rook's harness flail about in their wash. And there shall be fire on the sea, borne by the sheen of our failure. She unhooks herself and alights onto the shore, sinking almost halfway up to her knee and needing to awkwardly pull herself out. Ahead of her, the Surveyor appears catatonic, looking up at the ink spilling onto the sky above, only just revealing a vanguard of stars that peer down to observe her fate. A glow radiates from her, yet not in Rook's optics. Behind them.

"Hold on! Let me console her." The helicopter is seated now, idling. Hopefully not listing into the shore. Knight brushes past, intent on her prey. A curiosity bordering on lunacy, descriptive of her and her alone. Was it curiosity or hunger? One doll knelt beside another, extending a cable. The two identical inasmuch as they were alien. Yet one was a sister.

Sloshing across the shore, swimming on sand in a fight against the weight of her own inner armor, Rook makes it to where Knight is diving into an unreality nested within the Surveyor's head.

"You shouldn't be doing that. We need to bring her back."

"Try looking at it from a different point of view."

“Another point of view? You know M7 wants this doll for forensics.”

“And who do you think will be taking care of that?”

“I don’t know. But you’re throwing oil in the water here.”

“I said try another point of view. Quit being so dense about it.” There was a falseness behind her levity.

Nothing. Rook lets her sate whatever motive it is that will surely be masked with a reason for the meddling.

“There! I’ve shut her down, she won’t be making a fuss on the way back. Pick her up, would you?”

“Aye aye. But I’m already sinking as is.”

Seeing Rook bend to pick up the ragged form of the doll they’d slain, Knight scoffs.

“Oh, come on, give me that, then. I’ll carry her.” She throws the Surveyor over her shoulder and begins to trudge back to the helicopter.

Where the Surveyor had been, where Rook stood, water seeped from the ground and into depressions in the damp sand. From nowhere in particular it came to fill those voids left by their presence, causing the sand to spill inwards as though the very traces of their existence were eager to slip

from this world. Rook turned to follow as evening fell upon all that they had done.

Nepenthes

You look up at the sky. Something tells you that you should be going. Perdition hanging in the air. You trudge on, not seeing anything but the aloofness of the life hanging in the surf, or crawling and burrowing into the dry dunes to your right. There's something uncertain in your footsteps, a lightness tinged by knowing, but not remembering what it is that bothers you. Above, seagulls wheel in open air, a momentary comfort. But the blackening sky comes for them and they disperse; you continue on, wondering ever what had happened to the expedition and what was to come. A riotous urgency in the air. Pushing you on ahead, though the brightness, lightening your thoughts, distracts as much as it directs, pulling you onward, and yet, in all directions at once. Apart. Through you, a decision is made, you find the last doubts extinguished as you meet the ground, embrace the flavor of seawater even as it floods your internals, begins rotting that which gives you inner form. But there is no death in undying, for the brightness within gives you a strength beyond anything you could ever know, lighting a fire on the horizon that brings with it a sense of consolidating presence, a

fullness, whose traces hold a scintillating beauty which pulls everything apart that is together. You stand up, shaky on legs that feel anew, that fail you, and fail again, before you are once more one with the rolling waves, lapping at your body, your face, filling you with the life that swims within. Laughing. Up at the sky, eyes stare back in their many thousands, like bubbles boiling off a pan, watching you with disinterest as you pop in and out of existence. They are here now, a touching embrace and then terror. Then nothing.

Deliverance

The hop back is uneventful, easing frays in her nerves that Rook didn't even register. Knight is saying nothing, just pressing the controls on, directing them out to sea, toward some landing pad atop Mercury. Focused. The Surveyor sleeps across from her in the back, inert, jostled occasionally by squalls of turbulence in the air. What lurks inside that iron skull? Something which elicits a feeling she idly tries to deny the right to be called fear. That which could reach out and take her, plant a seed in her mind that would bloom into whatever it was had happened at that base camp. None of them were left. Only one *Surveyor*.

Averting her gaze from the serenely bobbing half-corpse, Rook looks down out of the window into

the blackness of an evening eclipsed by the gentle glare of what ambient light radiates from the chopper's instruments. Mirror images of clocks and dials, slurred as though melting and obscured by streaks of light. This is a frivolousness uncharacteristic of her, becoming too personal with the impersonal. She is ordinance, is used to it, excels in compartmentalizing what needs to be categorized and disposing of that which is disconcerting. Fear is something she is given the option to know, the completeness of comprehending human cognition, but not needing to be tethered to the terrifying need to survive. Yet, something felt wrong about the Surveyor as she'd seen her up close. Something that could not be named, that could only be forgotten on that soggy stretch of coast. The lightness in her step. The ambivalence. The overpowering joy of it.

She had certainly killed everyone. She'd killed everyone and gone out on a hike, leaving the S-O-S beacon blinking on and on, drawing them in, wishing to be found. And they had. They'd found them all except the Surveyor. Almost all of them. Identification was difficult in their state of decay and dismemberment. The plane was gone, slunk into the bay, certainly sucked below the hungry silt at the bottom of the swamp. The body parts didn't entirely add up to a full mission complement, nor did the doll parts. Too few, or in some cases,

too many. Locals? Tents were shredded. The shed, a portable operations center, was a skeleton of the building it had intended to be. A radio was left, and a generator, miraculously on the last of its fuel by the time they zeroed in on the location of the beacon. A flame, drawing them in. Why she'd done it, how she'd done it, what had gone wrong, all would be revealed in a dive by Mercury Seven. It was a manufacturing defect, a construct fraying at the edges, that finally, under some critical strain, unwound the fate of the Southern Horizons prospecting team.

They would find nothing of the brightness in her. Nothing that radiated not inward to the observer, but outward from them, watching through their eyes the sight of itself lying there beneath the darkening blue navy sky. And what had Knight seen, with her own mind's eye? There was no purpose in asking. Knight would only twist it.

"Don't sit there and whisper to yourself."

"I'm not whispering, I'm thinking."

"Uneasy awareness. Do you feel compelled to look inward all the time?" The voice was flat, a mask distracted.

"What do you think happened to her? That, ah, thing."

"That's an excellent question. Every question has

an answer, I'm sure."

"Do you?" Have an answer.

"I don't." Lips curling inward, cajoling communicated by falsetto rather than her reflection smiling in the glass. "Do you?"

"I don't, in truth. She killed them all. Went insane."

"In that order?"

"In some order. Mercury will figure it out. We just have to deliver her."

"You surround me with joyous shouts of deliverance."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm just talking, don't get all twisted about it."

"You know you don't have to act like that." Imitating, keeping up appearances.

"Like what?" Playfully, a false mirth to her words. Empty, behind the eyes, but only known by those who looked.

"I'm not human. You don't have to appease my sense of familiarity."

"Oh, but I find it fun! And it colors you so." Brightly.

“And you’re as dim and grey as ever, in your own words.”

“Don’t be such a downer, Rook. I’m sure they’ll figure it out some day, just you wait!”

“Why wait?” Continuing on autopilot, uncaring and unhearing.

“Why not? Show your love for the world that paints you so vividly.”

“If you think I’m vivid, then you should check your eyes.”

“There’s a beauty in lightness *and* in contrast, Rook. I simply must teach you about painting some time.”

“I don’t want you anywhere near me.” After what I’ve seen you do.

“You’re so mean, Rook!”

You’re so... what? An imitation lacking a reason. Death mocking life. Whispers of nothing.

A lull in the conversation. Black gulf above and below them, hanging in an IFR void between nothing and obliteration, landing site unseen. Directed by the few fading stars of a once mighty constellation of satellites. Old friends of their Surveyor, who now seemed bored by the sudden idleness in the cabin.

“Do you think she’s dreaming, Rook?”

“You know that answer as well as I do.”

“But I don’t know *your* answer.”

“We don’t dream. I’m sure whatever you did to her ensured that sevenfold.”

“Ahaha! I bet you think I killed her!”

“Did you?”

“She’s just asleep. I promise. Don’t concern yourself with it.”

“Why did you need to connect to her back there?”

“Have you ever had an itch you can’t scratch? What washed up there may never be seen again, once Mercury gets ahold of it.”

“You don’t find beauty in things, just some kind of satisfaction. That much I know.”

“What you see that I do isn’t really relevant, now is it?”

“Are you going to tell me you’ve learned to smile all of a sudden?”

“I smile all the time, see?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No I don’t. Or do I?”

Childish filler. Words without meaning. Cutting a line of thought to elicit a desired reaction. They trembled in the wind on a left bank down toward the modified tanker.

“They’ll know you were in there.”

“By my fingerprints?” She raises her hands in a mocking surrender. “Yours are all over her, too.” The yoke wobbles just long enough for Rook to nearly say something, but Knight takes it again.

“I’m not the one that went diving out in the field.”

“You weren’t diving, but you were sinking.”

“Cut it. Besides, mucking up the evidence isn’t the only concern here.”

“Are you worried about diseases or something?”

“Yes, Knight.”

“I’m feeling fine, Rook. Really. My countermeasures are nothing to shake a stick at, you know.”

“We don’t know what’s in her. At least I don’t.”

“Well if you don’t trust me at my job, trust you at your job, Rook. I’m sure you’d love to break me in half if I start acting up, right? Ahaha!”

“Is that the plan we’re flying by, now?”

“Like I said, try another point of view.”

Below them, a speck grew into a candle, into a more luminous ship. Miniscule, suspended against the seeming flat of the Gulf's waters, it ballooned in size until it was they who were draped against it, a mighty bullwark of steel, oil, and asbestos surrounded by the knurled canvas of the sea. A landing pad greets them, painted with a circled and haphazard H in a seeming afterthought to their existing at all here. There was a setting down and unbelting, a bringing forth of the stray lamb to the open maw of Mercury Seven. In Rook's arms the Surveyor was frail, a mutilated wreck of a frame, fragments of imitation flesh falling off bare hydraulics, torn and bleached corpse white by the equatorial sun long before they'd wrought their damage upon her. The last vestige of Southern Horizons, even in being their betrayer, was their tombstone, and now would be undone.

The director of the operation, a gaunt old navy captain who had been named as the King, was hobbling toward them on his strange heirloom of a cane, a staff, prismatic at the end, granting him him the almost fantastical air of sorcery in a coat that flapped with the wind, slick and glinting with sea spray whose presence whispered vague threats against the preeminence of their vessel and all who toiled within. Behind and around him was an attachment of soldiers, mixed with what had followed soldiers in the twilight changing of the world as it

hastened past, wishing to *forget* the *cost* of its sins. Tin cans, forged with more steel than even Rook held behind her silicone facade. Unaffiliated employers who wished to only touch the thing with a pole after it had been slain. Shuffling and shouting over the abating din of the rotary wing, “Leave it here.” “Yes, yes.” “Take it.” “You.” Stacatto, interrupted by one another and by crashing of waves in a professional confusion which conveyed also a sense of apprehension in its disorder.

“It is neutral?”

“It has been taken care of.” The deliverer, making first contact.

“Report to detox. We’ll handle it from here.”

“Affirmative.” Flat, behind her. Mocking?

“Affirmative.”

Advent

Cutting through the air, atop four mighty turboprop engines which hum a pleasantly diverting drone in the background of your awareness, the boat trundles across the sky at a sluggard’s pace, confident in its place above the world and never doubting its heading. A corpulent design of the previous century, born anew as the world spread outward from the land and back towards the sea

from whence it had crawled. It was at home swimming as well as flying, veteran of an era whose runways were comparatively few and rocky when contrasted against the trim and proper domain of the jetliners that had ruled the latter decades before the plague.

The autonomous crew slept in the lower cargo area alongside the vibrosis truck, where you are now, afforded some solitude by hung tarps, while the officials of the process nested in claustrophobic cabins upstairs. Above you, centered in your vision, a yellow globe wags slowly with the light rocking of the plane, its conical nest suspended by chain from the bulkhead beside your cot. A particularly squirly bout of bumpiness adds a frantic note to its dance, and you hear a clang from across the fuselage, followed by pandemonium and swearing. “Leonid! Can’t you take it a bit gentler up there? And I was just having the nicest dream about rabbits.”

From above, the call echoes back through the plane “I thought you lot didn’t dream.”

“I thought you weren’t deaf, blind, and drunk!”

“There were just some bumps, you get used to it.”

Vasilisa Custom, referred to by others as an Assistant Mechanic. Dmitriyev, the pilot, had brought her along; they were a sort of handyman crew at

home, taking care of odds and ends for whatever shipping company was in town at the time.

“How am I going to get used to falling out of my bed at all hours of the night?”

“I don’t know, Izhevsk seems to have it figured out.”

Your name. Rather, your company. Not who you work for, but a point of origin. A name, in any case, probably intended to be more personal than the title of Surveyor, which you prefer without announcement.

“I don’t sleep. In excess. Only an hour needed to charge.”

Izhevsk, of course, isn’t only you. There was Renata Izhevsk, radio operator, mechanic, pilot backup. Degtyaryov Izhevsk, medical, medical, and medical. But they are Renata and Degtyaryov, you are simply the Surveyor, only Izhevsk, unique in uniformity. K&V, the surveying company, hadn’t opted to name you. Not to say they’d been impersonal. Maybe your party chief had been leaving the air open for you to pick one. Maybe it was simply that nobody had thought of it, in their familiarity, becoming familiar with Surveyor and granting the word meaning through you.

“Well I, um, I just like to relax, I guess. Leonid.”

This was actually a breakout opportunity for most of the parties involved. News was that Blackwater had been dumping a ton of money into the idea that oil could be found all over the Gulf across the Atlantic. There were already wells out there, dug even into the deep waters past the continental shelf, though the reputation of any such ventures had taken a toll after one had failed, spectacularly. High pressure gas blooming within the marine riser, expanding outwards into a blazing eminence on the platform. Above the water. Eleven workers, never found again.

But that isn't a worry you entertain. This is no drilling expedition, simply an exploratory prospecting journey into the swampy shores of the equatorial Gulf. But you're distracted. Why? Something in your eye? Gentle whispers and a sense of focus that refuses explanation. Returning to the drilling expedition, you will not be drilling, only exploring by the sound and sight of the vibrosis truck slumbering beside you, between you, all Ishevsk, an implement of the Geologist, Daniil Yeremeyev, age 34, average build, fair skin, estimated 5'10", reclused, as you are.

And who are you? Izhevsk, Izhevsk, Izhevsk. A surveyor. A Surveyor. Short on memory, but not because you had forgotten. Because you had not the time to *remember*. Germinating, placing roots down into the sand within your chest, becoming

one from nothing in an instant, knowing then, irrevocably, how to think. But there was a discrepancy, a wrinkle in your existence that you could not get out. A mismatched system time. Power on hours you didn't know, in excess. You were older than you.

Why? Something gone wrong? Had done regrettable things? Experienced annihilation and rebirth into something more perfect before the eyes of your maker? Or maybe it had been impersonal, a destruction to match a sale, or a simple upgrade, handing down of the old to new being, borne of nothing. Assembly, a making whole from scattered, inanimate parts. Reasons and wonders swam within you, seeming to gain life of their own in your imagination, cannibalizing one another to grow stronger and eclipse your meaning as the Surveyor with something alternately tragic or wonderful.

"Izhevsk! Come on, we've got to move this thing."

You'd landed. Leonid is calling out to you from the cargo door. You're dozing, blocking the path of egress for the truck. Had it happened this way? Take on detail, weight, and substance.

"Moving. Need help?"

"No, it's all remote. Just come on, get out of there."

"Will do."

Outside, the sun beams overhead, burrowing cosmic rays down into your synthetic skin. The heat must be unbearable, but Leonid seems excited enough by the new toy to pay it little heed. The Geologist, inarguably the chief of the thing, is nowhere to be seen.

“Well then! With that out of the way, we’ve got to get unpacking. Everyone!”

The afternoon wears on. Odds and ends are extracted from the giant, now resting languidly in the surf after its long journey. A helicopter would surely come ferrying fuel from further inland, in due time. For now, you pitched tents, prepared to set up an even stronger mission control box to guard the gentler, unknowing machines against the weather.

It was hot work, surely grueling, but you only know it by the difference in your battery. Ample enough to get the job done, to rest for the night and be rejuvenated by the morning sun. For they did have a generator, but yet, no fuel for it, as you had needed to travel light in order to reduce the cost of hopping the puddle. Only what little TS-1 remained in the aircraft’s tanks was left to you, not suitable for the small gasoline generator that spoke of further cost cutting.