Triptyk

# 1

Héautontimorouménos[[1]](#footnote-1) swivelled on his roller, the cone comfortably nestled in his cavity. A bank of holos, now in dormant mode, projected morphing bubbles of wax suspended in hot liquid; the effect was calming and unusual — an effect the rescue team had learned from the sapients. RGLSMRV[[2]](#footnote-2) turned to face H., his sense-com reflecting his light and satisfied mood for the first time in this work shift. The two of them looked at each other, emitting nothing for a longish time, but relaxed eventually into whelpish giggles.

“I believe,” began R., “that our work is done. The virus is contained. Our sleep this dark-eon will be comfortable.” H. projected his contentedness at full intensity; no need to disturb the air for such a feeling. As he settled onto his cone, a heavy sigh escaped the third party in the room. \*$#&[[3]](#footnote-3) turned to face them. “Don’t celebrate too soon, gentlehrrms. Our work is just beginning.”

“Don’t spoil our mood, \*. We have earned our honours,” replied H.

“True, we have done good work,” said \*. “But do not forget that it was our own incompetence that allowed the virus to be released in the first place.”

“We know all that,” retorted R. “Mistakes are permitted, our intentions were honourable, and we have mitigated the damage as well as could be expected. The sapients will do well. Perhaps they will achieve the true consciousness within the next eon.”

“It is only too easy to make such mistakes. The small-pox was meant to lift them through the stages of consciousness, and instead it visited upon them a plague of a thousand centuries. And it is less through our guidance and more through their own efforts that they have finally eradicated the beast.”

H. was losing patience. “You are a plug in a geyser, \*. How long is a century? Thousands more will pass while we take our rest. You speak as if the virus were ancient history. As I recall, it was but an eon since we released the virus, and that is one eon’s work lost. No biggie.”

“An eon to us, an eternity to them. Unspeakable tortures. Destruction of whole cultures. We have left them a warlike and intolerant species. Do not dwell in your ego, H. We are here to serve them, not ourselves.”

H. waved a manipulator dismissively, looking at R. from the corner of his sense-com. \* took everything too serious. If he kept it up, H. would put in for a transfer — every eon with that plug in the room was an eon too long.

R. was more solicitous. “You are right, \*. We celebrate prematurely. But we are only Zon, and that is how Zon are. Do not judge us for it. We will put the sapients to rights. Our next effort will lift them into the glory that is the Collective, and we will receive little plaques with engraving and pictures on them.”

\* thought about that. “I do like little plaques,” he allowed.

R. sensed his advantage. “All will be well. The next eon will redeem us. Don’t fret, my friend.”

One of the holos announced an incoming message. All three turned to watch as the wax bubbles morphed into letters: “By order of the Council, all further efforts on behalf of the sapients are to be abandoned. It is the opinion of the Council that they must learn to elevate themselves. Signs of late are good — Art and Technology teams report excellent progress — and we must allow the sapients their own evolution. We cannot afford another mistake.”

A stunned silence sucked the feeling from the room. H. and R. turned to \*, emitting anger and shock. “Did you inform the Council of our error?” demanded H.

“I told no one,” responded \* with a defensive coloration. “I would not do that to you.”

The silence lengthened. “Then the Council has been observing our work all eon long,” said R. “There goes the promotion.”

# 2

\_\_\_, in spite of his discomfort, had to admit to himself that he was in truly beautiful circumstances. The native groundcover was lush and green in a way that his own dusty world could never support — it must be one of the advantages of living on a world in which one’s species had evolved; participation in an ecosystem, rather than parasitism. The sky was a...something...he didn’t really know that colour, and if it wasn’t for the implants it would have been just another wash of grey. He would have sighed if he could, but his respirator was as frozen as the rest of his lifesuit. Not only was his hydrogen sulphide supply compromised, but the crystalline nutrient powder it was supposed to catalyze was sitting inert in its tank, unable to spark his metabolism into the energy burst he was growing desperate for. His thorax mechanisms had shut down all unnecessary movement, even the pump that circulated the nutrient vapours throughout his system. He was as paralyzed as he had been the day he was born.

Well, if this was how he was to be terminated, it could be worse. At least the star was bright and warm, and he would not suffer the icedeath. And there was always a chance that his telemetry would alert his Master that something was wrong. He might be reparable, if the Council sent someone for him soon enough, although much of his memory would be wiped, and his animality along with it. His Kind was not disposed to panic, but to stoic resignation — hedonist in the good times, accepting in the bad. His eyes continued to work, somehow, running off his last reserves, and if he was going to die, he could absorb as much beauty as he could.

The wind picked up slightly, wafting him faster and lifting him a little further from the ground. He spun slowly, yawing and pitching, as he drifted over the meadow. It was a little disconcerting, all this uncontrolled movement, but not physically unpleasant. He forgot his paralysis and tried to smile, as his Master would have him.

At the top of a little air pocket, he glimpsed a construction in the distance. There were sapients moving slowly about in a clearing, herding some of the ruminants that constituted their food supply. \_\_\_ had been assigned to this exact location and clan, to observe the effects of a new bacterium still under development and showing great promise in increasing intellectual capacity without the need for cranial redesign. There was a good possibility that it would reverse some of the effects of the pox at the same time. The billions of periods that had passed since the experiment began to go bad had worn on the Council, and \_\_\_ would have done anything to relieve their suffering. It’s just what he was. And Thank Master for the opportunity to help save this benighted species.

Of course, his stealth was no more functional than the rest of his suit, and the photons were simply bouncing off him rather than being rerouted. His discovery was imminent, and there was nothing he could do about it. The breeze continued to push him toward the establishment, bouncing him through the air like a tiny blimp. One of the sapients, wearing one of those funny little roofs on his top end, stopped suddenly, staring in his direction, and \_\_\_ knew he’d been spotted. His mission was officially a failure, even a disaster. Involuntary internal systems clicked on: his suicide was now in progress. If there was any hope of recovery for his unit, he would have to shut down completely before tissue damage ensued.

The sapient’s arm was raised, pointing in \_\_\_’s direction, and his face seemed to be moving. Air waves brought an organized noise to \_\_\_’s ear, but without his synthetics he couldn’t interpret any of it. Other sapients, responding to the warning, began to congregate in a knot by an enclosure clearly designed to enslave the ruminants. One small one, dressed differently from the others, began to trot smartly in his direction. The others, sensing danger, quickly followed the one \_\_\_ recognized as a female of the species, and very young.

A gust blew him straight at her, snarling him in a bush not ten bodies from her. Covering the last distance between them, she halted a less than a body away, staring at him with deep interest. “Why does she not feel fear?” \_\_\_ wondered. “Most inappropriate. Previous observations would not have suggested this. Master will be most surprised.” Then he remembered that he was dying, and would likely not make his report, his sacred and fervent desire. A slow period passed, life ebbing away, before the young female stepped closer. She was about to lay body on him when the largest of the sapients stopped her, pulling her back.

He used almost the last of his energy to power up one of his synthetics. He couldn’t speak, of course — he had no such facility, and contact was not supposed to be mutual anyway, but he could listen, and learn, and interpret, and so pass his remaining periods in a positive manner.

“What is it?” asked the young female, clearly wanting to approach.

A mid-sized male snorted. “Looks like a beach ball covered in saran wrap. With a monkey’s head. Or a monkey’s butt — I can’t tell.”

“Whatever it is, it’s not from around here,” said the tall one, who had an air of being in charge. “It looks like a science experiment from the university farm.” He stepped forward conscientiously, reaching out a hand to poke \_\_\_ in the respirator. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“It has eyes,” said the young female. “It’s alive. Maybe it’s a robot, like transformers.”

“It would be a cyborg, then,” said the middle one, clearly impressed with its own knowledge. “It’s half-machine and half-monkey.”

“Whatever,” responded the female. “It’s not moving in there. There’s something wrong with it. The eyes move but nothing else.”

“Maybe we can sell it back to the university. I bet they’d pay good money to get it back,” said one who hadn’t spoken yet. “Looks expensive.”

The big one wasn’t having that. “If it’s theirs, we’ll return it to them. If one of our beefs got loose, I’d expect the same from them.”

\_\_\_ was almost enjoying the debate. He’d never been close to one before, let alone a group of them, and their interaction was pleasurable to him. It was worth shortening his lifespan in order to hear them.

“What’s that thing hanging off it?” asked the female.

“Looks like a car’s air hose,” the large one told her. Looks like it broke off. It’s supposed to be anchored in that little box there I think.”

“I could use that hose,” said the middle one.

“Shut up, Bil,” said the little one. “It’s not yours. You’re a stealer.”

“It’s not stealing if you find it.”

“That’s enough. Bil, go get a wheelbarrow. We’ll bring it to the truck and return it where it’s supposed to be.” The large one seemed to stand taller as he spoke, clearly asserting his authority.

“I’d like to poke it with a pin and see if it explodes,” said Bil. “I bet it would fly off in circles making a farting noise.” He seemed to find the idea funny, emitting a series of unpleasant barks through his airhole.

“Move it, Bil,” said the big one. “Tom, you think you can fix that hose thing? We should try to keep it alive, whatever it is.”

“Looks pretty simple, boss. I’ll need my toolbox.”

“Go get it.”

The Tom one took off at a trot, following the Bil back to the enclosure. In the meantime, the young female stepped closer, obviously intrigued. This time the big one didn’t stop her. Evidently he had decided there was no danger, and the clan was inclined to accept his opinion. “It’s definitely alive, Daddi,” she said. She put a hand on his surface, but \_\_\_ couldn’t feel it; he was too far gone. “I can see its eyes moving.”

The Daddi stepped closer, peering over her shoulder. The differences in the sizes of the sapients always seemed a bit bizarre. \_\_\_ was pretty much as he had always been. The Daddi laid his hand beside hers. “It’s cold. I think it’s dying.”

“Can’t we save it, Daddi?” asked the little one.

“Maybe,” said the Daddi. “It looks scared.” He stood up and turned away. “Tom, get the hell over here!”

Tom trotted up at speed, a heavy box hanging from one hand. He gently pushed the female aside, squatting in front of \_\_\_ with an interested air. “Give me some space, Liv,” he addressed the female. The Liv moved reluctantly away.

“Are you sure we should be doing this? What if it’s dangerous? Like Liv’s transformer?” Tom didn’t seem to be the smartest in the group, but he had a promising quickness with his hands.

“The university wouldn’t have let a robot out if it was dangerous,” said the Daddi. “This isn’t Area 51. And it’s not a robot, anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah...cyborg,” said the Tom, concentrating on the matter at hand. He studied the broken joint. “Well, I don’t know what it is, but it’s easy to fix.” He opened his box and took out a pair of apparatuses, each with a little jaw at one end, and a thin metal bar with a flat nodule and a thick handle. “Here, hold this here,” he said to the Liv.

The Liv took the bar and poked it into \_\_\_’s powder reserve. “Like this,” said the Tom, positioning it for her. She opened the snap closure with the flat end of the bar, and for the first time \_\_\_ felt hopeful. Master would be pleased, if they could accomplish their task.

The Tom took a jaw-tool in each hand and fixed them to the end of the hose and the receptacle. He brought them together, fiddling a bit, obviously nervous about breaking the thin synthetic. He couldn’t, of course. A few periods passed, and \_\_\_’s hope began to fade again, but then, suddenly and with a flourish, the Tom solved the riddle of the joint, and fitted the pieces together as if he had made them himself. “You can let go now,” he told the Liv.

\_\_\_, his vision fogging and his brain shutting down, pushed with all the tiny force that remained to him, diverting power from his ear, pushing hard to restart his respirator. There was an inaudible pop inside the lifesuit, and suddenly the comforting smell of hydrogen sulphide and nutrient mix flooded through him. “Oh Master,” he thought, “I will yet make my report.” One by one his systems came back online as his metabolism strengthened and his vision slowly cleared. His ear came back to life, and he could hear the sapients’ conversation again.

“Where did he go?” asked the little one. “He just disappeared.”

“I can feel him here,” said the Tom. “He’s not gone. Just invisible. His thing is warming up. I guess he’s alive.”

“Let me feel,” said the Liv, laying both hands on him, one covering his eyes. “He’s really invisible,” she told them. “It’s impossible, Daddi!”

“Stand back, you two,” said the Daddi. He looked over his shoulder at the Bil. “Let’s get him aboard the truck.”

The Daddi and the Bil stepped forward, reaching for \_\_\_, but \_\_\_ had pushed himself from the tangle of branches, and floated silently away on the breeze, invisible and ecstatic. Master would learn much about the sapients from this encounter, and \_\_\_ would never make the mistake of over-trusting his lifesuit again. In future, all procedures would be followed, and he would not allow his eagerness to please Master and Council to override his training.

As he floated away, Master’s voice came through the radio into his mind. “What’s going on down there, \_\_\_? We lost you for a while.”

“All is well, Master. I am ready to report and to continue my mission.”

“The mission is different now, \_\_\_. The Council has decided that the sapients must be left alone to continue their growth. They have prospered in spite of us, not because of us, and they are advancing toward consciousness with every lifespan. We will do nothing but observe.”

“Have I failed then, Master?”

“Never, my friend. Now you must come home and tell us what you have seen.”

As \_\_\_ prepared to turn on his thruster and return to the station above him, he spun himself back to the scene he had left behind. There was no way to thank the sapients, not that he would have been permitted such luxury. He focused his ear on the little group standing in the verdant field, bathed in bright starlight, and his implants swelled with love.

Just before \_\_\_ jetted out of range, the Daddi turned to the Liv, picked her up and looked at her. “I don’t think we’d better mention this to anybody, folks. Who knows what people will think?”

1. Pronounced “Herbert.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pronounced “FFFFF....” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pronounced “\*$#&()%@!.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)