

maneater

aric huang

For my father, the eclipsed sun

1

Dent was looking absentmindedly at the courtyard lights through the apartment gym's window when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Pressing the button to reduce speed on his treadmill, he slowed to a walking pace and took one earpiece out. Next to him was a tall, impressively muscular man, hand now gesturing toward Dent's legs.

"Good form, you run long distance? Marathons?"

"I have, yeah." Faded thoughts of sun, rain, burning muscles, and celebratory drinks.

"I'm Thomas, I live on B48." His hand now opened into one half of a handshake. His face was gentle and somehow soft. Dent put out his hand and completed the other half.

"Dent. Nice to meet you".

"Mind if I run next to you? To be honest I've been wanting some help with my running. If you had some tips for me I'd be grateful."

Dent was happy to share what he knew. For a time they shared a friendly distance as fellow athletes. Neither man was prone to bragging or excessive pride, and as Dent shared his stories of races won and lost and Thomas shared those of his time in the Space Marines, they came to a place of mutual respect and friendship.

"Do you think they'll renew your contract?" Thomas asked. They sat on a bench next to the apartment's coffee stand, still damp from the cold night air, and watched a delivery bot ascend the stairs with crab-like legs. The line for coffee winded around the small courtyard.

“No, I don’t think so. They only need security during construction, after that they’re automating everything.”

“I’ll have to find something after mine is up too. What do you think of this?” Dent saw a flash in Thomas’s left eyeball as something appeared on his retinal display, and he pointed at Dent. Dent’s wrist computer vibrated and he opened the message.

Security Officer
Arc Security - Romi 71 - 2 months ago

Position Overview

Provide safety and security to colony residents, visitors, and personnel. Patrol and monitor facilities. Observe, report, and respond to unauthorized activities and anomalous situations. Assist staff with any security-related services, including equipment installation/automation, personnel escort, and security planning.

“I’ve heard of Romi. Someone sent me a video, it looks nice.” ‘Someone’ was Dent’s sister Sarah, who hadn’t come up yet in their conversations. She was looking for a place to settle with her family and had been sending videos to Dent almost daily. Each place looked pristine and uniformly lovely in the clips she shared, Romi included. He tried to remember what about it was supposed to be special. Forests? Beaches? Canyons?

“The ocean looks amazing, right?” Beaches. “The infrastructure is in place and listings are starting to go up. I think it’s a good time to get in.”

Dent felt his hands clasp tighter around his coffee. Its warmth spread deeper into his palms and he breathed out a cloud into the winter air. He thought about hot sun and sand underfoot, and the feeling of being suspended in the waves.

2

Being of modest means, Dent had only ever traveled sub-light. The thought of being put under, frozen, and placed in the motion dampening units necessary for near-light brought back a memory from childhood. An normal-looking freezer at this friend’s house turned out to be filled with gallon-size plastic bags, each packed tight with frozen mouse corpses. “For the snakes”, he explained, seeing Dent’s alarmed expression. Dent was no longer so alarmed after this explanation, but the image of countless mouse bodies pressed into piles of flesh remained an uncomfortable memory.

Thomas had no such discomfort or unpleasant associations with the idea of near-light travel. Having been introduced to the practice at a relatively young age upon entering the armed forces, he saw it as little different from a standard atmospheric flight or trip through the solar system. If anything it was more pleasant than any of those. One drifted off in the comforting vibration of the

stasis pod and awakened on a new world, the old one fading from mind as quickly as a dream.

As Dent came to inside his pod, most other passengers had already awoken and were well into their 30-minute post-stasis observation period, stretching and conversing amongst themselves. The sterile chambers they had traveled in became lively and casual as people lounged in and around their pods, walked laps around the room, and formed circles to share updates from the 3 months they had just slept through. Amidst the bustle and immediate practical concerns of arriving on a new planet, Dent's life on Earth and his frozen mice faded from mind.

Stepping out of the spaceport, wind whipped constantly and unpredictably around him as he watched Thomas arrive in a small shuttle. On the flight to the housing complex, Thomas explained that the winds were caused by the air scrubbers being run at higher speeds than normal. As the normal temperature on Romi would be unbearably hot, the scrubbers also worked to cool the air. Normally they were not supposed to cause excessive wind, but Thomas told Dent that they were being run harder in preparation for more people to arrive.

Aside from the unnatural wind and the rocky surface being a verdant green that could easily be mistaken for fields of grass, to Dent the most unusual thing about Romi was its openness. On their drive they passed untouched fields and hills, and the occasional vegetable or livestock farm. The first colonists of Romi were farmers, brought years in advance to determine the farming practices necessary to establish agriculture on the new planet. Romi had been positioned as a "homestead" planet, where settlers could spread out and be more in touch with a relatively pristine natural world. Rather than fully terraform the planet as most were, the architects had opted for an intentionally more old-fashioned approach.

Their housing complex was a modestly sized apartment block, about a quarter the size of one on Earth. Still, it was large enough to house several thousand. Outside, a young couple strolled with their toddler son. While the couple seemed slightly uncomfortable in the wind, the child seemed unbothered and kept stopping his parents to point out some object of interest along the path or off in the distance. One of these was Thomas and Dent's van, and the child waved at the two of them as they stepped out and unloaded Dent's belongings. They waved back, and Dent thought of his two nieces and his own potential future children, and whether Romi might be the place they would be born.

As he was required to spend a few days acclimatizing and having medical tests done before being able to start work, Dent spent them exploring the habitable zone. The planet's space dock and main settlement were on a small landmass named Georges Island, with the habitable zone covering it and a few smaller islands nearby. Each morning after Thomas went to work, Dent boarded the shuttle and had it take him to some location of interest. Close to the housing complex was the "town", a collection of mostly empty buildings waiting for tenants. The only open businesses were a grocery store, a hardware fabricator,

and a few food stalls. The owner of one stall selling stewed meat and lentils told Dent, “It’s quiet now but not for long. In a few months this place will be swarming with people.”

For now though Dent felt that the whole planet was empty and isolated. He had grown up in the crushing overpopulation of Earth, where privacy and solitude in spaces larger than a sleeping pod was something reserved only for the very wealthy. Being the only person in a store or standing on the street or lying on a beach was something he’d rarely experienced before, and those occasions had been too brief for him to fully process the experience. Now that it was the normal state of things, it felt like something he’d always wanted without knowing. On his last few rest days, he had the shuttle take him away from the populated areas, over hills and through forests. Eventually the path would end at the sea, and Dent would get out and walk across the beach. Instead of people, around him were plants, insects, lizards, and the occasional bird.

Lying on the pale green sand of one of those beaches, Dent had started to doze off when a movement in the distance made him sit up. A group of five tall animals made their way out of the brush next to the beach with slow, careful movements, walking on all fours like some large ape or sloth. They seemed larger than an average human, and with much longer limbs. Looking closer, he noticed their elongated jaws, jutting out cat-like from their faces. They placed their limbs with great care, gradually crossing the sand and coming to the water’s edge. There they paused for a time, gazing across the water. The two largest then stepped into the water and moved off, limbs still moving carefully but now with more force as they swam against the waves. The three smaller followed in single file, and while they seemed to struggle a bit against the current, they quickly caught up with the other two and the group swam away, heads bobbing up and down with the waves, until they were no longer visible.

3

Dent had gotten to know many of the residents in the housing complex in his first few weeks on the job. A childhood on crowded Earth made him quite socially comfortable, and although he had lived a generally unattached life, Dent had always taken an interest in other people. He found it easy to make friends, and just as easy to move on from them, which did concern him a little.

The young couple turned out to be climate system technicians who met at training on Luna. Their child was born shortly after they were married two years ago, and they had dreams of raising a family on a quieter planet. On a house call to fix a malfunctioning door sensor, he met a stressed-looking shipping company executive, an older woman with a prominent neural accelerator unit on the back of her head, who spoke a little too quickly and whose attention seemed to wander every time Dent tried to answer her questions. Charles, a real estate agent who initially was quite standoffish and even rude to Dent the other

security staff, gradually became one of Dent and Thomas's good friends and would join them on their morning runs. He confided in them about his difficulty adjusting to life away from Earth. "I miss the people and the energy. It just feels empty here, like nothing is happening. I know you guys like it but I guess I'm just too much of a city person."

They all knew that eventually Charles would get what he wanted. More and more ships were arriving at the spaceport, bringing new residents, visitors, workers, equipment, and supplies. The security team's workload steadily increased, and Dent's life became a blur of productive, fulfilling activity. At the end of most days, he felt like he had worked hard and made a difference in the lives of those around him. When he could no longer recognize most of his building residents by sight, or the first crime reports started coming in, or trash started appearing on the beaches, he sometimes felt a vague sense of unease. However this was quickly forgotten with the start of a new day and new problems to solve.

One of those problems was a nearby livestock farm's request for help. At the farm Dent and Thomas met Sean, who showed him his chickens and goats. Over a pile of nuts and fruits, Sean talked at length about his experiences in the first years of settling on Romi. Back then, without the network of air scrubbers covering the habitable zone, the scorching heat and slightly toxic atmosphere required the use of full-body suits and bottled oxygen when outdoors. "We could gen-mod the animals and plants to handle the air here, but not us poor suckers," he said laughing. "Now that we made it work, people are coming, they bring in the air cleaners and guess what? Now we have to mod the stock back to the way they were! Isn't that ridiculous?" Dent and Thomas murmured their agreement, but Sean could sense they were not really interested, and his tone became a little less friendly.

"Anyway I didn't call you just to chat. I called you here because something is killing my animals. This has never happened before, and none of the wildlife here eats goats or chickens. I think someone who just came here is doing this, and I want you to help me catch them." This caught their attention more than the previous topic, and they began pressing Sean for details. The picture they were able to put together was that once every few days, some of the livestock would be killed when they were set loose to graze and roam the farmland. The dead would have their skulls cracked open and missing large pieces, or in the case of smaller animals be missing their heads entirely. The rest of the body would be covered in bruising and other blunt force injury, appearing to have been beaten. There were no signs that the animals were being hunted as prey, as the bodies were otherwise intact. This and the lack of similar previous cases made Dent and Thomas agree that this was probably done by some sadistic recent arrival.

Dent surveyed the farm perimeter and installed additional proximity sensors to fill in gaps in the network, while Thomas filled out case forms and requisitioned a set of autonomous camera drones. These would connect to the sensor network and quickly fly to the site of any activity. From a distance they also looked

and behaved almost indistinguishably to a small crow or jay bird, which would help them follow a surveillance target unnoticed. The drones arrived after a few hours and after running through a few test scenarios, they left Sean with instructions to simply let the system respond to any new intrusion and identify the intruder, so that police could be notified. Perhaps responding to his own instincts, Thomas felt it necessary to also recommend that Sean not take any action on his own to confront the intruder. Sean laughed and assured them, "I wouldn't do that. I don't even want to know who did it, I just want them dealt with. In all my years here I never felt scared, but it scares me to know there's people like this here now."

While Dent didn't feel the same kind of fear, he could understand it. While crime was much higher on Earth, he had quickly become used to the comparatively peaceful conditions on Romi. But that peace made it stand out all the more when apartments were broken into, or when a pet went missing, or when someone was assaulted or robbed in public. Each time something like this happened, Dent or his team would be involved in some way, either directly responding to the case or discussing changes to policy or procedures. There was a part of him that took comfort in the fact that something could always be done - if not to help those directly involved, then to help those who could be harmed in the future. There was another part of him that thought that on Earth, where policies and procedures had been iterated on for centuries in an endless cycle of human existence, surely everything he could think of had been done and found lacking at some point.

He tended to become more aware of that part of him on days when he walked down now familiar forest paths to the beach. While he often spent time with Thomas and Charles in the gym or after work sharing meals or drinks, he found himself unable to invite them on these days. Instead of running or swimming with the intent of training, he would stroll slowly down the beach for a time before entering the water and floating on his back. The water was cool but the sun was startlingly hot on his face, and as his body was carried by the waves he pictured himself as a piece of driftwood, burned on one side and washed away on the other until paper thin, before breaking apart and becoming ash dissolving into the water. On those days he could think of no solutions or things to be done. His thoughts were of being eaten away by time, eaten away so completely that no trace could be found anywhere in the universe. His parents, now present only in memories. He, his sister and his friends, currently in the prime of life. His nieces, still children. His own son or daughter, not even born yet. He thought of all the people he knew, and all those he didn't know, dissolving away into the sea of existence. He wondered whether, in the far future, if some being existed that looked upon that sea, it could perceive any trace of the thoughts, emotions, and lives of those people somewhere in its waves. More likely there would be no trace at all, and the waves would look the same then as they did before the first human was born, and the same as when this being and its kin were gone. Gradually his thoughts would become more vague and unformed until he stopped thinking about anything in particular.

The next few weeks were difficult for Dent and the other residents. Systemic issues with the air scrubbers led to poor air quality and rising temperatures, and the use of filter masks and personal oxygen bottles became necessary when outdoors. Dent was glad that his sister, who had decided to stay on Earth and move into a luxury apartment following her husband's promotion, seemed to be happy and doing well when they spoke on their monthly calls. Sarah seemed clearly worried about her brother's safety and well-being in the midst of these problems, but Dent sensed a certain self-satisfaction at her choice to stay on Earth.

Frustrations and worries about the situation on Romi led to an increase in thefts and disputes over the purchase of food and essential supplies. Dent and the security team were stretched very thin responding to these situations, and every day turned into an exhausting struggle against an ever increasing list of urgent priorities. The fulfillment that Dent usually found in his work transformed into a weight that seemed to press on him even in his increasingly rarer moments of rest. He found less and less time for leisure with his friends, and being out in nature became impractical with the heat and air problems. Thomas remained steadfastly calm and controlled throughout everything, and Dent's appreciation for his friend grew. He guessed that Thomas had gone through much more stressful things in the Marines. Their evenings were often spent eating in silence side by side in the stalls of a noodle shop, then having a few drinks in their apartment as they shared details of ongoing cases and strategized about what steps to take next. The fast-metabolizing alcohol's intoxicating effects would already be dissipating by the time they showered and fell asleep, and completely gone by the time they woke early in the morning.

Days and weeks passed this way as an unsatisfying collection of small victories, quickly followed by new and more difficult problems. While new procedures and increased security presence led to a significant decrease in thefts and missing inventory at the shipping yards, the arrival of technicians to repair the air scrubbers was still weeks away. As they reviewed their monitoring dashboards late at night at the end of another long day, Thomas told Dent he'd read that the planetary architects were now questioning the use of air scrubbers and were debating various other solutions instead. Some other officers overheard and joined in to discuss their impressions of the different approaches, and speculate on what would end up happening. Thomas was in the midst of describing a new technique (something involving catalysts that would react with native chemicals in the atmosphere) when they received an alert from Sean's livestock farm. Dent's excitement about a potential breakthrough in that case turned almost immediately to dread. The report stated that while footage of an intruder had been captured, it had not been able to make an identification. In addition, the activity recognition system indicated that some altercation or other violent activity had occurred. As he opened the video file, Dent felt as if his consciousness had left his body and was floating freely around the room.

The camera drone's footage initially showed it scanning the horizon before its attention was captured by a dark shape at the far end of the bare patch of terrain in front of the farmhouse. From its vantage point perched on the farmhouse roof, the camera zoomed in on the shape as it slowly and carefully stepped on four limbs to the edge of the light from the windows. Light caught a pair of expressionless eyes, which stared intently past the camera's view. Its pupils dilated wide as it seemed to react to some activity in its sight, and its body tensed into a low crouch. The next instant it was out of sight, and the next few seconds were a jumble of unrecognizable frames as the drone flew from the roof and attempted to get the subject back in sight. It settled across the farmhouse among some reedy plants in time to capture a clear shot of the creature pinning the farmer to the ground with no apparent difficulty. As Sean struggled uselessly, the camera zoomed in on the creature. It seemed to consider the mask covering Sean's face with idle curiosity before one limb shot out with shocking speed and sent the mask flying. Sean's head was still rocking back and forth from the impact, his body going limp as he apparently lost consciousness, as the creature raised both arms and beat him all over his body, distorting it into unnatural shapes. Abruptly stopping and observing the farmer's broken, motionless form, the creature lifted the body up and its jaws opened revealing long rows of thick blunt teeth. The jaws closed around Sean's skull and cracked it open easily, blood and brain matter convulsing out of the opening. Suddenly the screen turned black and Dent was looking at his own face, breathing hard, grim and slightly pale. He became aware of his hands gripping the table's edge. One of the other officers was no longer in the room, and the other was leaning back and staring into the ceiling. Thomas's hand moved from the screen's power button to Dent's shoulder.

At the farmhouse, Dent watched the medics collect Sean's body and biologists take samples around the area. One of the biologists told Dent that the animal in the footage was well-known to them from initial surveys of the planet as nomadic animals that traveled in small groups. Its main food source was a thick-shelled gourd or melon-like fruit, which grew abundantly in the hot Romi air. Like most of the planet's indigenous life, it was categorized as a low risk to humans as it seemed to stay far away from human structures. "What we've seen is they tend to leave an island altogether once a human presence is established. They're not territorial, so we're not sure why this one became aggressive. We try to leave the native life alone if the risks are low, but we'll have to reevaluate now that we know deviants like this one exist."

Although Dent sent a command for the camera drones to assemble at the farmhouse for maintenance, one of them failed to appear, and its map location kept changing. Wandering the fields in growing irritation at the relentless heat, he eventually found it perched on a fence post by an open field. As he moved closer it flew off, looking every bit the part of a living corvid bird, and settled again some distance away, eyes locked on his. Each time he got closer it took off again, stubbornly maintaining the same distance from him. Exasperated, he tapped at his wrist computer to command it to shut down and enter self-diagnostic

mode. Looking up, he saw the drone's camera eyes still staring hard at him. Under its uncanny, crow-like gaze Dent felt for a moment that it was evaluating him, judging him as he stood breathing hard through his mask, oxygen meter gradually dropping lower and lower, sweat dripping down his forehead and under his arms. Then the bird's body stiffened and folded into a neat triangular shape, and it was again nothing more than a piece of machinery, red indicator light pulsating as it dutifully scanned itself to find the cause of its own deviancy.

4

The first of the Georges Island earthquakes occurred while Dent, like many other residents, was returning to work from lunch. Aside from its novelty as the first earthquake experienced by any human on Romi, it was unremarkable in terms of duration and magnitude. While the shaking was severe enough to dislodge some wall art and send some dishes off of tables, there were no major injuries reported. Dent had forgotten about it by the time he went to bed that night, his mind occupied by his work instead.

The second earthquake occurred in the dead of night, after Dent had settled into a deep sleep. At first he thought the violent shaking was some dream or nightmare, until an earsplitting crack and Thomas's shouting snapped him fully awake. Huddled under their metal dining table, Dent watched as every unsecured object in his apartment was jolted out of place and sent crashing in all directions. His initial hope that it would end quickly faded as the seconds ticked by and turned into minutes. The shaking would subside for a time before suddenly resuming with even greater intensity, and Dent could feel the ground tilting slowly beneath him, as if the earth were a great metal bar trying in vain to hold its shape as it was flexed to its breaking point. The shaking slowed again to an ominous rumble, and Dent had a mental image of that metal bar holding precariously close to the limits of its strength, and the sudden violence of the catastrophic failure that was sure to come. The table was not fixed to the ground, and he glanced around for any safer place to hide. Thomas shook his head and started to shout something when the ground dropped out from beneath them. Dent felt his arms fling themselves instinctively ahead of him to catch his fall, then a moment of intense pain, then nothing at all for a while.

Dent saw himself lying on his hospital bed. His left leg was elevated and fully concealed by a thick cast, but he knew that underneath the leg was mangled and useless. He also knew that this was not a vision from the future, but of his memory of eight years ago. He saw his accident again, forcing himself to not look away as his transport pod collided with the reinforced concrete barrier. He watched himself drift in and out of consciousness in the interminable time it took for paramedics to cut through the jammed door and free his crushed leg. He saw his own face, angry and resentful at losing his future as an athlete, skeptical at the assurances of his parents and doctors, shocked at the strength of his repaired leg, then slightly embarrassed and self-reflective as he walked

easily out of the hospital with his friends and family. He had felt an acute anger at life's unfairness at the time, and was fully ready to go on living with that anger. His body on the other hand responded to the tissue and nerve regrowth procedures beyond all expectation, and before long he was back to running as if nothing had happened. But something had changed in him, and he gradually drifted away from the running world and the friends he made there.

Then he was in a hospital room again, this one more elaborate and well-equipped than the last. He saw his father sitting up in the bed, chuckling at some joke he'd made. An array of medical devices on wheeled stands surrounded the bed. This was also a memory, this one from only a few years ago. He saw his father's face, first relaxed and comfortable, then confused, then pinched and creased with frustration, then tired and vacant. He had only just become himself again a few years after Dent's mother's passing when the blood cancer diagnosis came. As the treatments failed one after the other, his light dimmed and was extinguished long before his body finally gave out. Looking at his father lying in bed staring blankly at the ceiling, skin stretched tight over his bones, Dent felt that his father was being scraped away into nothing. Dent had felt his old anger returning, but this time it carried a feeling of futility. Over time the anger subsided, but the feeling of hopelessness stayed like a stone in his chest. He felt a heat rising in his face and blinked away the tears forming in his eyes.

Blinking a few more times he realized he was in a different place again. At first it was hard to make sense of what he was seeing, and he slowly tried to get his bearings. A splash of blood in front of him, the source of which he traced back to his forehead. The pair of legs next to him belonged to Thomas, sitting dazed but conscious. He turned to look at Dent, smiling in relief before leaning back and closing his eyes. The small cave they were in turned out to be formed by their dining table, which was somehow still upright, surrounded by rubble. Where the apartment kitchen had been was now an unobstructed view of the surrounding landscape, a field of destroyed buildings. The air was hot and still, without even the slightest breeze.

Thomas forced himself to his feet and checked himself and Dent for injuries. Nothing life-threatening was found, and after injecting them both with an emergency stimulant, they began coordinating a rescue and relief effort. Charles met them before long, his shuttle landing near the apartment complex. He had just been on his way back from the space elevator, and had waited out the earthquake inside the shuttle, safely suspended in the air. He told them that he saw the elevator shaft being ripped apart. They were joined by two other security officers, who had been patrolling on hoverbikes and so had also escaped the worst of the quake. The group took stock of their supplies, passing out filter masks and counting their inventory of food and oxygen tanks. While the natural atmosphere of Romi was breathable in the short term, the low oxygen content would cause problems for those not acclimated, and a few hours of exposure could result in a dangerous buildup of toxins. Their first priority would be to help any survivors.

Dent sent a signal to activate any robots in the area. A group of six mostly undamaged personnel bots gathered within a few minutes, along with a flock of camera drones. Humans and robots began combing the wreckage of the apartment complex, as a steady stream of able-bodied survivors arrived at the camp, drawn by the electric torchlight around its perimeter. The arrivals were quickly put to use standing up temporary atmosphere shelters, and those with medical experience set up a field hospital that quickly filled with the injured. In greater numbers were the dead, which Dent and the others had to leave where they lay for the time being. Among them were the young couple and their child, whose broken bodies Dent found laying far from each other. Dent imagined their last moments of terror before being thrown from their upper-floor apartment. As recognized more and more of the familiar faces he'd come to know however briefly, he identified them in the resident database and marked the location of their bodies. Each database entry presented him with a short biography and identification photo, he hoped that he would never forget their names and faces. But other more immediate concerns were already pushing them from his mind.

As the day wore on people worked in shifts, needing to rest often as the temperature rose. By midday the heat became unbearable and almost everyone crowded into the bubbles of the atmosphere shelters. The robots continued to work tirelessly, bringing a steady stream of survivors to the hospital throughout the day. By evening that stream had dried up, and instead the bodies of the dead began to flow in. As soon as the first bodies arrived, people emerged from the shelters and gathered in small crowds. Although Dent and other security officers worked to quickly identify the dead and notify any surviving family or friends in the camp, the crowds only grew. The unmistakable silhouette of a personnel bot cradling a body in its arms would elicit a flurry of activity and shouting, and some would run out to meet the robot and see the body. Dent tried to persuade them to return to the shelters and rest but most refused, and although he worried a little about their supply of bottled oxygen, in the end he let them be. As the light faded, he watched as they talked about their loved ones, shared words of encouragement, and made new friends in spite of everything. Even as the night grew deeper and the robots stopped coming, a few still lingered outside. They gathered around electric torches like ancient humans around firelight, except this light was cold and unwavering. Dent, Thomas, and Charles brought them food and drink and sat with them for a while.

Among the group was Maxine, the shipping company executive Dent had met soon after arriving on Romi. She was waiting for her daughter, she told him. Dent didn't recall her living with a daughter, and on telling her this she laughed. "She never left her room. She couldn't adjust to living here. Believe me I tried to help her, I kept her enrolled in her old school, I paid for counseling and neural mods, everything." As she turned her head, the metal of her neural accelerator unit caught the torchlight and glowed a bright white. "Disasters can happen anywhere. It was the right decision to come here, for the company and our future. I know it was the right decision. She would have realized that too, when she got older." She was muttering quickly and seemed to be talking to herself.

Then she went quiet for a time, and Dent could see her eyes were welling up with tears which she quickly blinked away. When she spoke again she spoke slowly, each word seeming to take effort. "I know she's probably dead and there's nothing I can do waiting out here. I should just go inside and get some sleep. But I'll wait a little while longer."

Saying goodnight to the group standing vigil outside, Dent and Thomas followed Charles to his shuttle where they planned to spend the night. They had already instructed other security officers to establish a perimeter around the camp and setup a monitoring routine for the robots. It was standard security procedure and in truth Dent wasn't thinking of any specific concerns. The shock and exhaustion of the past day had wiped almost everything else from their minds.

5

Although he received the camera drone's activity alert first, Dent didn't notice it until much later. In the quiet moments before going to sleep he had started to notice the effects of the physical trauma he'd sustained - bruised muscles, a hairline fracture in the right arm, and a moderate concussion. Without any activity to distract him, the pain took its place, and he felt utterly exhausted. Thomas seemed to be in better condition, but from the way he stumbled to his cot, so unlike his usually composed and efficient way of moving, Dent could tell he was also struggling. Dent found a pack of painkillers in the shuttle's medkit, swallowed two, then tossed the pack onto Thomas's chest where he lay. Thomas smiled and gave a quick thumbs up before taking a few pills and closing his eyes. Charles was already asleep, sitting up in one of the shuttle's passenger chairs. Climbing into a cot, Dent felt his consciousness fade as soon as he lay down. The soft vibration of the alert on his wrist computer went unnoticed.

In his half-asleep state, the piercing shrill of the proximity alarm sounded to Dent like a person's scream, but unnaturally high-pitched and unwavering in tone. It was an impossible sound to ignore, and despite his exhaustion Dent was out of bed almost immediately. Thomas was somehow already at the door, pulling on a mask and plugging in an oxygen bottle. As the shuttle door opened, the artificial scream of the proximity alarm merged with the real screams of people. Dent froze mid-step at the sound, but Thomas barely seemed to notice and was already out the door. Dent quickly doubled back and picked up his pistol. It had been issued to him on his first day of work on Romi, but he hadn't had much occasion to use it, and it felt heavy and foreign in his hands. Telling Charles to stay and lock the shuttle doors behind him, Dent pulled on his mask and stepped out into the hot night air.

Dent could see Thomas standing in the distance near one of the smaller atmosphere shelters, large enough for around four people. Illuminated from below by electric torches on the ground, he was scanning the horizon with gun drawn. Some of the shelter's struts were snapped and the outer sheeting had been ripped

away. As he approached, Dent saw the insides of the shelter were stained with blood. The floor of the shelter was a pile of gore, barely identifiable as human remains. Thomas suddenly shouted, “On your 3!” and Dent’s ears were filled with the sound of gunfire. He turned to his right in time to see a black shape bearing down on him with incredible speed, before breaking off and turning away in a wide circle. On all fours, long strides easing to a slow gallop, Dent could now make out the long limbs and elongated jaws he had last seen from the safety of a security monitor. Its cheeks were wet and matted with blood, and a pair of pitch black eyes seemed to looking at everything and nothing. As it slowed its body jerked and twisted suddenly, and Dent realized that Thomas’s shots had indeed found their target. The creature seemed to realize this at the same time and stopped, hunching over and glancing around its body in confusion. Caught in brief flashes of light as Thomas opened fire again, Dent could see the creature covering its face with its hands, staggering backwards for a few moments before turning and running into the darkness.

Reconstructing the timeline of the creature’s attack from automated alerts and drone footage, they found that the creature had first been seen moving in the rubble outside the camp perimeter, triggering the first activity warning. A few minutes later a proximity alert was triggered, and only a few seconds after that it struck the group holding vigil outside. In half a minute all of them were dead. It then started tearing into the smaller shelters one by one. Shortly after Thomas and Dent arrived. In total the incident lasted around four minutes, and left fifteen people dead. Dent knew that one of them was Maxine, but he could not recognize anything familiar about her in the torn-apart body in front of him. For a long time he sat reading her database entry over and over. Her biography listed many accomplishments and awards through her education and career, and noted she was a highly respected figure in interplanetary shipping. The only hint of a life beyond that was contained in a small box below her name:

Spouse: David Rogers (divorced)
Children: 1

Dent gathered Thomas and the other security officers to review their situation. A relief mission from Taurus had been scrambled over the last day, but even at near-light speed the first ships would not arrive for one month. Technicians had already been on the way to Romi to repair the air scrubbers, but they were still around two weeks away and were not carrying additional food or medical supplies. Their ship was also designed for space-only operation and was meant to dock at the space port, with the crew and equipment being sent to the surface via space elevator. With the elevator inoperable, it was unclear whether they would even be able to land on the planet surface.

The port itself had sustained significant damage and only a few of its structures were still standing. Even so, settlers from all over Georges had started congregating there, some looking for shelter, others hoping that leaving the planet was still a possibility. Only a few vessels capable of escaping the planet’s atmosphere under their own power were still functional, and most were already filled to

capacity or had already left. The survivors from Dent's housing complex had little chance of making it onto one of the remaining launches. Inquiring with port authorities about the possibility of relocating to the port, they were met with a quick and decisive denial. The port was already beyond reasonable capacity, with more people arriving every hour. Dent realized he hadn't fully grasped how many people had come to Romi in the months since his arrival. Even the survivors from his housing complex numbered over a thousand. Coordinating them to move to another location would be time-consuming and difficult given the number of injured.

Moving was nevertheless an option they seriously considered. The speed and brutality of the creature's attack left Dent and security team shaken. All day people were coming up to Dent and other security officers, asking or demanding to know what would be done about the "maneater". As discussions stretched into the afternoon, it became clear that the only reasonable path forward was to dig in and stay in their current encampment for the month or so until the relief mission's arrival. Their supply of food, water, oxygen, and medical supplies would actually last far more time, as large quantities were recovered from the shipping yards and distributed all over the island. The question of what to do about the creature became the primary concern, and it became increasingly urgent as daylight faded. Dent and many other officers found themselves instinctively looking to Thomas for his opinion, and by the time the light was gone their plan was ready.

This time the shrill of the proximity alarm was something Dent anticipated with a nervous excitement. At the sound his binoculars shot up to his face, and he could make out long stalking limbs crossing the invisible barrier between perimeter fenceposts. The limbs moved smoothly and without hesitation, with no obvious sign of the injuries Dent knew it was carrying. All at once the limbs exploded into a full gallop, and Dent felt himself and Thomas both tensing in anticipation. From their vantage point in the brush overlooking the camp, they could see that the creature's target was a small cluster of shelters closest to the perimeter. A man was laying back in a camp chair by the shelters, hat over his face. As Dent watched the creature bear down on this man through his scope, he could sense Thomas raising a kinetic rifle and taking aim. The creature flung its arms forward an instant before impact, seizing the man firmly in its grip and tumbling a few times to a halt. It then paused for a moment, suddenly aware that the man had grappled it back in return. As the creature looked closer at its prey, the featureless white mask of a personnel robot stared back, and the creature's head suddenly snapped backward as electricity coursed through its body. Its eyes widened a little but otherwise its expression remained unchanged, it too a blank unmoving mask. In the brief but interminable moment that the creature was frozen in place, Dent suddenly had the thought that he had never seen the creature with any other expression. Despite the brutality and viciousness of its attacks, its face showed no sign of the anger, hatred, or

sadism that may have driven it. In that moment suspended in time, Dent felt it had decided to go to its death carrying the secrets in its mind with it, never to be known by another.

The moment was broken as part of the creature's head exploded away and it fell backward. The round from Thomas's rifle had taken with it one eye and a chunk of skull. Its grip on the robot loosened and the synthetic body clattered to the ground. Dent could see smoke rising from its flesh, and its hands opened and clenched into fists over and over as its muscles flexed uselessly. Thomas was already moving through the brush toward the perimeter, and Dent ran after him. He felt a pit forming in his stomach as the creature's uncoordinated contortions and writhings resolved into a purposeful crawl. Before Thomas could raise his rifle again it had already picked up speed, and the next shot sailed harmlessly over its head as it disappeared into the brush. Dent slowed his run but Thomas had broken into a sprint, and he yelled with an uncharacteristic anger, "Go after him!"

Dent would never be able to remember exactly what happened after they entered the brush. Perhaps it was his head injury and lack of sleep finally catching up to him. In any case he felt that he and his friend had entered into another dimension, where all that existed were rocks, wilderness, and the paradoxical fear of hunting while being hunted at the same time. The infrared night vision that Thomas's augmented eyes boasted, and similar capabilities of Dent's handheld scope, should have made the hunt easy. But the already hot Romi air became like the steam of a boiling pot in the forest's humidity, and the forest turned out to be alive with a surprising number of animals. Again and again they seemed to catch sight of the creature before it transformed into the shape of some reptile or primate or lemur-like animal hanging from the trees. As they stumbled over rocks and between trees, trying in growing desperation to come up with a plan and make sense of their surroundings, Dent felt that the creature had somehow mustered the life of the planet itself against them and was watching them, waiting for its chance to spring from the darkness and throttle them both to death. There was no light from any of Romi's moons, and although star light shined above them, it was fully hidden behind the forest canopy. Each time he lowered his scope, the visual cacophony of brightly colored heat signatures disappeared, replaced by complete darkness. His wide open eyes could see nothing, and all sounds seemed to be swallowed up by the thick hot air. Even the pulsing pain in his head and tired legs faded away and he felt weightless, suspended in a universe of utter nothingness. He thought about a distant future when the seas of existence had dried up, the earth below cracking and disintegrating until nothing was left but the void he now floated in. The last speck of his being lingered there for a time before also disappearing without a trace.

A sudden explosion of pain brought him back into existence. The earth reappeared and he was pressed suffocatingly into it. His body reformed around him and was immediately broken in several places, first a leg, then an arm, then a few ribs. As he opened his eyes, the universe around him seemed to consist only

of an animal's blank stare, and the tangled fur of limbs crushing him into the ground. Then humanity appeared in the universe, taking the form of a familiar friend. Light and fire erupted from the instruments in his friend's arms, but the animal lashed out and he was cast to the ground. His friend lay fallen, but the animal did not press its advantage. It turned and staggered away. Black blood ran from its sides and spilled on the earth, leaving a river in its wake.

The creature's body was found in the morning, on the beach beyond the forest. Its fur was soaked wet, and its lungs were half filled with water. According to biologists, its muscle mass was smaller than normal, likely due to malnourishment. A photo was produced, and Dent saw in it the thin, withered limbs of an old man. As the small crowd of visitors around his cot lost interest in this topic and began talking about the state of their supplies and the status of the relief mission, he looked at his friend Thomas, chest and shoulders bandaged, sleeping in the bed next to his. The doctor injected him with something and he drifted to sleep. In his dreams, he saw mice playing in fields of wheat. He dreamed of a newborn baby, cradled in its father's arms. He dreamed of a mother, holding her daughter's hand. He dreamed of himself and Thomas as children, running side by side. He dreamed of a couple walking down a beach with their child, entering the water and swimming away. A young boy, sitting alone, watched them for a time. He seemed to be thinking about something, but when Dent asked, he shook his head and stayed silent. He then followed the family's footprints to the sea, and cast out into the waves. Dent watched the boy swim out toward the horizon until he was gone.

0

Outside the shuttle window, thousands of ships slowly drifted. Some were heading toward space docks, suspended at the end of countless thin tubes emanating from Earth's surface like flower stamens. Others were departing into open space, to destinations near and far. Some people on the ships slept peacefully. Others, like Dent, sat and watched the ever shifting panorama. His shuttle reached the end of its landing track, and the disembarkation tunnel stretched out to meet it. The restraining arms around his chest released him, and he joined the flow of other passengers, floating down the walkway to the ship's exit as one.

Bumped and jostled by people from all directions, he wondered whether the ports on Romi were just as crowded now. Only a week after the relief mission's arrival, the atmospheric catalyst had been released, saturating the planet and creating air perfectly breathable for humans. A terraforming fleet descended on the planet and swiftly set to work reshaping the land and constructing new buildings. Even the cause of the planet's geological instability had apparently been discovered and dealt with, although the explanation was beyond Dent. He was told that the original planetary architects' less heavy-handed approach to terraforming had been widely criticized after what happened on Romi, and their replacements rushed to turn the situation around quickly to restore confidence

and protect the investors' interests. Dent's news feed included an article covering an analysis of the new atmosphere's effect on native life, which concluded vaguely that some species were expected to adapt and others were not. The article ended on the positive note that shipments of crops and wildlife well suited for the planet were already on the way. It stated that in the six months since the quake, the population of Georges Island had passed 2 million. Its many beachfront properties commanded high prices despite their small size, so Charles had told him.

Charles had tried to persuade Dent and Thomas to return, but Thomas had already decided to rejoin the Space Marines as a combat instructor. For his part, Dent had a feeling he would never see the planet again with his own eyes. On their occasional calls, they all agreed to meet again one day. When that would be, Dent didn't know.

On the short flight to Sarah's flat, her daughters alternated between peppering "Uncle Dent" with questions about his time on Romi, and falling suddenly silent as some message or notification flashed by on their retinal displays. Dent remembered he had always been disconcerted whenever he saw the same flash in Thomas's eyes, self-conscious of his working-class wrist computer. The girls' rapid speech and even faster thinking reminded him of Maxine, and he knew that a newer, more powerful version of her neural accelerator hummed discreetly inside their heads. As a dull throb of pain rose in his chest, then his limbs, he felt time scraping away at him. In the last month he spent on Romi, without the help of proper medical facilities, his body had mended its injuries the best way it knew how. The procedures he'd later undergone at the hospital on Luna had mixed results, puzzling his doctors. In the end he'd decided to live with the pain instead of opting for full cybernetic or organic replacements. The doctors and his sister had nodded sympathetically and expressed their understanding at his decision, but Dent wondered if secretly they felt he was foolish, mentally impaired, too traumatized by the incident to think clearly. Maybe they were right. When the girls started asking about his injuries Sarah quickly cut in and changed the subject. He saw them look meaningfully at each other, before launching into another topic as if nothing had happened.

Sarah had booked a private afternoon time slot at one of the complex's pools for the girls, and as they unpacked she hesitantly asked Dent if he would like to come. Dent noticed her glance at his arm, scars faded but still visible. He pretended not to notice and casually told her he'd love to, that swimming would be good for his muscles. In truth he was a little worried that being in the water would bring him back to Romi, his Romi, the place where so many he had known and not known had ceased to exist, forever disappearing beneath the waves of the great sea of existence. All at once his shoulders heaved and he cried freely. His sister sat by his side and hugged him tight.

The pool was nothing like Dent expected. Where he pictured a clean, featureless rectangle, there was instead an undulating beach of fine white sand, sloping gently into a cove of blue water. The occasional shimmer gave notice to the

illusion, created by invisible arrays of holographic projectors, but only slightly. If they were turned off, it would be plain that only the sand and the cleverly designed pool itself were actually there. But looking at the clear summer sky, the palm trees swaying in the distance, and the schools of brightly colored fish circling the waters, Dent's previous worry faded away. He knew that among all these imaginary things, his family was there, and the reality of their presence was enough for him.

Sarah and her daughters splashed into the water first, while Dent stretched his muscles. This time the dull pain felt oddly comforting, like an old friend that troubles you. These muscles bore Dent into the water, and fish scattered around him. The girls knew that the fish would try to keep away, so as not to give away the illusion if one passed through you like a ghost. They swam this way and that, trying to corner one into giving up the game. Tiring of this they dove ahead into the furthest depths of the pool. Sea creatures of all kinds floated around them. The simulation no longer seemed to care about keeping them away, and they passed through clouds of jellyfish, giant sunfish, and swarms of rays, their human bodies melding with fins and scales and the smooth shining flesh of sea creatures. Dent had a vision of the two children growing old under the waves, taking the shape of an octopus or a crab drifting across the ocean, or of an urchin or clam resting motionless in the depths. He saw their lifetimes repeating endlessly into infinity. Then the vision was gone and he saw two humans swimming toward the surface, to their mother and the sun.

Copyright © aric huang 2024