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Lilith

By Ethan Smestad

There is a quiet here, in the crimson haze of the desert. Soon enough it’ll be gone, and Mars will be blue and green.

Lilith is alone: a tiny, white phantom in the red, dusty expanse. She holds her scanner aloft; it tells her that external oxygen levels have risen .06 from yesterday. She wipes condensation from her tinted visor and examines the beads of moisture collected on her glove. This the beginning, and the ending. Lilith looks back towards home.

The tip of the obsidian pyramid at the top of the Ark is always shimmering brightly, concentrating sunlight and channeling energy into the massive, transparent dome beneath it. She can see the jungle canopy’s silhouette, even a few of the toucans and birds of paradise flying across. To Lilith, the Ark looks like a giant breast, ready to feed Mars’ children. It will be the first wonder of this world.

Lilith isn’t really alone, she only wants to pretend for a moment.

Adam is standing a few yards from the re-entry portal. His face is hidden behind the tinted visor of his helmet, but she knows he’s been watching her the whole time. She waves, he waves back. She would like to stay out here longer, but he’s been waiting patiently, and the time has come.

She caresses his helmet as she passes him into the portal, and he follows behind her. As the doors seal behind them, they pull off their helmets and shed their dusty suits. They wear no clothes underneath.

“Still rising?” He asks. Lilith thinks Adam was a grey wolf in another life. His face is sharp, and his body is fit and tender, the way only wild animals are. He wasn’t like this when she met him.

“Yes, but I think we should decrease the atmospheric output.” Lilith shakes out her curly hair, stretches her body and caresses her skin which is always smooth after a trip outside. She glides over to him and nuzzles into his salt and pepper chest hair. “What kind of animal do you think I was in a past life?”

“Who says you were an animal? You could’ve been a vegetable or a mineral.”

She leads him by the hand past the pressure gates into the Garden of the Ark. They are greeted by the sounds of the jungle birds and running water, the smell of the damp mulch and the fresh grass, and the beams of sunlight peeking through the canopy. “Don’t be pedantic. Tell me what animal you think I’d be.”

Their feet collect moist topsoil as they walk. They pass the mango trees and pick one as they go.

“I think you’d be… a panther.”

He nibbles at her ear, which sends her giggling and running down the path, him chasing. When they arrive at the grove, he catches her, wraps her in his arms, and they fall onto the soft bed of grass at the edge of the pond.

His teeth are gnawing at her neck. Lilith wonders if she should make him stop. No, she decides, let him have this. She only tells him to go slow. She wants this time to be the best.

After, they lay next to each other while they eat their mangoes.

“I think that time might’ve done the trick,” he says, “don’t you think?” His grey eyes are sparkling. She’s never seen him smile like this. She kisses him, and they laugh as mango juice spills from his mouth onto her chest. Her green eyes scan his face. She wants to stay like this. Then, she wants many things she’s long-since relinquished.

“Come do rounds with me today,” she says, twirling his hair in her hand.

“What if we get a call?”

Every day, after they’ve had sex, he ends up down in the cold platinum of the communication bay, beneath the deep soil of the garden and the reservoir. He stares at the light blue glare of the console, its scanners oscillating endlessly without disturbance. They both know they won’t get any calls.

“When was the last time you went up to the observation deck?” She asks.

He reflects, shy about his answer: “Not since before everything happened.”

Lilith takes his hands into hers. “I want to show you something up there. Please?” She kisses his hands. “No more protocols today, let’s just live.”

The Ark absorbs and concentrates sunlight from outside and projects it within the dome at the correct angle to simulate the normal cycles on Earth, slowly dilating over decades to adjust to the solar cycle of Mars. It’s a little before midday when Lilith leads Adam into the rainforest to spy on the Bonobos. She points up into the canopy at two apes, one big and one small.

“That’s Trudy and her son Jack,” She whispers to Adam. “Trudy’s parents were among the last twenty-five Bonobos left on Earth. There’s forty two Bonobos in the Ark currently. They’re known for having lots of sex to release tension when there’s a shortage of food. Luckily, the bananas and papayas in this ecosystem are abundant, so that means the population remains steady.” She turns to him and laughs, “Now they’re the first Martian Monkeys.”

Adam is only watching her. “Why are you showing me this?” he says.

“Because it’s life, Adam. On Earth, people took so little interest or care in these animals that they were almost extinct. It hurts me to think of the thousand other species that are gone forever because of us.”

“You’re right,” he sighs absently, “it’s sad.”

She grabs his chin and locks eyes with him. “Not just sad. It’s a crime.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re here, isn’t it?” Adam holds her shoulder, assuming she’s asking him for comfort. Lilith is only asking him to stop staring at her for once, and look around.

By the early afternoon, they’ve arrived on the plains. In the sunlight, it has the color of golden wheat, and the dry air is a relief from the humid jungle. Lilith points to a cloud of dust trailing to the west.

“That’s the gazelle herd,” she tells Adam, “Their job is to eat the vegetation, which keeps the jungle from over-growing and consuming this habitat. To keep the gazelle from overeating the vegetation, there’s a family of cheetahs that live a few miles north. The gazelles are probably running from Delilah right now. She’s the momma cheetah. I watched her give birth to her kittens.”

Adam isn’t watching the gazelle herd; he’s looking over to the south. Lilith touches his shoulder. “You haven’t visited their graves, have you?”

“No,” He says. She takes his hand, tugging just a bit before he gives in, and they walk south.

In front of them are ten mounds, in two rows of five.

“Do you come here often?” He asks.

“Every day.”

“You barely knew any of them.”

“I got to know them in the end.”

Adam laughs to himself. “I can’t even remember which one’s hers.”

Lilith points to one of the mounds. “Evelyn is this one.” He stands in front of her grave, trying to keep his legs from shaking. They stand in silence for a while. Lilith listens to the wind rolling across the plain. Still looming over Evelyn’s grave, Adam confesses:

“I think it made sense when Jill got sick. She was old, you can expect those things. Her husband, Kyle, the physicist-- he was also old, but I think grief was what got him. Then, with everyone else…”

He turns to Lilith. She expects that he’s going to be angry at her now. After all, she’s making him remember everything. She thinks it’s only fair.

“We’ve known each other almost three years now, you know that? The first two years, training, flying here, getting everything running, you might as well have been a fly on the wall. We all talked about you, how you’d never say a word to anyone that wasn’t strictly work. Evelyn and I thought you might’ve been one of those autistic savant scientists.”

He paces, walking through his recollections. “Then we stopped getting messages from Earth. A week later, Jill has cancer, and they all start falling like dominoes. Suddenly, you’re everyone’s bedside nurse.” Adam comes close to Lilith to examine her. “I’ve always felt like you knew something. Did you?”

She looks at him with her green eyes and brings his hand to her cheek. “I knew there was nothing else we could do for them except make sure they didn’t die alone. That’s all you can ever do.”

His eyes tell her he’s not convinced, but what else can he do? Lilith is his Goddess whether either of them likes it or not. She’s trying to be a merciful one.

By sunset, they’re on the observation deck at the top of the pyramid. Lilith is watching the martian mountain range off to the northeast; they’re twice the size of Mount Everest. She waves for Adam to come over, and points to the mountains. “What do you see?”

“Mountains.”

“Right, and at the peaks, what do you see?”

Adam squints. “Looks like,” then he realizes. “Snow.” She directs his eye down the length of the mountain.

“It’s been there for three weeks now. Runoff is starting to form. In a few hundred thousand years, everything between here and there will become a river valley. Soon enough, the Ark may be at the bottom of an ocean.” She runs a hand over the small of his back. “We did it.”

She watches Adam’s eyes scan the red desert outside for the briefest moment, before looking at her, into his own future. He places his hand on her neck.

“It doesn’t matter. None of it matters unless you and I can have children. Tell me you understand that.”

Lilith steps towards the glass: It has a membrane which holds the captured sunlight. She passes her hand over it, and the sunlight swirls like thick plasma against her touch. Turning back to Adam, she takes a breath and begins the ending.

“I had cancer back on Earth. I was given a clean bill of health three months before we were all deployed to Fort Worth for training. I didn’t use any chemo, radiation or surgery. Everyone thinks you need to kill a cancer cell, but all it really is, is a neglected part of your body that needs attention and love.

“Most people don’t really understand what cancer is. A cancer cell is one that loses contact with the rest of the body, so instead of dying like it’s supposed to, it replicates and replicates until it ends up choking out all the other organs—it’s unchecked growth. To cure it, you need to get it to communicate with the rest of the body again. That’s when something amazing happens: The cells allow themselves to die. They remember what they’re a part of, and they bow out in the most graceful way.”

She looks into his eyes while all the pieces start to fall together in his head.

“You might still be wondering what happened on Earth, Adam, but I don’t have to wonder. We became malignant.” Adam’s eyes are wide and somehow sunken in.

“What kind of cancer did you have?” His sharp, handsome face is wrinkling up before her. She continues:

“I didn’t want any of this to happen, Adam, but I’ve learned the lesson: If life’s going to go on, it’s going to go on without us in the picture.”

Adam’s focus is fixed on her lower stomach. “What kind of cancer did you have?” He insists, but he’s already figured it out. No matter how much she explains to him, it will change nothing.

“Listen to me.” She holds his face between her hands. “This doesn’t have to be the end.”

“No, no, no, no.” She breaks his fall and holds him as he crumples. She’s been imagining this for weeks, but she didn’t imagine she’d be crying too.

“Life will still go on, and we can watch it be born again. I won’t hide anything from you ever again, please, let’s just live now. Please.” Lilith tries to wipe away his tears. “We’ve been happy, haven’t we? We can still be happy.”

Adam cries for a long time, until he finally falls asleep in her arms. Soon after, Lilith falls asleep beside him underneath the night sky. Somewhere up there, the Earth watches over them. When she wakes, he’s gone.

For a few days, Adam lingers around, keeping to himself. Lilith doesn’t try to talk to him. A week later, she can’t find him anywhere in the Ark. She continues visiting the bonobos and gazelles and cheetahs. On the seventh day, from up in the observation deck, she spots an oddly-shaped rock formation forty yards out in the desert she’s never seen before.

When she goes to excavate the body buried under the red dirt, she finds him naked, with the back of his head blown out, and one of the rifles meant for population control of the apex predators beside him. She thinks he tried to suffocate, and brought a back-up plan he ended up needing. Inspired, she takes off her helmet for the first time outside, and although she’s dizzy within two minutes, it is still the sweetest air she’s ever breathed. She collects his bones a few weeks later and buries them next to Evelyn.

Lilith will enjoy growing old. Living in the Ark will keep her more fit than any office worker that ever lived on Earth. She can keep up her tasks and adventures to a ripe old age, and enjoy meeting the children and grandchildren and great grandchildren of animals she met when she first arrived. Maybe she’ll be lucky enough to see the day the Ark finally opens, and her brave wards will slither, crawl, hop, dash, and fly their way out into a new world meant only for them. To think of the other things buried deep in the Martian soil, risen like Lazarus, ready to fuse with the aliens from Earth… she hopes to dream of it when she lays down to dream the last dream of human beings. She won’t mind at all when one of Delilah’s great great grandchildren finds her body beneath a mango tree and eats her.

Lilith is never alone.