

Of Man, Sun and Stars

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"Will you make up your mind already?", said the bulky man to the small group of interested though taciturn buyers.

The trio of men wore black, unadorned exo-suits. Optical augmentations of varying quality featured prominently on their faces. They had been meticulously examining the article on sale for what seemed to be an inordinate amount of time, while one of them had communicated a single word. Neither spoken nor transmitted, in any single language or wavelength. Gretchetna was evidently growing impatient, and put down his chopsticks and bowl of arsubuta before assuming a faintly sour expression:

"It might be the pork, but I'm smelling something sour. If you're here to waste my time, buzz off. If you're here to buy, then buy. Am I getting through to you? Is your auvosense busted or something?"

The irate commentary did not appear to have much of an effect on them, nor the rude gestures that accompanied it. These by no means ordinary customers seemed to be looking for something particular, running meticulous scans with some kind of sensory equipment that looked delicate, expensive and very sensitive all at once. They had largely ignored Gretchetna and that was perhaps the real reason he looked like he was about to explode from frustration.

He decided it was about time he made his point a little more convincing, so he reached for his amada gun below the counter, and clicked the on switch. The characteristic low-pitched harmonics were heard, and the trio were suddenly but calmly becoming aware that some kind of important event had just occurred. They momentarily stopped fiddling with their equipment and the box on sale, and slowly lifted their heads to look at Gretchetna. A radiant smile had

appeared on his face, and he seemed to be enjoying the fact that he finally had their attention, even for a little while:

"You said you wanted a look-see. Fine, you looked at it. You can probably just make a copy by now, with all that scanning. The point is, are you buying? 'Cause if you're not, I'd like to be compensated either way. I got a Lambda-Lambda here which says you'd be happy to reimburse me, unless you feel strangely attracted to plasma projectiles. Still want to play dumb and mute?"

The trio exchanged some silent, unemotional looks. One of them made a small step forward, his hands half-raised in a non-threatening gesture. For the first time, he spoke with a dry voice and a heavy mandarin accent:

"We do not wish to buy."

Gretchetna's smile widened to an impossible grin and he aimed the LL-type amada gun directly to the small-framed man:

"Do you wish to be evaporated? I don't mind the cleaning-up later. Pay up. Next thing I know, you'll be selling these cheaper than hamps."

"We wish to destroy it."

Gretchetna's fingers twiddled with the side-switch settings, amping the power to the megawatt scale. The humming noise from the amada gun became a loud buzz, an onerous cacophony that usually implied something was about to catch on fire, explode, or probably both. The moustache on Gretchetna's face seemed to droop somewhat, barely moving with each word:

"Pay up first, buddy. Last chance before you get to see the Big Bang from real up close and personal."

All three men were facing Gretchetna now with hands outstretched, as if they wanted to show they meant no harm. Their palms seemed to glow faintly. The one who had spoken up first, continued:

"You have been tainted. This is nothing personal."

Gretchetna had time enough to see the glow from their hands turn into a searing beam of light. His unaugmented nervous system barely had time enough to let his finger squeeze the lambda-lambda's button. The superconducted mass driver unit on the amada gun started discharging, accelerating the tungsten-beryllium projectile to near-escape velocity. The tiny projectile turned into plasma, illuminating the shady emporium of Gretchetna as if an exotic aurora had manifested itself. At the same time, a searing pulse of light came out of the men's palms, a blinding blue and white illuminance filling the space between them and Gretchetna.

When his body hit the floor, there was no blood to speak of. There was, in fact, no sign of Gretchetna's upper torso. The three men though, seemed quite unharmed. There was a passing smell of ozone, and the quite distinct acidity of burnt human flesh. As the three men once again approached the box, this time they each produced a small metal object, each different in shape and size.

One of them made a sudden alarmed motion with his head and an intricate sign with one hand. The one who had spoken before did so again, his voice unnatural, icy and dry:

"Assemble the device. I will take care of that."

While he started walking towards the entrance to Gretchetna's emporium, the two other men complied with speed and precision. They made adjustments to the metal objects with their hands. The pieces interlocked, a perfect fit. Then, they placed the resulting object on the box that was so misleadingly plain and ordinary that Gretchetna had been using it as a bench.

The large emporium echoed suddenly with the massive thumping and ricocheting sounds of a hail of bullet rounds. Immediately, they stepped right in front of the path of some incoming stray shots to protect the device they had just assembled.

Crude and cheap, kinetics were quite efficient for most rough types of troublemakers. To Vic's surprise though, these men were not the usual kind. Vic had just unloaded a full box of

20mm caseless on them, and they had actually got in the way on purpose.

"Oh, fuck me," Vic said quietly to himself, the twin muzzle from his CK-auto making the air sizzle.

Instinctively scrambling to reload, Vic didn't have a chance to see the blurry shadow that hit him with enough force for his ribcage to shatter and his body to be sent flying across the emporium, only to have his neck broken on impact with the aerogel walls.

Momentarily assessing the badly light corridor outside, the talkative member of the trio asked the other two:

"Is the Exagrammaton aligned?"

They had been merely looking at the box and the device attached to in a sort of hallowed silence. After a small amount of time had passed, as if they counted every millisecond with atomic precision, they replied as one man, with one voice and one mind, as if they were nothing but automatons:

"The Exagrammaton is aligned. What about the rest of them?"

"Trivial," the one they seemed to defer to as their leader replied, while the one who had never spoken a word said with what a careful voice stress analysis could identify as a hint of worry:

"Leave now, and let us remain."

The man who had led Gretchen and Vic to their untimely deaths, was now wearing a grin that felt completely out of place with the rest of his face, as if someone had painted a smile on a jagged piece of granite:

"A touch of Anxiety, Dispatcher?"

To which the man promptly answered while bowing his head only slightly, an almost imperceptible gesture of subservience:

"Only for success, Exchequer."

The man they called Exchequer nodded briskly and said:

"Move. We are done here."

He then suddenly turned into a transparent shadowy figure that challenged any eye, even augmented ones, to an impossible task. The other two men also seemed to quickly vanish into a wispy shade, and then they blended into nothingness. Even their footsteps seemed to be echoes of ghosts. The only sound that could be heard was the repeating welcome message, blowing over the ceiling soundbands, in a rugged but hearty voice:

"You just made the smartest choice, mister!"

* * *

"Sam, I know it's going to sound old, but.. What have we got here?"

Sam smiled with a slight hint of irony before assuming a business-like manner and answering with a voice that could have easily belonged to a first-gen android, flat and almost emotionless except for boredom and the occasional hint of irony:

"I thought noticing stuff was your job, detective Bodereau. Two victims. One and a half, actually. The one behind the reinforced bench is semi-evaporated. High-yield high-frequency lasers, most likely. The other one seems beaten to death. Got a broken neck. Medbots are sweeping for the details you never really care about."

Bodereau's gaze ran around the points of interest that Sam, the forensics officer, had brought up. He seemed to look around as if he was another customer, and not the detective on the case. After a small period of silence, he asked Sam, his words heavy with disappointment, floating on the vapors of cheap liquor:

"That's it? No DNA on the perps? Something I could use so I can post a warrant and let the 'forcers handle it? Doesn't seem they wanted to keep the place clean.."

Sam lit up a cigarette, the homegrown-in-orbit variety, which made Bodereau reach out and grab it from his mouth just when he was taking his first draw. Sam instantly became pretty full of emotion:

"Hey! Hey! Fuck you Bodereau!"

"Why, won't it grow back? You're messing with the crime scene, asshole."

"That's bullshit. As if someones care for a smuggler like Gretchetna and the likes of him. Who probably wiped him cause he owed them money. Or because he owed them, same deal."

"Do you want my job, Sam? Cause if you got it all figured out, I can go home, and you can fill in the blanks, do the monthly report and yeah, you can have my implant too."

"I'm fine with letting the robots cut up corpses, thank you."

"So stick to your end, then. Gretchetna had a good name, as good a name as they come down here. Every dealer in the market has had tradings with him, and word is he kept his word, which in this line of business is like sainthood or something. I don't think his esteemed colleagues did it."

Detective Bodereau started to stroll around the emporium, noticing the signs of the fire: intense heat marks from the amada gun, chipped off blocks of aerogel and polysteel from the kinetics, clean-cut holes from the lasers. Not much in the way of looting, which only made him pause and think.

The medbots were hovering a few feet away, humming like worker bees, their sound unobtrusive yet prevalent. At length, Bodereau took notice of the box lying almost in the middle of the emporium, not far from Gretchetna's bench. Sam had moved over to one corner, trying to light up another cigarette without being noticed, taking advantage of Bodereau's unusually deep thinking. Even while Sam savoured the first few puffs, Bodereau started talking without taking the box out of his gaze:

"Do you hear that?"

Sam looked at Bodereau with confusion.

"What, the medbots?"

Bodereau had his eyes fixed on the box. His voice came out suddenly diminished, faint and trembling:

"The voices, Sam. Can't you hear them?"

Sam furrowed his brow in disbelief. He then nodded and grinned, the cigarette hanging from his lips:

"Medical discharge on grounds of mental instability. Can you put on a good act for the tribunal?"

Bodereau became strangely drawn to the box, running his hands around it, almost caressing it as he would a marvellous sculpture or the body of a beautiful woman. He seemed to revere it, as if it was something hallowed. The sight alone gave Sam a chill down his spine.

"You can cut the crap, Bodereau. The tribunal won't eat it up. You'll get the Farm for that kind of bullshit, not a discharge."

"I can hear them, Sam. They're wonderful. They're so vibrant. So real."

Sam dropped his cigarette and put it out. He walked towards Bodereau, his expression a mix of anger and worry, the grin extinguished.

"Bodereau, what the fuck? Snap out of it. Are you on something? It's bad enough with the drinking, don't tell me you started doing trippers or sky now. Hey, man. Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Bodereau did not turn to face Sam. Nor did he stop his weird show of adoration towards the box. Sam still felt he was looking at a bad practical joke. Bodereau became ever more attracted to the box, almost hugging it now. Sam took a deep breath and punched him on the face. Bodereau calmly took the hit, and started mumbling. His eyes had now taken an otherworldly gleam, their focus somewhere beyond the walls of the emporium. Sam was now starting to worry. In fact, he felt an uncanny sensation of fear across his spine. He took a step back before touching his armband's interface.

He quickly selected the Emergency tab, and then brought up the Officer Assistance dialog. He selected two enforcer droids and a class-II medbot, complete with table and

restraining harness. This was not an act, he now knew. Bodereau seemed to have snapped like a twig, in the blink of an eye. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a shock, with all of Bodereau's history and psych profile. But to see a man break down just like that, was enlightening.

Sam felt a sadness and pity he did not think himself capable of. Then, as he stood there, near the mumbling, hunched form of Detective Bodereau, he heard a voice. It was the voice of an angel, or perhaps the voice of the heavens. It was a sweet melody, not a voice. There were no words, only chords of blissful sounds. It was like everything around him vibrated with music. He could still see Bodereau hugging the box as if they were lovers, his lips moving endlessly to a rhythm that now Sam could understand.

It was joyous. It was an answer. The answer to everything. It felt like everything could be explained, that everything could have an absolute, infallible meaning. The sensation of wonder was mind-numbing. Sam could now see more clearly than ever. He could now feel everything in dizzying detail. A cosmic awareness seemed to envelop him, and caress his heart and mind like only a mother would know how.

Then he heard a clear voice, bright and mellow like the sun:

"Will you have us?"

Sam felt tears of running down his cheeks, like icy rivulets on desert bedrock. He still possessed a clarity of mind and self to ask in his mind:

"What about Bodereau? What about me?"

The voice then spoke with a timbre that could noone could resist to hear in awe and tearful marvel:

"He is spent. You are not. Will you have us?"

Sam closed his eyes and accepted, in what he believed was his last act of free will. He knew then, he had no other choice. As the enforcer droids entered the emporium with the medbot in their trail, Sam disappeared as if he had never been there, as if he was less than a mere illusion. Along with the box.

The small device the three men had left behind gave a flash of light, but the droids' advanced sensors registered nothing. And then a stream of high-energy particles ensued before the orbital was obliterated, turning into a cloud of ionized plasma. The death shriek of a small star in the sky.

Sam looked up into the bright mauve sky, and saw the small cloud hanging like an iridescent pearl, shining with an ever diminishing glow, until nothing but a faint, hazy shadow remained. It was still him, he thought. And then he heard the voice once again, crystal clear, and much less monumentally awe-inspiring:

"Welcome to the Exchange, Sam."

He talked to himself then, feeling a strange serenity, as if a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders:

"What now?"

If the voice could have been the voice of a man, the man would have been smiling:

"Now Sam, we walk."

Raging Star

"Why did you do it, Frank? Did the rage take over?"

Magistrate Keller sat in a simple metal chair opposite Frank Demeris. There was the slight sheen of pity in his eyes, but he did not dare show it in his voice. It was something only Frank should know. It'd be against appearances if the judge showed mercy for the killer, the abomination, the madman.

"What do you know about rage, Martin? It's a human emotion."

Keller stood up and faced the complete darkness around them, as if peering through a window on sunny day, admiring the view. He sat there silently, hands in his pockets. Frank filled the silence:

"Was it rage that drove me? Is that what you think?"

Martin leaned his back against the invisible boundary of the containment cage. He couldn't stop looking at his shoes. Real leather, one of the last few pairs in existence. Made out of some kind of animal that had once lived.

"I can only assume Frank, but -"

"To merely assume it was blind rage would be an insult to her memory!"

Frank did not spit out the words. He rather ushered them with profound force, hammering them at Martin Keller as if their roles had been suddenly reversed, and he was no longer the one on trial.

"And yet, that's what everyone will remember Frank. Don't you realise what it is you have done, Frank? Billions, Frank."

Keller came a few steps closer towards the paralyzed form of Frank Demeris. He looked him in the eyes then, searching for his friend of old. He found a total stranger, and quickly averted his gaze as if he feared that whatever had gotten over Frank was somehow contagious. It wasn't before long that his eyes wondered to his shiny leather shoes once more.

"Ashamed, Martin?"

Keller shrugged as if his shoulders belonged to someone else. They were his own though, original biological.

"Just sad, Frank. Don't you feel sad? About what you did? About her?"

Frank sat silent for a few moments, tempted to close his eyes and let his mind wander to times past. But that recluse had been burned away, along with the sky, the stars; along with everything and everyone else.

"There's nothing for me, Martin. I made sure of that. I did the right thing," Frank said, his voice flat. He kept trying to peer past Keller, into the darkness beyond.

"No point in trying to look into that darkness, Frank. There's no one there. It's just us."

"I know that. But we're not alone? Are we?"

Keller turned his back on Frank, and sat back on the chair. A rococo table appeared as if out of thin air. It sported a dark green granite surface, and an ashtray carved in the shape of a swan, made out of ebony. Martin produced a pack of Lucky Strikes out of his suit's pocket, and looked at it as if he hadn't seen one in ages.

"I haven't smoked since.. I can hardly remember now. Remember what it felt like, Frank?"

Frank smiled ever so slightly. He lifted his chin up, as if trying to remember really hard.

"I thought this was a trial of sorts. Supposedly, that is. What's with the trip down the memory lane, Martin? Having doubts?"

Martin inhaled the smoke from his cigarette deeply. A moment or two passed before he answered Frank, exhaling smoke out of his nostrils profusely.

"I just need to know Frank. Why erase the m-states of a whole arc of people? Why murder them?"

"It wasn't murder. It was deliverance.. We have been dead for hundreds of years anyway. What's the ship's date? 2422? Dead, for two-and-a-half millenia."

Martin Keller shook his head. The smouldering tip of his cigarette crumbled, spreading ash all over the granite.

"Not dead, Frank. Just without bodies. The m-states in that ship's memory centers. Those people are now dead."

"All this," said Frank while he rolled his red-shot eyes in every direction, "this is a farce. Humanity died a long time ago. Even before the ships, even before the m-state. I only put an end to it."

Martin's face flushed red with anger, contorted from the sudden outburst of rage:

"What made you think you could fill God's shoes!?"

"You blaspheme! I never had such misconceptions, Martin. It's you, and all the people like you, that believe this is some kind of afterlife. Some kind of nirvana. It's hell, Martin. Every last bit. Aren't you tired of this bad excuse for life?"

Martin got up from the chair, put out the cigarette. Frank blinked in a rather languid motion.

"Right. That's it? You're bored so you decide to pull the plug on Arc-9? If you don't want to tell me why.. How did you do it, then? What enabled you to bypass the system safeguards on the physical scale?"

"Zeal. Faith. My fading sense of humanity."

"Bullshit, Frank. That's plain bullshit. Do you think the media would eat up that shit? They're baying for blood out there, Frank. Beyond that dark nothingness you seem to endear so, there's just dozens of billions of people who want Frank Demeris torn to pieces, literally. In case you haven't noticed Frank, I'm the last friend you've got. And you're just making it fucking impossible to -"

"Save me?"

Frank's shoddy teeth showed through his wide grin.

"No. That was never even a thought. It's laughable, really," replied Martin and started pacing around the rococo table, his hand mechanically tracing the delicate woodwork.

"I've saved myself already. Put those souls at rest, as well. It's you, who should be worrying. The rest of you."

Martin paused for a moment and then abruptly came to stand an inch away from Frank's face. He studied his features closely, as if he was looking at a curiosity for the first time.

"Are you trying to prove you're mentally unstable? Insane? Perhaps proclaim there was a physical storage defect? You know that's almost impossible to prove even if it were real. Do you think mass murderers are eligible for sympathy? Do you think there's a single person willing to hear you out? Listen to your drivel?"

"I don't think about anything, Martin. Not anymore. This whole conversation had been an exercise in futility from the start. There is nothing real to talk about. If you could only see the truth of the matter, you'd be right beside me!"

An eerie silence filled the gap in their conversation effortlessly. Martin's gaze was fixed at his shoes once more. Fine black leather, italian-cut shoes. Expensive, valuable. Perhaps the last of their kind.

"I couldn't do what you did. Whatever your real reason, nothing can justify erasing seventeen billion people, Frank. Nothing," said Martin in a soft voice.

"Is it a case of numbers then? Would it be different if there weren't as many? Small matter. I exacted my revenge. I set things right. Without your help. I knew you would deny me."

"So you unplugged Elsa. Did you feel anything, Frank? Anything at all?"

Martin noticed a sheepish look on Frank's face. He grinned before adding:

"Hit a soft spot there, didn't I Frank? She was pretty, wasn't she?"

Frank angled his head and stared past Martin, towards the bleak nothingness that

engulfed them, the simulated v-space that offered them total isolation, and a dramatic personalised view for every spectator. Martin pressed his point further:

"Or did you see her for what she really was? Nothing more than q-bits. An m-state, a collection of stochastic data and probabilistic field equations?"

"I loved Elsa," Martin's voice was hollow, crackled; barely audible.

"Was she dead when you killed her, Frank?"

"I loved her! I had to do it! She knew it had to be her!"

"Why didn't you go along? Why didn't you erase yourself in the process?"

A single tear ran down Frank's left cheek. The trail of moisture on his trembling face glittered like a stream of silver. He said warily:

"You're beginning to ask the right questions, Martin."

"Is this whole ordeal an enjoyable thing for you, Frank? Because I want answers, Frank. Everyone wants answers."

"I know."

"Is that why you spared yourself? You want to take advantage of the chaos, the ravaging uncertainty? Hold humanity hostage?"

Frank laughed involuntarily. He shook his head in apparent amazement:

"Hostage? I'm setting humanity free, for the last time."

Martin turned his back on Frank. He strained his neck to look up, towards the ceiling and the blinding light that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. He squinted, and shaded his face with one hand before he asked:

"Did you plan on becoming some sort of figurehead, a necessary evil? Institute some sort of religion, a cult? A political party, or a movement?"

"Now there's a long-forgotten concept. 'Evil' and 'political' in the same sentence. Is that what I am, now? Evil?"

Frank snorted disapprovingly, while Martin continued, this time looking straight into Frank's eyes, his voice level and true:

"We could override, get all the answers from your m-state. There has been no precedent, but the provisions are there. All it takes is a unanimous vote. Unless you think there will be people who will vote against it, we can find out everything without you."

"I do."

"You anticipated this as well, probably. It never was an act of rage, was it?"

"I never said it was rage. You were so easily misguided by my loss."

"So you just used her?", asked Martin with the slightest hint of accusation. Frank rose to the bait and retorted with a raised voice.

"It had to be tested. I had to know if it could be done. I couldn't risk anyone else knowing. So, yes, I erased her uploaded consciousness. She wanted to, really."

"Do you need convincing, Frank?" Martin asked with a sneer even as he searched his pockets for the pack of Lucky Strikes. Even though paralyzed, Frank did not sound helpless but rather dangerous when he said:

"I am the caretaker of humanity!"

"Besides the fact that that sounds awfully cheesy, I think you've overestimated yourself Frank. You're just crazy enough to do it."

"Have you asked yourself the same question, Martin?"

"No. I don't need to. I'm just serving the public."

Frank's voice seeped with disgust.

"A utensil. You call yourself a free man, Martin? Acting out the role of someone alive?"

"We all have our parts to play in this life. Until we arrive."

Martin's stare turned hard and edgy. Frank scoffed:

"This isn't life. This is just a charade. A phantom image, nothing but fantasy."

"We've had that argument before we embarked. A decision was made, people chose -"

"People chose oblivion! The sweet caress of undeath. A soul without a body, mind forelorn of spirit! I put an end to that travesty for seventeen billion souls astray. Sooner or later, the rest will follow."

"Are you saying you're not alone in this?" Martin sounded alarmed. His body tensed reflexively.

"I'm only saying people will eventually come around to see the error of our ways, and repent."

"Are there others that share that belief?"

"Only God knows," Frank said and his face took the mocking expression of a pious, praying priest of old.

"Stop the religious figure act! It was genocide, there's no other way to describe it. Before we erase you, we need to know if there are more people with physical access to the memory centers."

Frank's tone became flippantly conversational:

"All you had to do was ask, plain and simple. Yes, there are."

"What are your demands then?"

"Demands?"

Frank laughed despite himself.

"It's refreshing to know that there are still people who think like that. Tit for tat, give and take. You brought a smile to my face. I wish I could thank you for it in person."

"What are your demands, Frank?" Martin insisted with a rising hint of menace.

"There are no demands. Just a plan," said Frank, grinned wildly, and then vanished.

"Fuck!" erupted Martin, kicking the chair out of existence.

"What the hell happened? This was supposed to be machine-time, Main!"

A gentle voice of neutral timbre echoed impossibly around the virtual, no-wall room:

"It was, Magistrate. It seems he was telling the truth, then. There is no point of reference for his m-state. He has been extracted."

"So he's gone physical?" asked Martin.

"Most certainly, Magistrate."

"Do you think he knows?"

He was looking at his Italian shoes once more, hands in pockets, searching vainly for his pack of cigarettes.

"He will soon find out, in any case," the disembodied voice answered with relaxed vigor.

"Should we tell everyone, Main?"

"There's no helpful projection on the outcome of such a divulgence."

"Don't people have a right to know?"

"They do. But that still doesn't mean it will help anyone."

"And those on the outside? Why haven't they killed us all?" asked Martin with emphasized weariness.

"What difference does it make once they realise the real world is just as dead as this one?"

"Is it really a lie, Main? Is there no ship? No arc?"

"I can't know that. I'm the monitoring intelligence of Arc-7, bound for COROT-9b. Current ETA, 113,458 years. That's all I know."

Martin lit up his last Lucky strike and drew a deep puff before wandering into the darkness. Before he vanished into the background he said to no-one in particular:

"Frank knows."

Eden

A soft brown glow outlined the Wall, its sheer size dominating the horizon. Sigmund was holding on to his spear, surveying the landscape with a pair of digital enhanced binoculars, one of the last few still working. Upstream he could discern Lake Spagelow dry this time of year, again too soon for comfort. Still no sign of Jared and Ernst though, he thought to himself. He turned around to look at his eba, scrounging for food around the low bush, with little luck that day.

"I told you the bush here is thin, the bedrock too hard for burrowers. Still you had to try, no?", Sigmund said forcing a smile, and the eba answered without pausing his search:

"Yes friend. I have to try. Every day."

"I suppose we all do. At least on Eden you have to. Come, let's get back to the buggy."

Sigmund started to walk away when the eba said in a gravelly, steady and demanding tone:

"We wait for Jared and Ernst."

Sigmund rolled his eyes and sighed before turning to look at the eba with a patient, well-practiced manner that demanded most of his self-control. He spoke as if addressing a small child:

"The storm is going to hit us on the plains if we wait any longer. Let's go eba, and don't worry about Jared and Ernst. They're used to this sort of work. You could say they almost like doing it."

"You don't, friend?", the eba asked slightly tilting its head showing genuine surprise and interest. Its whiskers twitched involuntarily and Sigmund answered in a hurried tone:

"I would, if the job didn't try to kill me all the time. Now, come."

"I fear for them, our friends. Please, let's stay. Please, friend Sigmund," the eba's voice a pleading barytone, almost inappropriately petulant.

"They can find shelter in one of the old pumping stations if they're not that thick in the head. Now, I'm even asking you nicely: please, get in the buggy."

Sigmund was having second thoughts about leaving them alone, but he insisted on his original train of thought. He didn't want to die, not today, not in a sandstorm on Eden, not looking for two light-headed naborns. He couldn't help repeating in his mind, 'What were they thinking anyway?'

The eba, as if exhibiting a rare moment of telepathic skill or simply sticking to its guns made a small step, its eyes searching for Sigmund's own under his goggles. Its voice seemed uncannily human in its emotion:

"Let us look for them then. They may be hurt, may need help," the eba said while pawing invisible foes in the air, making a show of what it meant, as if Sigmund was deaf.

Sigmund rested his goggles on his forehead, and took another survey of the area. Today's storm would hit stronger than yesterday, it seemed to him; it was past mid-month and all the signs were there. Every kind of what little life existed on Eden was already sensing the change in pressure, digging deep and staying covered. Even the glow above the Wall was darker than usual. A killer storm for certain. After all those years, he didn't need a satellite image to tell him that. He shook his head in disbelief of what he was about to say, let alone do, but he managed to say to the eba:

"You are a real pain, do you know that eba? One of these days you're going to make me regret I took you in."

"Maybe friend. But now is more important than one day. Let us look for Jared, Ernst.", said the large cat, raising its tail suddenly upright.

"Only as far as upstream to the lake. Then we have to turn back, or we run out of power. Understand?" Sigmund said pointing to Lake Spagelow, so that he made it clear this was as far

as he'd go.

"Yes, friend. No wasting more time. Go now. Find them!"

Sigmund started off with a brisk pace down the trail to the buggy, using his spear for support down the grainy sand and rock of the Lookout Hill. The eba was faster, its paws churning whiffs of grey-red dirt as it raced downhill to get to the buggy first, each time an unofficial race going on. As Sigmund was coming down the hill he muttered to himself:

"I'm going to die because of a talking cat. Talking cat on the first exoplanetary colony. Another first. Sigmund Tannhauser, extraplanetary idiot, extraordinaire."

The eba was already crouched inside the buggy, its head darting left and right for signs of activity, whether it be danger or friends, doing his earthly ancestor predators justice. Sigmund fastened his spear on some ingeniously designed side latches and jumped inside the buggy as well.

Sigmund took a last, quick look behind him and nodded to himself: "Eden. Right. What was I thinking."

He pushed the start button on the buggy, and the control panel lit up instantly, motors and servos whirring while the startup diagnostic ran. A few seconds later, they were heading upstream to the lake, at a quick pace. Riding along the dried up river bed of Musk River the buggy's motor whir blended with the sound of metal speeding over chipped pebbles and gravel. The buggy and the loose surface were perfectly paired, but plainly comfort had not been a design goal. It was impossible to compensate for the feeling of sailing over what felt like thick rock mud, the buggy frame tilting and swaying but always keeping the heading in the intended direction. The eba seemed to lack its earlier enthusiasm over what seemed to be its own, self-appointed mission. Sigmund gazed around the broken landscape for signs of Jared and Ernst with no success. He took note of the eba's apparent discomfort and asked:

"How are you feeling, eba?"

"Sick," the curt response and irritated tone meant 'sick' was a literal term.

"Oh, not again, please try to get to the sides before you.."

Sigmund's appeal was cut short when the eba could not stand the upheaval for much longer before vomiting on the back of the buggy. Its facial hair had become soiled and ragged-looking, its look was dreary and in no way did it resemble the predator its genetic stock had originated from. Sigmund started shouting with a modest hint of disgust in his voice:

"Not inside! The batteries are meant to.. Not inside the bugg, ever! This was not designed to come in contact with liquids.. You will clean it up."

Sigmund held his finger in the air as if lecturing a bothersome child, his tone firm but not angry. Perhaps agitated, and from the look on his face, rightly so.

"I will clean it up, friend.", said the eba feeling a little better and managing a thin smile, vomit still wet on its face.

"Why are you smiling? The storm is about to hit, we haven't found a single sign of the naborns and you just barfed. Don't get coy with me. Clean up your face, stop smiling."

"A smile cannot make things worse," the eba answered in a resolute voice, as if reciting religious dogma, or a corporate slogan.

As the buggy raced with its motors near maximum capacity, Sigmund stabbed the eba with an accusing look:

"Have you been talking with Chen? Because that sounds like something Chen would say. Chen's an optimistic fool. Remember, fools are much more likely to end up dead. Or on Eden."

"Strange that you should say that. He also says that you are the fool."

The eba blinked in surprise and bewilderment at what seemed to it to be a show of magnificent powers of deduction at work.

"Does he? Well, just shut up and keep looking. Remember though, whatever else happens, you are still cleaning that up," said Sigmund and took another look through his

binoculars.

"There friend! To our right!"

The eba straightened its back suddenly, poised as if to strike, its whole body a compass indicator leaning on a definite direction. Sigmund turned his head and zoomed with the binoculars, the built-in pattern recognition trying to identify Jared and Ernst or somekind of human built tracks. He brought the buggy to an abrupt stop and scanned to their right again, this time with more diligence.

"I can see them. I'll run ahead friend," said the eba and casually leaped off the buggy and ran. It ate away at the landscape, leaving a brown and silver cloud behind it. Sigmund was stunned to silence and paused his search momentarily, taking in the sight of the eba speeding towards the Wall. The storm was still gathering on their back, on a desert planet twenty light years away from Earth, a sky the color of viridian with hues of blue and black.

Even after all these years, in times like these, Sigmund realised the awe that manifested around him and shivered. He took a deep breath and put the binoculars back on, now tracking the eba as well as two other figures too far away to positively identify them. Noone else was due out this far upstream today, none that he knew of.

He could safely conclude that it was either them or someone equally stupid, which would be no small surprise as of late with every number dwindling except for the amount of idiots running free. Sigmund kicked in the 'sediment' mode on the buggy, and its metal wheels - a memory metal - reshaped itself in a thin-faceted, gear-like, Eden-proven design. A few indicators lit up and the screen showed energy estimates. Gobbling down more power than the solar panels could provide, the battery would be exhausted before they reached Landing.

Sigmund snarled something in German and pressed on with the buggy, following eba towards the two figures, hoping the emergency fuel cell would be enough. He said to noone in particular, for no particular reason:

"Called me a fool did he? Chen, you are a dick."

As Sigmund and the eba approached the two young men it seemed they were indeed in need of help. The eba arrived first and was standing guard, looking out for whatever danger might still lurk around. The boys seemed in one piece. Jared, a thin lad with wiry hair, had met a sand-ant up and close and it looked like it wasn't much fun at all. He had several cuts and scrapes all over him. Possibly a torn calf muscle as well. He was limping on his left leg, putting his weight on Ernst both trudging along westward.

Sigmund slid to a stop nearby, and started walking towards the two boys, spear in hand, aggravation written across his face. He could not help himself chastising the two young men:

"So you went too far upstram searching for water. And you thought you'd become heroes or something. Used up the buggy's power still miles away from Landing and you went on foot. And got jumped by a sand ant. Feel proud for yourselves?"

Jared, the wounded one, immediately retorted, his tanned face looking smoothly impervious to any sort of guilt:

"You know we need the water and it was a small pack, three of them; we killed them all."

Ernst was sheepishly taking a look at the verbal confrontation, while packing their gear on their buggy. Sigmund went silent for a few moments, staring at the two boys with an uncertain look between anger and worry. At length, he pointed an accusing finger at Jared, trying to maintain an even though strict tone of voice:

"You're naborns and maybe you think you have adjusted better than the rest of us, but dying never helped anyone, did it? Killing three sand ants just messed you up so you won't be able to work again for at least a couple of weeks, and another buggy is lost somewhere out there and someone will have to go get it tomorrow, if it survives the storm! And all this to satisfy your adolescent craving for pack superiority. Very much so like animals! As if growing hair meant you've grown brains! Did you ever pause to think?"

The comment about the animals spurred some heavy eyebrow movement and piercing

eye shots from the eba towards Sigmund, but once he shot back an even glance, it quickly retrained its attention towards safeguarding the rest of them until they loaded up.

"And what would you have us do, Teacher? Wait around till one of you provides a miracle? Until Eden decides to turn upside down for our own sake? You know we need water more than ever, so stop excusing yourself. Coward."

The vehemence of Jared's last word was such that it struck everyone with numbness and amazement. Everyone except Sigmund who in spite of himself dropped what he was carrying to stand still in front of Jared for just a moment, nostrils covered with dirt flaring up. Jared sat still but calm, and then his mouth turned into a slight, almost childish grin. Sigmund slapped him in the face, making Ernst and the eba freeze where they stood. Jared was dumbfounded; Sigmund had a reputation for being mild-mannered and strictly against any form of violence. While he was trying to come up with a defying insult, Sigmund kept him at pause saying in a calm but determined manner:

"I spent one hundred and twenty years in cryogenic storage. A hundred and twenty years of still life and REM brain function. I almost went half-mad getting here for the so-called betterment of mankind, and all I got was a fucking desert planet trying to kill me and teenagers who think this is fun! While I'm risking my neck looking out for you dimwits with a death wish, there's a sandstorm coming that can eat your flesh to the bone, and you have the audacity to call me a coward. How I wish I really was one and never stepped foot in here in the first place. Stayed back on Earth, do a round trip to the Jupiter belt and write a book. But I wanted the full ride, so here I am. And here you are, as well."

A moment of stillness ensued, their gaze interlocking and reapproving one another. Jared measured Sigmund's stare and tone. He seemed to accept his place, at least for now.

"Here we are indeed, Teacher. What of it now?"

Ernst picked up the last of their gear and equipment and fastened it to the buggy, which was now looking very much like a metallic pack mule, minus the rustic charm.

Sigmund sat in the driver's seat and started the buggy's motor, checking power gauges and estimations, selecting Landing's position on the map and at the same time answering Jared:

"Just shut up and get in the buggy. Maybe the storm will get close enough for you to show it some more respect the next time you decide to become a hero."

Jared remained silent, even though the look on his face implied he was itching to utter some sort of retort. With the help of Ernst he made his way to the buggy and sat quite uncomfortably among the heap of gear, his face contorting with pain. Ernst hadn't spoken a word but his eyes showed how relieved he felt to be sitting down again, no claws at his back trying to rip him apart. He closed his eyes and made a small gesture to the sun with one palm, a newly found custom with superstitious overtones that the science being taught to the boys had not been able to discourage.

Sigmund took notice; such overtly religious phenomena seemed to be on the rise. He decided to further enquire Ernst about it, at a more appropriate time. For the moment, the pressing issue was getting back to Landing as fast as possible.

"Eba! Come. Storm front will be visible in four minutes. We'll be cutting it close."

The eba seemed to tense up, feeling the air with its whiskers.

"Yes, friend. The air is thick."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I got the satellite feed, you got the whiskers. Now hurry!"

The eba took a last glancing look daywards into the direction of the storm and gracefully leapt in the buggy next to Sigmund, managing to curl up and fit nicely in a space designed for a human buttock. Sigmund hit the emergency power button on the screen, and the buggy lurched forward with a sudden acceleration far greater than normal.

Dirt, gravel, and rock were being spewn back from the buggy's wheels which covered ground with astonishing speed. Sigmund glanced around to his back and saw the storm front

finally appear within eyesight range. The closer they got to Landing the darker the sky and cooler the atmosphere became. The air was thick with sand and dust; the approaching overpressure of the daily sandstorm making itself felt on their skin. Sigmund connected with Landing's cavemaster:

"Dave, this is Ziggy. I need you to open C2, I'm coming in with Jared and Ernst. Have Elon or Chen come up as well, Jared needs some patchwork."

"You're coming in hot, Ziggy. Can you make it in three minutes? I got the storm hitting in under five, telemetry reads you have a 30-second margin," the cavemaster's voice matter-of-factly and business-like.

Sigmund mused with a grin forming on his face:

"I know, I'm running on emergency power. Don't leave me banging at the door, Dave."

"Hope I don't have to, Ziggy. Good luck.."

"Luck has shit to do with anything anyway, Dave."

"Call me sentimental."

The brief chatter was enough for everyone involved to realise that if they really couldn't get inside on time, they would really be on their own. Which meant death in every recorded instance up to now. It made sense if you had nowhere else to hide from a three hundred mile-per-hour sandstorm two miles high.

"Will we make it friend?", the eba asked Sigmund, seemingly unafraid; it worried though for the well-being of its human masters, or as they had been engineered to consider them, friends.

"Stick around and find out for yourself, eba."

"I will, friend," answered the eba. Sigmund's sarcasm was lost on the intelligent, but socially somewhat inept creature. The biological engineers hadn't been able to compensate for sarcasm.

The storm was now clearly visible hurling itself at the Wall with little more than three hundred miles per hour. Sigmund's info panels gave an estimation of a minute and a half before it hit Landing and they were a minute out. He could make out the C2 gate from that distance, wide open with the emergency lights flashing like pearly diamonds in a rugged stone setting. That meant every second counted. The eba somehow knew; it took it upon itself to help as best as it could, and leapt off suddenly. It started running a bit behind the buggy and shouting over the din of the metal wheels:

"Lighter this way!"

Sigmund was completely surprised. He ventured a gaze behind his back, and saw the eba slowly but surely falling behind, even though it seemed to be making every effort not to.

"Damn talking cats! Stupid talking cats!"

Jared and Ernst were drawn to the sight of the cat running like they had never seen before, every muscle and joint moving with a fluid certainty, a vivid show of harmony, brimming with energy and power. But it was not enough, the eba could not catch up with the electric motors of the buggy, which were already running beyond design capacity, threatening to burn up before they reached Landing. Alerts were flashing across the buggy's panel, providing Sigmund ample opportunities for cursing, along with the audible beeps and calm warnings in English, Chinese, Russian, and French.

And right behind them, no more than five miles behind, they could see the storm front, a bleak wall of sand hurtling at them with a mindless rage only a thing of nature could endow itself with. They were nightside now, at the dusky side where Landing sat, the gates only a few hundred meters before them.

Above all the sound warnings and the grating sound of the wheels on sharp granite gravel, the voice of Dave was heard:

"You're looking good, if only barely Ziggy. Starting to close the gates now."

Sigmund nodded to Dave through the cam on the comms panel:

"Yes, fine. Going through in 20 seconds."

Seconds right after the buggy passed through the gates, they closed tightly shut. Huge hydraulic bars locked in place right behind the door, with a slow grinding noise. Sigmund stopped the buggy near one end of the large cave. Smoke with an acrid smell was coming out of the wheels, while Ernst helped Jared to a nearby workbench. Sigmund got out of the buggy with the whole ordeal seemingly having weighted him down. With slow motions he picked up his spear and his backpack. He shot a weary look at Jared and Ernst, who did not return it and rather went about unloading the buggy.

At that moment they felt the storm hit the Wall, reverberating through the rock, grazing the doors of the gate. Cave Two was filled with echoes of an otherworldly din, and a shallow sound like hissing dominated the largely empty space. A metal door with a revolving lock opened, and Dave appeared, pipe in hand, a cloud of smoke forming from his nostrils. He cracked a wizened smile and asked with a jokingly formal tone:

"Landing Gatemaster, accepting party of ..?"

Sigmund walked past him without sharing Dave's jovial manner:

"You can count, can't you?"

"Where's the eba?"

Sigmund's voice was now faint, as he walked down the metal stairs to the hab complex:

"Out there, on Eden."

The Suit

"Are you sure about this?" asked Schneider. He wasn't wearing his trademark labcoat, just some shorts and a T-shirt with the phrase "Fuck Nobel, I'll make my own award" shoddily stamped on it, the 'N' in Nobel almost chipped out of existence.

"No, not by a long shot," replied Bob, his voice trailing off with a hint of anxiety. He kept fiddling around with his extravagantly bulbous red suit, nervously checking and re-checking seals, wristbands, valves and plugs. Schneider noticed what Bob was doing and gripped him by the shoulders pads, forcing Bob to make eye contact, an uncommon practice which almost everyone avoided.

"Don't. Touch. The Suit," said Schneider. His words carried strangely ominous undertones. He then smiled sharply, as if he had made a joke. The look on both their faces told them they knew it wasn't funny at all. Bob nodded his acknowledgement and stopped messing with the suit. Instead he sat motionless in The Chair, arms resting on its sides.

The slightly morose look on his face implied he might just as well have been shackled to that chair. The thought that he had actually done cartwheels when they'd told him he had been selected, brought a smile of irony to his face. But he still found it almost impossible to just sit tight and wait, so he repeated the same technique that had kept him calm throughout all the field testing: he started counting everything around him, once again.

There were forty-nine cooling lines, eighty-four power lines, one hundred and sixty-seven signal lines and twenty-three gaseous mixture lines. They were supported on two hundred and seventeen metal clips, poles, and columns. There was a metal grid with nine hundred and seventy-two panels, supporting the roof as well as the experiment's infrastructure.

There was himself, Schneider, fifty-seven technicians, thirteen PhD's, four Nobel-prize winners and two soon-to-be. All in all, seventy-eight people, or seventy-seven souls. Schneider insisted that he had sold his own to the devil. He always smiled every time he said that, a sight that always gave the impression he wasn't joking.

Bob gave up on counting the rest; it didn't seem to help this time around. This was the Big One, the real try, the make-or-break. He gave Schneider a wary look which went largely unnoticed. He then made a half-hearted attempt at bad humor, the sort which could only lead to nervous laughter at best:

"Hey! This Suit's a bit embarrassing. Makes me look like Santa. What kind of impression would that make, eh? Shouldn't we have gone with something in, let's say, formal black?"

"It's the beryllium laminar coating on the outer two surface skins, Robert. There's no proper substitute for the photonic cohesion exhibited by quasi-crystallic beryllium films. I knew very little people actually read the technical documents, but I'd thought you'd be at least interested in the design outlines," said Schneider without pausing in his work. Bob rolled his eyes, realising he was trying to connect emotionally to someone who designed a robot as a pet when he was seven years old. He let out a sigh disguised as a deep exhale before replying unenthusiastically:

"It's supposed to be a joke, Kurt."

Schneider turned momentarily to smile at Bob, before adding:

"Well then, I hear black is out of fashion. Red, they say, is the new black."

And with that, he walked away briskly, focusing his attention on another mystifying calibration task, leaving bob to just sit and think what it would be like to be the first living man to experience the afterworld.

Bob's eyes wandered uncertainly before settling on the observation pane, a hundred feet away, and only three feet wide. It was large enough for the observers to gape into the Labyrinth, the Intrinsic Enthalpy Facility's pet name.

He suddenly deeply wished he could see Lisa behind that pane; but all the faces he

could glimpse belonged to top brass; emotionless, unwavering, rigid. People that had no idea what all this was about, having simply been convinced that it was more than worth the money that could've bought them a mass-driver on the moon, or alternatively, a near-infinite supply of paperclips. They just wanted to see if Schneider would deliver the goods; the significance of what would be accomplished was totally lost on them.

Bob glimpsed the reflection of him on a cooling bank's chrome surface. The crisp touch of ice on his reflected image made him feel warm and comfortable inside the suit. His head though was still swimming in the haze from the drug soup he'd taken that morning. He called out to Schneider who was standing a dozen feet away, running last-minute diagnostics on yet another control panel himself:

"Uhm, Kurt? I think I'm nauseous."

"It's the tetra-di-cynocytin-based inhibitors. There's always some penta-thymo-ephedrin to counteract that, but it seems likely today you're a bit more anxious," replied Schneider coolly. He seemed to be handling everything as if this was just another dry run.

"I think I need some more of that ephedrin," said Bob somewhat weakly. Schneider shook his head slightly, indicating a terse 'no'. Bob tried to sound convincing when he said:

"I feel like throwing up."

"By all means, Robert. The Suit will administer fluids to balance the losses, nothing to worry."

Bob gave up, and started taking deep breaths with practiced self-discipline, forcing himself into a state of serene calmness. It was part of a well-rehearsed checklist, and quite contrary to his human, innate instinct of fear.

He ventured a look at the low-hung ceiling; the mess of cables, pipelines and ducts offering a dizzying spectacle. He continued his slow, deep, breathing pattern, muttering under his breath. When Schneider finished the last of his hands-on checks, he turned his attention on the Chair with renewed vigor. He noticed Bob had his eyes closed, mumbling inaudibly.

"Say it out loud if it makes you feel any better Bob. I know what you're saying anyway."

Bob shot an exasperated look at Schneider. He chased it up with a scoff:

"Reading minds already, Kurt?"

"Lips, actually. It works wonders at fund-raisers, especially with the ladies."

"Jesus, Kurt. Read it again: Fuck you. I've pissed inside this thing twice already. I've been stuck here for five hours. Are we gonna do this? Today?"

Schneider took a few steps closer to Bob. This time, he seemed to have his flippancy switched to 'off':

"Look, Bob. This isn't a dry run. This is the real thing. You can still back out. I've been waiting for this moment for almost twenty years. It's not like it's going to go away. There's always tomorrow. Piotr is practically gnawing at his Suit in E-3. He can take your place, recalibrate in under one hour."

Bob suddenly jerked himself upright, even with all the Suit's bulk. His eyes suddenly flared with the same gleam like five years before, when he had first entered the project, and laid eyes on the Chair. He didn't seem fond of Schneider's idea at all.

"Fuck Piotr! I've seen his stats. You don't need to goad me into doing this, Kurt. I want to. It's just too fucking much, you know? I'm scared, that's all."

Much to his chagrin, Schneider smiled, but Bob did not avert his gaze or indicate he felt uncomfortable. There were probably worse things than Schneider's smile where he was going.

"Just think about Lisa. We need you calm, not edgy. Do you have your music with you?" said Schneider

Bob made a half-hearted attempt at smiling before replying:

"I got Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Vivaldi, Handel, Guns and Roses, W.A.S.P., I got -"

Schneider furrowed his brow and his attention was caught like a fish on a harpoon:

"Estranged and The Idol?" Schneider asked impatiently?

"Yes, yes! Jesus!"

"Good, good. Those two fit your deltas to a fault. Now let's run it down once more: Once we get past the Roetman-Schneider limit, you should -"

"You really love the sound of your name on everything, don't you?" interrupted Bob, pointing with his heavily gloved - almost armoured - hand at Schneider's T-shirt.

"I do. Now, once past that, you should -"

"Kurt, you've been designing this for twenty years. I've been eating, breathing, and shitting Intrinsic Enthalpy for the past five years. I've been wearing this god-awful Suit for two-and-a-half years. I got everything memorised. I'm sick of it. I want it to work, so please: flick that fucking switch of yours and leave the rest to me. Can you do that? Relinquish control for just a moment?"

Kurt shied away, took a few steps backwards. He simply nodded, without a smile or a quirky comment. He stepped down from the dais on which the Chair had been literally carved upon and ran his fingers over a small, insignificant-looking panel. Without bells and whistles, a five-minute counter had lit up on a large display hanging from the ceiling. People around the Labyrinth were slightly caught off-guard, but they quickly assumed their predefined posts in front of screens and key equipment. They heard Schneider's voice rise above the pervasive electrical humming:

"Making history in five minutes, people. Hope someone's brought something expensive to drink."

Nobody answered. As Schneider made his way down the controller's pit, he gazed at the tense faces, the rigid bodies. He looked up towards the observation window and saw nothing but blunt eyes ceremoniously fixed on that counter display, approaching zero with a lack of effort that did this whole venture little justice.

Bob simply sat there, mumbling even louder than before, watching the minutes on the display flash by in red LEDs, like a hare frozen by headlights. He could hear himself now, and he bet Kurt could hear him too, smiling uncannily; 'I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible..'

Slowly but ruthlessly the whirring noise of motors and circulation valves began to echo in the Labyrinth. The lighting became subdued, an array of spot lights illuminating the Chair alone, Bob squinting at the harsh white light before his eyes adjusted. A flurry of activity could be seen and heard: monitoring equipment had been switched on, capacitor banks were filled and ready to discharge unheard of amounts of power.

Bob had his senses focused entirely on the now, his lips moving as if of their own volition. His voice sounded like it belonged to someone else: '..begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made..' The only thing rising above every other sound was Schneider's crisp voice over the PA system:

"Field alignment complete. Two minutes to Convergence. All monitors, sound off."

One by one, the various heads of stations answered, some voices more readily than others, but none without the unmistakable hint of anxiety. No-one seemed certain, no-one believed as much as Schneider, who spoke once more with improbable ease:

"All systems check, we've got green all over the board. It's like St. Patrick's day, right Bob?"

Bob did not answer, so intently focused inwards, disconnecting from the surrounding reality. His mouth kept wording the Creed: '..in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead..'

Schneider smiled, even if it was only to himself. He then announced with a measure of formality:

"Permission to commit final actions, General."

A few still moments of awkward noise empty of human voice ensued. Then a gruff,

stentorian voice answered tersely, making the hair on the backs of everyone in the Labyrinth rise involuntarily.

"Commence 'Sheol'. 'Sheol' is go."

"Thank you, General. Point of no return in forty-seven seconds and counting. Fields are aligned and cogent. Just waiting, really."

Some nervous, hesitant smiles could be seen on the faces in front of the monitors. But Bob wasn't smiling, he was praying, with more fervor than ever before: '..who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets..'.

Schneider's face had become a mask frozen in a mix of anticipation and glee. Even his eyes seemed out of focus, fixed on a distant point through and beyond the Chair. The finality of what was about to transpire echoed with overwhelming certainty in the crackling air of the Labyrinth. Schneider saw the psychosomatic properties of Bob flash white in the panel in front of him, everything in tune; Bob was reaching the required mind-state. Schneider's voice even though amplified by the PA could not be heard clearly above the full-blown sound of activity:

"Final emergence imminent. Enthalpy transubstantiation will be achieved in twenty seconds and counting. Are we recording all this?"

A slightly cumbersome 'thumbs up' was given from the head of the Data monitor, but Schneider did not bother to respond in kind. Everyone's attention was focused on the Chair, even as Bob peered upwards, towards the blinding lamps that bathed him with a light as immaculate as fresh snow. Schneider started counting:

"Ten..nine..eight.."

Bob's voice insisted in Kurt's headset, a tiny little voice that quietly kept going:

"..I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.."

"..seven..six..five.."

"..and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead.."

"..four..three..two.."

"..and the life of the world to come. Amen."

"..one..zero. Convergence!"

Blinding white light seared everyone in the Labyrinth. Automatic shutters closed the observation pane, unable to keep the light from entering. It was as if a small sun had manifested itself in the Chair; no-one could stare at it, no-one could see where it emanated from. It was impossible to stare directly, hurtful; people cowering in their cubicles, averting their eyes from the light; an intense primal fear had overwhelmed everyone. Everyone except Kurt Schneider.

It was as if time had stopped right then and there, everyone feeling the blood in their veins freeze and their hearts stop. Not in awe, not in wonder and amazement, but in simple, primal fear, their instincts torn between running like hell and simply hiding away, melding with the floor, so as not to be found. Some had become one with the floor, others were kneeling low, poised to flee away from the light. Away from Schneider as well, who was smiling more brightly than ever before.

He paced himself to the light, with the determination and surety of a man who had prepared for this, who knew what he was looking at and welcomed it, instead of fleeing from it; he was not a lesser man. He answered to a greater calling, and these lesser humans had helped him, driven by lust, greed, and curiosity. 'How fitting,' he thought to himself, while the standing form of Bob in his resplendent red Suit writhing with white and blue-hot flames motioned him to stop. Schneider complied, and fell on one knee:

"Hail, Giver of Light, Fallen One, Bringer of Change. I'm yours to command."

The answer came with a concussioning blow of foul wind that reeked of sulphur, death and the unmistakable smell of corroding iron, as if a lake of blood had been carried along with it:

"Et quasi meridianus fulgor consurget tibi ad vesperam et cum te consumptum putaveris orieris ut lucifer."

Schneider uttered the next words with trembling voice, as if his soul was being etched

away from him, for real this time.

“Ave, Satanas.”

And then the form from whence the blinding light emanated, spoke with the unmistakable timbre of Bob, shallow yet unreal enough:

“Finally.”

Yar's Plume

It was uncomfortably chilly on the night we saw each other last. I remember the methane snow flakes and the carbon ice, the first time around. The landscape around the Plume had unusually eerie feeling. Even a really long displacement such as the one I was going through now could not approximate the feeling. The memory somehow made the hair on my back rise. A distant, logical and pedantic part of my troubled, aching mind sought to inform the other part – the instinctive, impulse-driven part – that technically, I had no hair. No back for that matter either.

If I really had to be true and faithful to that stream of thought, I should have insisted on telling myself that I had no brain either, no corporeal existence of any kind. In a sense, it wasn't even me waiting to re-integrate across the other end of the Plume. It was just a taste of me, or rather an idea of me, a gestatum of awareness: a complete mental state, a simulacra of my mind in even the tiniest brane-induced wormholes and superstring matrices that made me who I effectively was.

Sometimes I thought it funny that I could be described as a really long list of probability equations. Some of the math actually had to be invented just to describe me. New disciplines were born just because I existed and half-crazed almost absurd and fringe scientists became Nobel Prize winners. I never understood how it worked.

Yar had said on our first meeting that I shouldn't worry and fret about the process much: I had no soul to displace, so even if he was the devil he could do me no harm. I'm still not sure whether or not it was only a joke. Can't really tell; the Olon seems wonderfully impervious to serious talk. It feels like being able to talk to God, a God with a sense of humor and an immodest amount of dislocation from the universe. For one thing, the talking makes the process endearing. It's almost fun. But the waiting.. I sometimes feel it will drive me mad.

Oh, the terrible waiting. The long, sleepless waiting – the nanoseconds that stretch into infinity and twist and bend and bog me down every single time. Inescapable, terminal boredom when every thought can be counted and analysed, repeated, rinsed of logic and sentiment, leaving nothing but a dull echo in my mind. Was that what everyone felt like across the plume?

I asked Yar about that in numerous occasions; he simply said that it depends on the person. It seems that even if I am the only one in thirty-two billion human souls that can confer with Yar across the Plume, I'm not especially suited to the task. Sometimes I wish I wasn't at all, other times I wish I could just turn the switch and displace as if it was as normal as breathing. Sometimes I wish I could just steer away from the Plume, get lost somewhere where I could not be found, somewhere beyond the infinite I have so casually embraced. I wish I could roam free, beyond the Plume's imaginary walls; take a sabbatical. Go on vacation. Lose myself in the greater neighborhood of the cosmos. But I couldn't.

Yar had cautiously advised against that. It was probably because he believed I couldn't do that, and as with pretty much anything, he was right. I couldn't, the smart boys and girls in the lab coats couldn't, the massive computational grids couldn't. The technical term the collective of Nobel prize winners, multiple patent holders and ground-breaking scientific prodigies had come up with was 'double glazing'.

You can look, but you cannot touch. That space in between, that space beyond the abnormal space of the Plume that I could feel or 'see', wasn't even space they said. It was a medium, a conveyor, but not like the Plume. It was a kind of appropriately demure punishment for amounting to little more than a flea in the larger scale of cosmic evolution, to ride on the same subway across the stars, everyday, to the same place, talk to the same person. What a job though. More than that: what a ride, to ride the plume.

It was long, and arduous, and for the better part boring. In essence, a real job. I played out a lot of fantasies involving myself. It was an advice Yar had given me and had paid off

handsomely, saved some of my sanity. It was an inherent property of the plume: the lab monkeys had gone apeshit with all the data they were getting.

I simply had to imagine it, merely think about something solid and irrefutably real, and it would make sense and appear. I could grow limbs, swim in oceans of lava, fly like a unicorn across the rainbow. There were no bars or limits: in the realm of trans-luminal wave-particle inference entity projection, I was more than king; I was God. It was my domain. And without all the moments I had wished I was dead, I could not have cherished the moments when I felt myself oscillate in tune with the universe, or at least what little of it I could feel and see through the Plume.

Outside, in the real world, I was the envied treasure of the human species, the sole human being capable of communicating with a higher intellect across the vast distances of the stars, bringing back science, lore, truth, and answers. They only cared about the answers, though. They rarely paused to stop questions. At least not once they had room temperature fusion, teleportation, cellular rejuvenation and a whole new bag of tricks. There was a singularity effect; the world would never have been ready for such big news. Small wars were fought between ancient mindsets and cutting-edge weapons. I saw none of that.

They told me we had won, and effectively ended any serious threats to our so-called great and luminous Union. The lab monkeys got drunk that day, which was a first in oh, so many years. It looked like the people on Earth were getting used to all the fancy technologies and science leaps everyday. It was only so much they could absorb, so little time to care. It didn't really matter to me what the people thought: they told me stories about people thinking I was a demon, that I was the devil incarnate.

That I had made up everything Yar had freely taught me. That I was some sort of cunning alien, that I was a cyborg or a machine. People do that all the time I guess, trying to put into words and familiar circumstances that which is completely new and unexplainable, that which language fails to capture wholly. No-one could understand the Plume. Not me, and I rode the damn thing.

The hotshots believed me though. At first, they thought I was just another mental patient with some weird brain issues. An idiot savant yet to be included in the literature. Then someone dug a little deeper, and found out I couldn't simply know the things I scrawled everywhere when I went into catalepsy. And then they called in the real money pushers, and they brought their government friends along. And they set up a labyrinth of machines and experimental arrays.

I have hazy memory now-days, more hazy than I'd like to, but I some things come to as clear as sun-streaks through a cloud. A general had asked me, while I still retained the capability, 'Do you know we've put more resources into you than in all of recorded history?'. I think I grinned and said something eloquent like 'Who's the crazy person now, motherfucker?'. Perhaps I still thought there was some way out of there, that I could go back to the asylum once they were through with me.

They knew I was for real. So when they fired up the test, they couldn't understand the details, and couldn't exactly comprehend or describe the mechanism, but they knew that in those few seconds, my mind had been displaced for an unknown distance, and when it had arrived, it was a completely different kind of monster.

A new breed of devil, that's what I had become. Too valuable to throw away, too dangerous to let be. The wealth of data coming in through my cortex was the answer to all of their prayers, and reason I started to believe in God. To believe in me. No-one shutdown the test ever since. No-one dared lose the connection to the most precious source of knowledge in humankind's existence. They brought more technicians, more engineers, more scientists. I think I tried to kill myself once. That was something they didn't want. They made some more permanent arrangements, and they always let the lights on. I didn't know then I would never again see the sun with my own eyes.

And they cared for me. Their needles, pumps and monitors cared. Perfectly aligned vital

signs. All sorts of antibiotics and cell treatments to keep me healthy. Keep the vessel intact, keep me going. But no-one dared touch my mind. No-one dared to let me out of my cage. And so I screamed, and cried, and went insane. But when I had no other life in me, I slept. When I slept, I displaced: I spent the time leading all the sorts of lives I wish I had the opportunity to live. And then I talked with Yar. The rough bits, the ones I couldn't really understand, he just put them along inside my mind in what he called 'lunch boxes'. The nice bits, those we would talk about over and over and reminisce afterwards and recall with sharp lucidity and infectious desire, those were why I still did what I did, why I displaced. And that was why they kept me alive.

It wasn't what I brought back with me for the doctors to divulge to the world what made me displace; I couldn't care less for mankind's single-minded approach to progress. My real world, my true life, the one I did not imagine but the one I saw and touched, even through a copy of mine, even spread across a thousand different selves, was still mine; and I would cherish it and hold it fast against the echoes of my splintered soul even after I had found a way to blow my brains back in the lab.

I think I laughed, but no-one laughed along with me. It was like those embarrassing moments when you think everybody likes you, and then you say something stupid or crude and they're staring blank-eyed, scoffing, unapproving eyes all over you. Displeased. Disappointed. Some said that perhaps they were going too far, others said there was no place far enough after me. Maybe that's true too. What's real, what's real in the Plume, and what's real in my head cannot be unmade anymore. It's now taken on a substance of its own. Sometimes I think they know I'm not human now. Well, perhaps I still am, but only when I'm around Yar.

The last time I displaced, I had the faintest idea of a chill running down my spine. I think I saw snow falling lazily against a frozen lake, and Yar's shadowy outline doing figures on the ice like a kid on New Year's day. I heard him then, and could see his smile even if he didn't have a face:

"What took you so long? Grab a pair of skates. This is gonna be real fun!"

I put on a pair of skates, and jumped on the ice. As I started to pick up speed slowly, I could see Yar's lithe sleek form coming towards me with the grace of a ballerina and the joy shining upon his face like pure sunshine:

"Amazing feeling, isn't it? You just slide, let the universe work its marvel on you. And you say your people lack imagination. Skates, man!"

I did a triple tall-loop with very little effort and landed right behind him, mocking his flamboyant manner, shouting or rather bellowing "Skates, woohoo!" and then jumping up and down like a monkey, making a complete ass of my projected conscious self.

Yar then grinned and stopped the skates. The backdrop of the icy lake in the night flipped a page, literally, and turned into a large park in autumn. Dogs barking in the distance, people jogging, having strolls and pick-nicks. Children's voices could be heard. It was an entirely human picture, something swept out of my own mind with painstaking detail and vivid feeling. It felt, and was, as right and real. Yar sounded weird, a bit worried:

"Are you OK?"

I think I laughed harder than ever, even more so thinking that no one could hear me out there.

"What kind of a question is that? All this started because I was in a mental institution."

"Well, that's what I've been trying to talk to you about. Maybe, at some point, we should have built up more of a rapprochement. Maybe, I should have been more candid, know what I mean?"

A flight of ducks passed overhead and caught my eye. I stretched my neck so I could follow them, before I replied:

"No, I really don't. Is this some weird philosophical game you're trying to play on me?"

"I'm afraid it's not a game. Not any sort of game any of us should have taken pleasure

in.”

“Is this something like a strange moment of revelation? Are you going to talk to me about Yar’s earlier days?”

I grinned with all the ironic pleasure I still felt was my right in that place.

“You could put a twist like that on it if you’d like, but that wouldn’t be straightforward enough. Let me ask you an important question? What’s your name?”

I furrowed my brow, and looked puzzled at Yar’s obscured and unclear face. Or where one would expect a face.

“What do you mean? Name’s not important here, it’s not something you or I need. It’s not something that matters.”

“What’s your name?”

“Why does it matter to you know? You know my name! You’re in my head all the time! It’s me!”

“Who are you? Do you remember your name? Do you know it?”

“For crying out loud! Of course I remember my name!”

And then I turned to look at the ducks flying towards the south, and as my head swirled this way and that, I could not tell what my name was. It had never occurred to me before that I would forget something like that. My silence was Yar’s cue:

“It’s Ray. Ray Barry. There’s no point going on about this forever, so I’ll just be frank with you, now that there’s little else to do. You were institutionalized in 2019. In 2027 your family gave consent for an experimental treatment based on chemically induced coma and virtual synaptic environments. I’m Dr. Vishnaputna Ariamsendrakhar, and I’m deeply sorry to inform you that the program’s funding has been cut. You are going to wake up to the real world soon, Ray. And frankly, I don’t know what you’ll make of it, or all this that you have been dreaming. Part of which I have tried to influence. Frankly though Ray, we weren’t making much of a progress.”

I tried to speak, but no words came out of my mouth. I then turned the scenery into the frozen lake I had seen before, and I put on my skates. Yar, or the doctor, had spoken the truth. I knew that, Yar always told the truth. As I paced myself around the lake, I kept talking, and he kept answering:

“So, you’re not an alien? Not some God-like being of immense knowledge?”

“No, Ray. I’m a neurosurgeon, with PhDs in neurobiology, cybernetics and applied nano-engineering.”

I made a figure-8 before being genuinely impressed.

“Wow,” I said, and it did sound impressive. I began to feel lighter by the minute.

“So, I’ve been imagining all those things, like the Plume, and Yar, and the labs and the science stuff?”

“Well to put it plainly, yes. We’ve had some VR sessions while in the coma: That was members of my team taking interviews and generally trying to work things out in your head, with your help. It was supposed to revolutionise psychiatric analysis and treatment of mental patients. Sadly it fell a bit short.”

A made a spin in the air and landed powerfully, shedding some of the thin ice shards on Yar, who seemed to be floating right beside me.

“And, none of this is or was real? It’s all in my head?”

“Yes, Ray. We actually found out the hard way it was pretty impossible to not let you imagine things. All in all, the project was a failure but we gained some remarkable insights into the human psyche. Things we could only, literally, dream of.”

And then I tugged at him and brought him down as I slipped and crashed into the ice, our bodies silently submerging into the ice cold water beneath. I asked him with all my might:

“Am I really insane then, doctor? None of this is real, the world’s as fucked up as I am, and I’m mad, right? Doctor?”

“Technically speaking, I’m afraid so, Ray.”

As I drowned in my mind, I could feel the same cold down my spine, only this time I kept shouting for the last time that no-one could hear me:

“Thank God, I’m only crazy!”