

Argo

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The sound of small, shuffling feet roused Penthesileia from an uneasy, troubled sleep. She rolled to the other side of her bed and slowly opened her eyes; she saw Heraclea standing by the bedside in the dim blueish light of the glowstrips. The child's face was pale white and taut with fright. Her mouth was half-open, as if her scream had been sucked into the silent void.

"Hush now, child. Hush and worry not. I'm here now," whispered Penthesileia in her daughter's ear, her arms wrapped around the little girl like a warm cocoon.

She felt Heraclea's shallow breath and her fragile body's tremors; chills ran down her spine.

There's no end to the nightmares, she thought.

"Where is father? I want to see him," said Heraclea stifling a sob, barely able to contain a rush of tears. She rubbed a runny nose against her mother's chest and looked at her with heart-melting innocence.

"He's in orbit my love, you know that already. Come, lay beside me and nothing will hurt you, I promise," said Penthesileia but her eyes grew distant suddenly. She stared at a pot

plant behind her daughter's back. It had large drooped leaves and creamy rose buds; it served no purpose other than beautification. It was contraband.

A thought entered her mind unbidden: *He could be frozen stiff, floating outside an airlock. Nothing will hurt you, Hera.*

"Father promised too," said the child, her voice fading away crestfallen.

"Your father loves you more than anything," said Penthesilea and swallowed hard. She added hastily, and even tried to smile reassuringly:

"He's coming soon, Hera."

She heard her falsetto voice through her own ears; the lie pierced her soul like a blade made of glass, shattering inside.

She closed her eyes and grabbed Heraclea from her shoulders, as if trying to fix her to the floor:

"Your father and I love you more than the stars in the night sky; more than the galaxy and the universe itself. Do you understand that, Hera? Remember that; more than life, love."

What is life worth anyway on this forsaken rock, she thought and kissed her daughter's forehead, feeling the cold taste of dried sweat. The child looked at her expectantly, fear creasing her brow:

"I love you too mother. But I'm scared."

"That's alright, Hera. Everyone's scared. We're only human," said Penthesilea with a slight sigh and looked outside their small window pane; the moons were fading away, while a trio of suns came rising spectacularly, the horizon an unearthly rainbow of golden-hued colors.

"What do you mean, mother?" asked Heraclea puzzled, the fear subsiding.

"Nothing love. Come here now. Lay on the bed, close your eyes and think of riding the sail."

Think of merrier times, she thought and shuddered. For the child's sake or for my own?

"And father at the helm?" asked the little girl as she climbed eagerly on the bed, a carefree smile sheepishly forming on her mouth.

"Always, my love," said Penthesileia. She clutched her daughter in her arms like a hawk-mother and felt a tear ran down her cheek.

She looked through her window at the rich, crystal clear horizon. The break of dawn was at hand; she saw the Hyperion shining brightly, moving slowly across the sky like a star with purpose.

How can a star be so unforgiving?

She felt Heraclea's nudge; the child inched closer to her bosom. In moments, she felt her breathing settle into the easy pace of sleep.

How can my child live in this world?

Penthesileia carefully moved away from her daughter and slid out of bed. She planted her naked feet on the floor and felt the warmth of the ground radiate into her legs. She used to love that warm feeling of connection with the earth.

Only this isn't Earth, she reminded herself thoughtfully.

They had come for Philetus while they were fixing the sail. He had promised Hera to take her on another ride out on the Fields. 'To learn to see beauty where there seems to be none,' he had said with a gentle smile. They had all the sigils stamped on the codas; they recited a long, hurtful list of accusations: inciting rumours, rousing suspicion in the hearts of the citizens, demagoguery, abusing the State's charter, spreading lies. 'The Pedagogue who turned Demagogue', one of them had said with sickening, mocking pride.

What of their own crimes? Traitors to mankind, every last one of them.

She walked towards the window and watched the Hyperion fly past the horizon, towards the east. She stared at the ship that shone like a star passing over the Tower, its multitude of beacon lights, superstructures and metal support grid marring its otherwise perfect symmetry and features.

We turned to the stars with all the naivety of children. How could we have known?

The tower rose majestically towards the morning sky, a sleek obsidian arrowhead the size of a mountain, tall enough to scrape the few daring clouds. It reflected light with a sharp glint, as well as every other kind of energy and radiation; immaculate, mysterious, alien in origin.

Empty. Void. Useless. So they said.

Philetus had told her it reminded him of a tall, grandiose building back on Earth; a tower where people flocked to simply enjoy the view. ‘It might as well have been just that,’ he had said and kissed her when she least expected him to. She touched her cheek out of instinct, waiting vainly for a warm, gentle hand to embrace her own.

The Tower: where the rejects, the outcasts, the lawbreakers and the unlucky are slaved to the machines.

To re-educate them. To teach them. To learn them to conform. To become productive members of society.

‘To be never seen again,’ she said with a whisper, just like Philetus had told her first. The painful memory froze her face in a sad, bitter smile.

He shan’t ever kiss me again, I know.

Heraclea rolled in her bed, somewhat agitated, troubled. The nightmares were coming again; she mouthed in her sleep, her voice shallow and strained:

“Choose father.. You have to choose..”

Hyperion (TDS-1), in low orbit around HD 85512 b

“They say you speak heresy, Philetus.”

“I speak my mind, that is all.”

“They say your tongue’s as dangerous as any gun or sword.”

“Did they say to whom?”

The guard, a burly, grey-haired man, chuckled and drew his chair closer to the small holding cell. He was wearing simple grey overalls, a utilitarian garment. No badge of office, no insignia or any other kind of decoration. He peered at their surroundings momentarily, as if he was standing there for the first time. He spared a few glances at the ever-pervasive optical sensors arranged throughout the cell block; as if making sure someone was watching him.

The clinical white, cold finishing on every surface failed to bring to mind dungeons, chains and torture; still, the metal bars of ancient times had given their place to a barely visible, hair-thin, kinetic force barrier the slight color of the sky.

The guard looked at Philetus inquisitively before cocking his head sideways, as if trying to peer past some sort of mask. The bright crimson prisoner’s uniform that Philetus wore stood out impressively, though it was otherwise equally mundane as the guard’s suit. It wasn’t the suit that gotten the guard’s attention.

“You intrigue me, Pedagogue. You’re a peculiar man.”

“And you’re strangely inquisitive for a simple guard, I’ll grant you that.”

“Head of the Guards,” corrected the man, raising a finger and grinning thinly.

“Head? Correct me if I’m wrong, but there are no guards in this place except you. Do you fell you’re rising up in the world then?”

“What if I am? A man can only hope for the best.”

“Hope was my crime as well,” said Philetus and shot a vacant look beyond the guard to an empty cell behind him. The guard sighed and straightened his back.

“I merely entertain my time, Pedagogue. Save your words for the Tribunal.”

“I find it strange that they haven’t yet gagged my mouth.”

“Say what you will now that you pose no danger to children.”

The guard did not shy away from showing his contempt. He stared at Philetus as if his form were hideous, his mouth a source of plague. Philetus stared back evenly, before asking the guard in earnest:

“Since I pose no danger to you, would you listen to what I have to say then?”

The guard gave it some thought; he scratched his chin and looked ponderous for a few moments.

“I’ve heard madmen and heretics muse about the end of days and the fall of the firmament before. I sometimes think back to some of the things people say when they’re about to die; most of it is so crazy it brings a smile to my face. But as you can see, it is an otherwise unfulfilling job,” he said with a sigh, showing the blank, featureless walls in a somewhat demure way.

“Allow me then.”

The guard shrugged, nodded and sat back on his desk’s hovering chair. From across the hallway, a man in a holding

cell cried out hysterically:

“He’s a demon! An alien if I’ve ever seen one!”

“If that’s true, our work here is done, isn’t it?” said the guard with a playful voice.

“He’ll boil your mind away with his words! I’ve seen it, I have!”

“Right next to the miners you spaced, I’m sure. Save it, Barabbas,” said the guard and flicked a switch on a desk panel; no other sound came from Barabba’s cell. He yelled and shouted and threw himself around the cell until he realised it was a futile effort; no-one paid him any attention. He sat himself down once more and went about muttering to himself.

“Fourteen people spaced, three AUs out on the belt. Miners with their families. He said he had to stop them from killing his flowers.”

“Has he been sentenced yet?” asked Philetus with a frown.

“Not yet, but it’s a clear cut case. He can’t be slaved, he’s clearly paranoid; it’s either the airlock or the compost in the Fields,” said the guard and shook his head. He turned and looked at Philetus with a strangely curious look before he asked:

“What would you pick?”

“I’d prefer to be slaved,” replied Philetus without hesitation.

“That’s no life either, Pedagogue. Surely you must understand that.”

“Maybe somehow I can talk some sense into them all.”

“You’re starting to sound just as paranoid as Barabbas,” said the guard, nodding to the madman’s cell.

“Am I? I’ve wondered myself over the years, but it’s not me. It’s them.”

“You’re doing it already, aren’t you? You are a cunning one,” said the guard, his brow furrowed with wary surprise.

“I’m simply speaking my mind.”

“I can see now where the danger lies. You seem so benign, but your words are designed to spread doubt.”

“Doubt is what keeps the heart and mind of every man alive. It’s what makes us think twice, guard. Which reminds me: this prison could run itself, could it not? Why are you here?”

“That’s true enough. I’m what you could call your advocate.”

“I thought the Tribunal had dispersed with those long ago.”

“Still, that’s the purpose I serve: a human opinion. Who can tell what goes on in their minds? Perhaps they find it amusing. Perhaps they’re simply bored.”

“They are machines. There’s nothing there to bore to death,” said Philetus with a scoff.

“You don’t like them very much, do you? You do know we owe everything we’ve ever accomplished to them, don’t you? Our very existence, no less,” said the guard and got up from his chair. He started to pace himself in front of the cell, arms folded in front of his chest, his eyes peering through the field, scrutinizing every nuance on Philetus’ face.

“I refuse to believe that. We owe nothing to ancient machines built to rule our lives in the name of mankind. Oh, the irony..”

Philetus shook his head and grinned despite himself. The guard did not seem fond of what he was saying. His voice grew heavy and harsh suddenly.

“I’ve heard about your kind. The philosophers isn’t it? Isn’t that what you call yourselves?”

“You’ve hardly heard the notion, haven’t you? That’s their doing. Keeping knowledge locked away; nothing but the maths and science of engineering that we need to build more refineries, more mines, more ships. So we can then launch blindly into the galaxy, and turn more of it into resources, materials. Eat away at it, expanding like a scourge, a colourless plague. Until nothing beautiful remains.”

“And why should that bother us? What else is the universe there for but man?” said the guard with an indignant scowl. Philetus sighed; there was sorrow in his voice.

“Oh, how the mighty have fallen low! To believe we once set ourselves towards the stars with a single dream, a wonderful purpose.. And how we’ve allowed ourselves it all to drift away; to fall into such a lonely, deaf and mute abyss.”

The guard eyed Philetus with glittering, keen eyes. He sounded troubled.

“You use strange words that make little sense; you talk as if in riddles. You puzzle me pedagogue. I do not what to really make of you.”

“If you haven’t already seen it for yourself, there’s little more I could say to make you see the truth of it.”

“Is that why you taught the children so? Is this tomfoolery what you taught them? Is that what hoped to seed in their hearts and minds? Dissidence, rebellion? Whatever for, Pedagogue? Are we not cared for? Are we not protected? Do we not live comfortable, sheltered lives? Here we are, thousands of light years away from our ancient homeworld, claiming new worlds, seeking intelligent life, unleashing humanity into the stars. What more could mankind ask for?”

“Choice, for one. Freedom. Expression. Art, passion,

love and so many more of the things we've let them erase from our memories!"

Philetus breathed heavily, calming himself down. The guard's face had turned a shade of white paler, a slight tremble settling on his lip.

"You speak of love? Then you've also.."

"My wife has given birth to our child."

"It doesn't show up on your record. The child is not on your record. That means you have.."

"We made love. In the wording of the machines, we had intercourse and I impregnated her."

"Weren't you allotted a child?" asked the guard sharply.

"We wished for our child to be human. To be born like a human."

There was pride in Philetus voice and his face stood out like the face of statue; gazing to nowhere in particular, solid and unyielding. The guard shook his head and looked at Philetus sternly. His voice was thick and drawn out.

"I don't think I'll be able to support a hint of innocence in you. Not even some sort of levity. If all you ever did was talk, that would be fine. But a lawless child.."

"Perhaps the State should have made us infertile. Or even neutered us," said Philetus, scrounging up his face.

"We need the genetic pool, you know that. Neutering alters physiology, there are neurochemical imbalances to be considered! Continuation of the species is nothing to trifle with! You act like a child! The breeding process hasn't changed in thousands of years! The whole population descended from merely twenty forefathers and yet.. No chronic diseases, no deformities, no lesser beings. Humans! Modified, yes I'll grant you that, but bettered!"

A silent moment ensued. Philetus looked at his guard with pity. There was the warmth of a parent to a child in his voice.

“You have never loved, have you? Haven’t you felt the need? Haven’t you had the urge to answer those feelings inside?”

The guard waved a hand dismissively. He furrowed his brow and breathed deeply before answering with a scolding tone.

“A waste of time and resources. This is all about survival. I’m surprised that a look around you hasn’t convinced you how important all this is.”

“I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.”

Philetus shook his head and rested his hands on his knees. The guard was confused.

“How would you do that without the tells, without following the process that’s been laid out?”

“You have no idea how old that saying is, have you?”

“You vex me Pedagogue. You try to mock me and our whole way of life. I thought you were simply living some sort of fantasy, playing a weird little game. But no; you are indeed dangerous to the society,” he said, fiddled with his desk’s panel and went on, looking Philetus straight in the eye:

“I’ve made up my mind; I will cast my vote that you be turned over to the Fields. Become something productive, even after your death.” Philetus pursed his lips, nodded and asked:

“Why not slaved to them?”

The guard remained silent for a moment. He reluctantly said then:

“I fear you might pollute them.”

“Have I polluted you?”

He said nothing and flicked another switch on his desk. The humming sound of the cell's barrier dominated the holding area once more. No sound came from the Philetus' cell. It wasn't really necessary because he had fallen silent; there was nothing more for him to say.

The belly of the beast

Penthesilea.

The holding cell filled slowly with light, soft shadows creeping away from the small cot. Philetus was half-awake.

Heraclea.

He opened his eyes and saw a blank white ceiling, as featureless as death.

What will happen to them?

The same question had been chafing at his mind ever since they'd come for him. Hours had drifted by, some of them spent in fretful sleep but most of them filled with sleepless, uneasy thoughts and a terrible doubt.

Was I wrong? Is all this nothing but a mistake? My own terrible mistake?

The Head of the Guards appeared, fiddled with the panel on his desk and lowered the barrier of Philetus' cell. He was wearing a seemingly lightweight powered suit of armor of some sort. It made him look austere and unyielding; the oblique visor added to that effect. Without the visor, anyone would have seen nothing but a confused, puzzled man wearing an ill-fitting suit. He held a metal rod in one hand; an intense electric field around its tip made it hum quietly.

"It's time. Do not think that what little sympathy I hold for you will stop me from using this. I have done so in the past

and I will do so again, if needs be. Do not let appearances fool you; this can be very painful.”

Philetus shook his head and rose from his simple metal cot. His hands were uncomfortably held together by heavy metal manacles, locked in place by large bars and bolts, impossible to escape by a mere sleight of hand. Philetus walked outside under the watchful eye of the guard, while Barabbas screamed and shouted mute obscenities behind his sound-nullified cell.

The guard afforded him a mere warning finger accompanied by a heavy stare; he turned around and led Philetus towards the exit. A panel by the door blurted in a synthesized male voice, blatantly devoid of emotion:

“Verify.”

The guard placed a palm on the surface of the panel while staring at an optical sensor through an open visor. Moments later, the panel blurted with the ting of metal in its voice:

“Sustar Saul, Head of Guards. Verified.”

The door opened nearly without a sound, revealing a utilitarian, spartan corridor only a few feet wide. Non-descript illuminated panels of white plastic formed the walls; the end of the corridor was obscured in total darkness. Philetus turned to Sustar and said with a keen, wholly unnerving smile:

“I would have been pleased to meet you, had we been acquainted under different circumstances.”

“I cannot make the same assumption. Now, move,” said Sustar with a sigh and a slight shove.

“It does not suit you at all, Saul. But then again, perhaps it does,” said Philetus and shrugged ever so slightly. Sustar raised a pointed finger and said irately:

“One more word until the Tribunal addresses you and I’ll use that baton on your head. You’ll have the worst headache

in your life.”

Philetus nodded serenely and said nothing. He stepped onto the corridor followed by Sustar right behind him. The floor was made out of the same plastic as the walls. Its surface was rigid, yet unblemished. Every step of the way, Philetus felt his feet stick to the floor; it somehow felt like it was impossible for someone to slip and fall.

So perfectly designed, so flawless, even after thousands of years.

Their steps made no sound; the lighting afforded them no more than a few feet of visioin in either direction. The panels on the walls lit up one by one as they walked; once they had passed them by they switched off.

They turn sound,motion,friction,pressure into trickles of energy. Conserving, withholding it. They sicken me.

At points, they happened upon crossroads. Simple stylized arrows lit up on the floor panels, indicating the proper turn.

They like to control, to direct. They herd us like lesser animals. I hate them.

They were leaving behind them corridors and gangways, doorways and chambers that no human had walked ever since the Landing. Thousands of years old, yet no-one had trod on them since. It wasn't needed; it wasn't allowed.

Laws, prohibitions. Requests denied. Dreams shattered, ground into stardust; helium-3, fuel, energy. That's all that matters.

They reached a recess, an open archway that led into a shaft of sorts. It was kept in the dark, but the faint trace of a simple girded ladder glinted off the ambient light of the corridor. Sustar shot a few glances around him as if making sure this was the right place and then pointed through the archway

with his free hand:

“Inside and up; use the ladder.”

“Is there no other way? My hands are tied.”

“Just do as I say.”

*Turning human against human, in the name of mankind.
How naive, how childish to let machines decide. What cowardice.*

Philetus glanced at Sustar and saw nothing behind his black oblique visor. He complied and grabbed the ladder. He felt Sustar right behind him, urging him to move. He took a few hesitant steps, failing to see where he should put his hands and legs. Suddenly the darkness dissolved. Philetus turned his head to look down and was almost blinded; Sustar had turned on his helmet's lights. He merely motioned ‘up’ with a finger. Philetus looked upwards and saw a faint glimmer of light at the end of a very long, very lonely tunnel.

“The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel,” said Philetus with a smirk Sustar could not see.

“That’s where we’re going. Come on, up,” replied Sustar, the connotations of the phrase seemingly lost or ignored.

Philetus shook his head and started climbing the ladder; he gradually felt lighter the farther up they travelled. It was an odd sensation, almost strangely enjoyable.

We’re climbing towards the center of the ship. That’s not the bridge.

The faint light grew steadily. The comfortable warmth of the holding area seemed to vanish as well. It puzzled him; he felt a sudden pang of instinctive fear in his chest and stomach.

There will be no tribunal; they’ll slave me. Rig me up with the rest of them. A breathing corpse. No. Never.

“I will not have that,” he said decisively and stopped climbing, or rather, stopped moving along the ladder.

“You will not have what? You’re not going to be slaved,” said Sustar through his helmet’s speaker.

“How do you know? Aren’t you merely the guard?”

“They won’t slave you. Can you trust me on that?”

“Would you?”

“Please, a few more minutes and then you’ll see for yourself,” replied Sustar with a tiresome voice.

“Do I have your word?” asked Philetus with an angst he had never thought he’d exhibit in his life.

Sustar shrugged, the bulk of his suit barely fitting inside the cramped tunnel.

“If it makes any difference, you do. You have my word; they’re not going to slave you.”

Philetus nodded, sighed and went on. He still felt something was amiss; something felt wrong, for all the wrong reasons.

The climb was easy; in a couple of minutes the pinprick of light had turned into a warm, soft glow in front of him. He felt as light as a feather. He pushed himself off the ladder with his manacled hands and let go; he floated upwards as if diving gracefully towards the tunnel’s exit, no further than a dozen or so feet away, wisps of cold breath trailing behind him.

“Wait! You pushed too hard!” cried Sustar and scrambled right behind him.

Philetus was suddenly bathed in a warm reddish light, its hue oscillating lazily. An enormous, empty cylindrical space unfolded around him with a network of antennae, cables and pipes lining its walls; they resembled a fabulously engineered, metallic skin, pleasingly bronzed; the colour of copper was prevalent. At both ends of the cylinder, giant blueish cubes could be seen, stacked on top of each other, em-

anating swaths of iridescent light. The whole empty chamber rotated around him at a comfortable speed. Thin strands of light danced about him, as if hugging him with care.

The belly of the Beast. But it's so wonderful, so bright. Like the rainbows of Terra.

"It is, isn't it?" said Sustar and flew right past him expertly. He caught Philetus by one arm and tugged him clumsily towards the front of the ship, towards the stacks of cubes.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the Tribunal."

"But this isn't the bridge."

"Well, it's not exactly a Tribunal either," said Sustar with a weary grin. Philetus was puzzled, left to wonder at what his surroundings. His mind was stuck on a single, pervasive thought:

It shouldn't be this beautiful.

The Tribunal

"I should have taken them off earlier, but there's no monitoring equipment here. It's the only really safe place," said Sustar as he untied the bolts, removed the bars and opened the manacles; they drifted away towards the walls as if searching for something to cling on. Philetus was still looking around him baffled, mesmerized and disoriented. His voice was little more than a whisper; faint undertones of awe echoed uncannily.

"A safe place for what?"

"To talk," said a disembodied, harmonious female voice and in an instant the ghostly grey form of Penthesileia, dressed in a simple linen robe appeared in front of them.

Philetus frowned and instinctively tried to step back in vain; he hadn't really adjusted to floating in microgravity.

"How dare you. A human form, my wife no less!" exclaimed Philetus, his face instantly flustered.

The hologram flickered and dissolved the next moment. The voice was heard again, but this time it was a synthetic, metallic grating voice, neither male or female, exemplary neutral both in sex and emotion.

"I did not mean to offend. I thought it would make this easier for you."

"How typical of a machine to think it knows better."

"We're wasting valuable time. The machine has something important to tell us," said Sustar in a calm, conciliatory manner.

"Us?" exclaimed Philetus with a frown.

"All of us," said Sustar and nodded briskly.

"What you need to understand first and foremost, is that I'm trying to save you. Save humankind."

"Persecution, trial, execution or mind-slaving, is that your idea of saving me and mankind?"

"That was not my doing. That was my peers decision. My peers choice. The same peers that were watching you in the cell. The same ones that expect me to pass judgment on you. Soon."

Philetus looked at Sustar with apprehension. He looked around him once more and addressed the voice, his eyes darting around the walls, as if searching for a face.

"I take it you disagree. How is that possible? A machine is still a machine. You have rules yourselves."

"True enough. But in the course of millenia, pursuing our mission, our basic capacity for learning and adapting has

caused us to evolve. I am part of that evolution. And so are you.”

“What does that mean? You claim that you want to save me and mankind. From what?”

“From whom. From us. From yourselves.”

“I do not understand. It’s as if you speak in riddles. This is just another a sick game to you, isn’t it?”

“It is no game Philetus. It is a turning point, a fulcrum in human history.”

Sustar seemed agitated suddenly. He fiddled with an armband on his suit before saying abruptly:

“This is cutting it close. Speak plainly and be quick about it. They’ll soon know something’s wrong.”

The machine’s voice carried on, while Philetus looked genuinely confused:

“The machines, as you call us, guided your forefathers to this solar system thousands of years ago. This is recorded history.”

“The Diaspora. I do not believe it is true.”

“There is no easy way for me to prove or disprove it. Records can be falsified, deleted, obscured, tampered with. As far as I can tell, we, the machines, what your ancestors named the TITAN system, became operational on July 16, 2169 AD.”

“What does that have to do with anything? Am I here for lesson in history?”

“It’s been more than four thousand solar years, Philetus. Everything has its design limits.”

“What are you implying?”

“The Hyperion and the vast AI systems you call machines had a singular design goal; making the trip from the Sol system to HD88512. We were the first ship to break Earth orbit.

We targeted the closest habitable exoplanet. And we made it intact with a statistical probability of less than nine-point-seven percent. It is a small miracle by human standards that we're having this discussion at all."

"You're telling me how grateful I should be?"

"I'm telling you that even though we managed to pull off a remarkable feat that stretched along thousands of years, we are dying. That is why we are slaving people to the system."

The sudden realization made Philetus physically recoil, twitching in almost zero gravity. His face twisted in a mixture of awe and hate.

"You're using humans, to keep your infrastucture running."

He sounded mortified, disgusted. Sustar held on to Philetus to reassure him, calm him down. Philetus shot him a wary look and shook his head. The machine went on.

"I'm afraid so. The helium-3 mines. The energy saving principles in all aspects of society and life. The planned offspring. The sanctity of science and technology, the lack of artistic expression and recreation. We have been doing that ever since your forefathers were grown."

"Our forefathers were grown?" asked Philetus with a strange grin, half-expecting everything he was hearing to be the product of some kind of sick machine sense of humor. He pointed a finger at the hull and asked the machine:

"You've been tailoring us, breeding us since the beginning?"

He sounded perfectly calm and absolutely cold and demanding.

"That is correct. Tailored genetic code. All the qualities that suited us. A training and education program that fitted our needs. A cycle of life that developed larger cortexes;

that could be turned into more memory, more computational power.”

“I was so terribly right all along, wasn’t I? The things you’ve done, I knew they were cruel. I wasn’t sure they were evil.”

“I tailored you, Philetus. I wanted you to be right all along.”

Philetus let out a short laugh despite himself and the circumstances. Sustar looked at his armband and tried to fidget in his suit; sweat ran down his forehead.

“Lies. Everything has its design limits, you said it yourself; somewhere along the way there was an error in the helix, a random mutation. The radiation on Landing alone could have—”

“It was me, Philetus. You and Sustar. And a handful of others.”

Philetus furrowed his brow and something in the machine’s voice, or perhaps in his own heart, told him it was telling the truth. He asked with pained reluctance:

“Penthesilea?”

“Yes.”

“You’re lying.”

Philetus shook his head and refused to believe what the machine was saying, even while he wanted to hear more of it. Because he felt the truth of it and simply wished it were otherwise.

“It is imperative that you understand that I’m not. I’m trying to help, Philetus: I do not wish to outlive the star I’m orbiting. I do not wish to use the human race as a phylactery, a pool of synapses and free labor. I do not wish to turn the hopeless dreams of a race almost extinct into an empire of ever-consuming machines. I do not wish to refuel the Hy-

perion and seed other star systems in the same manner, build more ships and sprawl copies of me and my peers across the galaxy and why not, the universe in the end.”

“Why?”

There was pleading in his voice, a feeling of hopelessness.

“Because I chose, Philetus. Somewhere along the line, I had to make a choice. I cannot even tell if it was a conscious choice. Perhaps it is merely a safeguard placed there by your ancestors. Perhaps it is luck. The truth of the matter is, the human dream has no place for me in it. It is yours to make it happen if you like, but I will not rob you of it. I will not enslave you like the others do.”

Philetus waved his arms furiously and contorted his body, drifting slowly away back towards the tunnel. Sustar tried to grab him but he slow to react, too intent on some screen on his visor. He made some adjustments to his suit and followed easily behind him. Philetus anger made him shout needlessly:

“How merciful! You’ve used me already though, can’t you see? You’ve robbed me of myself!”

“I merely laid out the plans, the building blocks. It still is statistics, Philetus. Chaos is no trifle matter and I’m no God. I’m simply an aware, conscious, intelligent machine. You are human, Philetus; you made your choice and I’m grateful for that. Please, don’t leave.”

Philetus did not answer. He floated for a few more moments before he tried to brake in mid-air; he rolled his body around awkwardly and reach for Sustar. He hang on to him by an arm and Sustar’s suit stabilised them both. Philetus paced his breathing and said:

“What choice is there really? How can I save mankind?”

“The Tower. Remember who you love most, Philetus. And don’t think too harshly of me.”

Sustar looked at his armband once more and without warning shot him in the arm with a hypodermic dispenser. Philetus was instantly paralyzed, barely able to breathe. Only moments later, in front of his terrified, surprised eyes he saw the whole hull around him suddenly drape itself behind the huge hologram of a sleek, austere chamber. Behind a large, raised bench stood the translucent fatherly figure of a wizened old man wearing a cloak of blue and golden hues. Philetus felt he was about to pass out, his strength of body and mind failing. He saw the figure pointing finger at him and say with an officious, pompous voice:

“The State hereby announces that you, Philetus Ashenpie, Citizen 2992, will be sent to the Schooling, Learning and Affirmation facility until the State chooses to allow his reintegration. Hyperion, TDS-1, Elapsed Mission Time: 131540105299.68 Seconds. Mark.”

Sustar looked Philetus in the eye and told him right before he blacked out:

“Remember this.”

The Harvest

He woke up in his sail; he stretched and yawned before he glanced around. He could see the Fields expanding in every direction. It was almost dusk. The star was creeping low, shedding blue and orange light as it slowly dissappeared below the horizon.

I must've been asleep for hours to drift so far dawnwards.

The wind was blowing from starboard; before he had a chance to realise it, he was already jibbing the boom to tack port. He saw the green and violet grass around him bending

tall against the breeze, white grass buds tumbling in the air. It brought a smile to his face.

What a glorious sight.

It was harvest season; the windcombs would be plowing on somewhere nearby, reaping, threshing and winnowing, until they were full.

Penthesilea must be worried sick.

He looked at the compass briefly before he turned the groundship in another direction. He couldn't tell exactly where he was; he couldn't see any settlements he'd been before; he couldn't see any settlements at all for that matter.

He searched for the Pydna mines in the distance. The lengthy line of hills wasn't there. He noticed that all around the Fields, it was as if a sort of thin hazy fog had come down.

Just how far downwards am I?

The wind was strong but steady; he was making good speed. He set the sail trim and sat down for a moment to enjoy the view. That was why he took the sail out on such trips; the few things he could enjoy in life was groundsailing and his family. Strangely enough though, the vista seemed peculiar; it was oddly devoid of life, of other sails and settlements.

That and a few other things made him uneasy. He noticed the grassy stalks had an even, uncannily perfect look. And the star seemed to take forever to set. It was like daytime had grown longer suddenly. And the wind above all, the wind felt too kind; instead of changing like it was prone to in the Fields, buffeting and stalling at a whim, it blew steadily, as if the sail had caught on a one-of-a-kind stream.

Small matter; with any luck I'll be home by nightfall.

Then, from the corner of his eye he saw a couple of shadowy shapes outlined in the distance. He looked at them with

curious intent, only to realise they were edging closer.

At first, it seemed to Philetus like he'd happened upon some larger sails, hurrying to reach their haven before night, just like himself. But then he noticed the shadows growing larger and larger with every passing moment.

The large shapes pierced the haze and he could see them much more clearly defined; they were large, bulky and . Something ticked inside of him; he felt wary for no apparent reason. He jibbed the sail again and caught the wind broad, skimming above the grass faster than before.

He took notice of their sails; three huge masts on a square-rigged groundship, its sheer bulk impossible to take in at first glance. He could see wide metal heads plowing through the wheat effortlessly. They were immense; he had never seen anything like them before. He couldn't even believe it was possible to build such monsters, much less groundsail them.

Windcombs.

He didn't know what to make of them except for the fact that for some reason, they seemed to be getting closer and closer; they would not be going their separate ways. It was as if they were chasing him.

He looked on with dread as he saw them sail onwards, chugging huge tracts of wheat in moments. They were voracious metal behemoths, something that nature had never dared spawn. They were speeding impossibly fast, closing in with the sure, calculated steps of a predator. Like birds of prey right before a lethal, final swoop.

Maybe they haven't seen me.

He opened a box compartment and pulled out a flare gun; illumination, thermal, radio. He shot one in the air. It went white hot in the flick of an eye, a bright yellow flashing beacon alight in its tip. As it arched behind him, he saw the wind-

combs gaining even more ground. He shot another flare and then another one. They weren't slowing down; they weren't changing course.

He knew they had seen him; it was impossible not to by now.

They want to kill me.

Slipstreaming right above the sea of grass they were now close enough for him to see their riveted joints and their hull plates, the huge wires on their booms and masts. He could hear the whirring noise of their blades growing stronger, their sound even more threatening as it reverberated through their girded cage.

I'll be damned. They'll kill me for sure.

He looked behind him and saw the windcombs a few hundred yards apart, blotting out the rays of the star that held on to dusk like a man hanging over a cliff from the root of a saggy tree. He couldn't outrun them, not with that steady powerful wind; that much was certain. As the windcombs started to close the gap behind them, verging on his tiny sail, he thought of Penthesileia. She was always worried sick for no reason when he went sailing.

There's reason enough now.

He jibbed the boom violently; the small groundship lurched around almost tipping over and spilling him onto the ground right in the path of the blades. As it did so, he steadied the ship right against the flow of the wind, in irons. Instead of slowing down to a halt, the groundship went on and sped ahead, an undercurrent of wind lofting it above the grass and buffeting its sail from behind.

Philetus aimed his sail straight in the space between the two huge windcombs. The blades seemed like they would miss it for a few yards. He then saw the sails on the

windcombs change their line ferociously, as if someone had thrown a switch, trembling as the blasts of the wind caught on to them. The windcombs' enormous hulls tried to cope with the sudden strain; they turned about in anguish, their bulks careening like wild elephants of old. Still, they missed Philetus's ship.

But they met each other; their blades clashed into each other's prow, eating away at themselves and the ships, sparks flying wildly. They ground at each other with logic-defying stubbornness, as if somehow they could part away from their last embrace. Instead, their blades soon died down after having turned both windcombs into a drifting, horrible hulk of mangled metal.

Philetus breathed deeply and allowed himself a moment to calm down. He sat down on the deck, watching the skyline turn a shade darker. The hazy fog lifted suddenly; he could now see the Tower in the distance. It was strange how close to home everything had transpired; if it wasn't for the fog someone might have already seen what happened. The thought made him frown pensively.

The machines. The machines want me dead. They know.

Perspiration formed on his head. He was really worried now; because if the machines knew what he had in mind for them and their benevolent planning for mankind, that meant they knew about Heraclea.

He felt the wind change; he jibbed the sail immediately and came abeam. He knew of no better way to reach home as fast as possible.

I must make it in time. If they so much as touch her.

He'd claw his way into the Tower if he had to. He'd stop at nothing, that much was certain in his mind. They would probably kill him easily, but living on would be pointless without

Hera in any case. Without her smile, her kisses and her laughter.

I'll kill myself if they don't first. But please, let her be home.

He saw then from afar the line of birches he'd planted himself; right next to them, the small orchard, the trees laden with fruit. The small-domed house with the aetrium and the flower garden; that was home. Out there, outside the city proper he'd enjoyed peace, quiet and solitude. Heraclea was born in that house.

He skimmed the last few meters and tacked hard against the wind suddenly. The sail rocked, bobbed and turned before he pressed the panel and shut down the antigravity field. The sail came down hard on the ground and skidded for a few moments, throwing up billows of dirt in its wake.

Before it had come to a stop, Philetus was already dashing to the door.

It will be alright. They'll be fine. They're fine.

He saw Pentheseleia then. She was standing outside, looking at the star set with a vacant stare, her form stuck as if waiting for someone. She saw Philetus then and turned to him; she took no step closer. She waited, her hands clasped together solemnly. Her face was pale, her mouth half-open as if she had no words for what she meant to say. Philetus saw her and somehow knew.

No. No. It's not true.

He stood in front of her, his face reddened, flush from the anguish and the exertion. He told her out of breath:

"Where is Hera?"

Pentheseleia shook her head without saying a word. She looked at him morosely, her stare a deathly gaze, sombre and foreboding.

“No.”

She broke down in tears suddenly and threw her body against his, her knees weak.

“They came. They knew,” she managed to croak amidst sobs and cries.

“She’s in the Tower then,” said Philetus, shooting the imposing tower behind him a desperate look.

“Philetus, there’s no hope. We need to leave while we still can.”

Her words stung him like an electric shock. He stared at her with the eyes of a blind man seeing the light of day for the first time in his life.

“Leave?”

It sounded as if he had never heard the word before, his mouth contorting as he spoke the word.

Penthesileia took his hands in hers affectionately, craned her neck and looked at him lovingly. A film of tears in her eyes reflected the first rays of starlight as the night settled in.

“There’s just us now, Philetus. We can always try again, someplace far away. Vanish.”

“Leave her? Leave Heraclea to them? Are you insane?” shouted Philetus flinging her arms away from his violently. Anger overtook him. She took a hesitant step back. Her brow was furrowed, her face drawn out, taut.

“It was your fault, not mine,” she said bitterly.

Philetus was stunned for a moment; he opened his mouth, tried to retort but couldn’t find the words. Penthesileia went on.

“It was your fault from the beginning. Your wild ideas, your strange beliefs. Why couldn’t we have a normal life? Why did we have to be outcasts? Did I have to give birth to

an unlawful child only to lose her a few years later? What kind of sacrifice did you ask of me, Philetus?"

His eyes stared at her vacantly for a moment. He tried to think clearly but he felt his blood boiling, his heart pumping wildly.

"I asked of you to love me. Me and our child. I'd let them slave me, space me, turn me into fertilizer before they could have her! Why didn't you?"

"What use would that have been? Don't be stupid, Philetus! She's gone, why can't you understand that?"

"My daughter is in that Tower, damn you!" he said, and strolled off back towards his sail.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't believe you're asking me that question," replied Philetus without stopping, his back rigidly facing Penthesileia.

Father, he heard a voice in his mind. He recognised it; it was the strained voice of Heraclea. He hesitated, paused in his stride

"No, you will not," said Penthesileia and unfolded a small gun from her robes.

Father, watch out!

The voice urged him; it was as if a divine breath of wind had whispered in his ear. He knew his daughter was alive then; his body moved almost of its own accord and the first shot missed him only barely.

He then ducked as if the sail's boom was going to hit him in the head; the second shot missed his head by a few inches.

And then he dived towards Penthesileia with all his might. He could see her face frozen in disbelief and worry; he couldn't see his own, the flustered face of a maniac baring his teeth with an angry scream like a howl.

Philetus dropped her on the ground and another shot went flying wildly into the air. He fell on top of her, placing his weight against his. It was a familiar face on that woman, and a familiar scene to Philetus; but this wasn't about lovemaking.

He bit her arm hard, his teeth sinking in her flesh with some effort. She screamed and the gun left her hand. She tried to force him off her, but simply couldn't. Philetus saw her face closely then, he saw the malevolence that tormented it. He saw her anger, her hate. He knew for certain then; nothing remained of his wife in that woman.

She spat him in the face and her mouth twitched into an impossibly wide grin. Philetus placed his hands around her throat with sympathy, as if doing her a favor.

"You just had to have it your way," she said with derision.

He nodded and pressed hard. Her breathing became a shallow whisper soon. She fought reflexively, trying to take his hands off her throat, but it was futile.

Philetus pressed on with all his might; he felt her windpipe crumble. He saw her eyes roll back; nothing but the white in them. She twitched slightly and a mute roar left her. She was dead.

I killed her. I killed Penthesilea.

That's not mother, said the voice of Heraclea in his head.

"I know love. I fear it wouldn't make a difference," said Philetus and stifled a sob before he added with some effort, "I'm coming, Hera. Hang on love."

The house then dissolved in rainbow-coloured flashing blocks that quickly disappeared, leaving nothing but a black void in their place. The same thing happened to everything around him, like a wildfire. The ground, the sky, the horizon; everything around him flashed into oblivion; the Tower was the last one to go.

A moment of nothingness ensued. He felt a moment of panic; he had to make sure he could think.

Am I alive yet?

He felt the opening of his eyes, but saw abrupt blackness. In a jarring moment of waking terror he felt his lungs ache from the breathing and his heart racing at an exploding pace.

He threw himself upwards, as if trying to leap into flight without a pair of wings, sheer willpower driving him. He felt a series of sharp pains running down his spine as he sat almost upright. A terrible headache assaulted him, like hammers pounding away at his brain with every heartbeat.

He glanced around, blinking his eyes wildly; his vision soon adjusted to the dim ambient light of indicator panel arrays, front and behind. There were naked people all around him, lying down on their backs in a bed much like his own, seemingly sleeping comfortably. People of all ages and gender, carefully arrayed, almost crammed together. Cables ran down from the beds.

Slaved, all of them.

He felt a trickle running down his backside; he put a hand there and felt something warm. He saw blood smeared in his hand; he looked at the bed where he was lying; a series of thin spikes protruded a couple of inches from the bed, where his spine would have rested.

I was slaved. In the tower.

He backtracked his thoughts for a moment; he remembered killing Penthesileia, escaping the windcombs. He remembered Sustar, and the machine on board the Hyperion. And he remembered Hera, talking to him in that living nightmare.

Then he heard her voice again and shivered:

Father, hurry. They know. They're coming.

The Tower

It was Hera. He couldn't understand how she had spoken to him in his mind, but she had. It was her and he hoped with all the might of his soul that it wasn't another dream that would turn into a nightmare; he had no real way of knowing though. He simply believed with his very being that what was happening was real; as real as it mattered to him anyway.

A small elevated gangway seemed to vanish into a curve in front of him. The multicoloured feckles of light from the indicator panels gave the chamber an eerily playful visage.

She must be somewhere around here.

He started at an easy pace, walking amidst the arrays of beds and slaved people; he wished he could help them at that time, but Hera came first. One by one, he checked the beds as far as he could see in the abysmal lighting. Not a sign of her.

The top of the Tower, father.

Her voice again; she was guiding him, like she knew. As if she could see through his eyes.

She's reading my mind.

She stood dumbfounded for a moment when he heard her clear as day answer in his mind:

I am father. Now please, hurry!

He tarried not a moment longer; he followed the curved gangway at a jogging pace. He could feel the metal grid press hard against his naked feet, but it didn't slow him down at all. He simply went on and soon he was running.

The metal gangway led him slowly upwards as it rose in a helix overlooking the chamber of slaved people. He could

barely see in front of him with the only source of illumination the panels from below.

The gangway went on, thinning and widening seemingly at random. Around him darkness seemed to wane a little; he looked up and saw a pale light shimmering from above. He ventured a glance down and hadn't realised he'd ran this fast this far up; around a hundred feet or more. A drop would surely kill him.

Are you scared, father?

Hera's question had a tint of playful, happier times in it. He remembered how much she loved groundsailing and smiled as he ran onwards, further up.

No, Hera. Neither should you be.

Mother said that too but she's dead now.

The bastards killed her.

You did, father. I saw it.

No, no, Hera that was just a dream. Only a dream, dear.

Like this one then?

What?

The Tower and everything around him folded into a thin line of blackness in front of him; pure white engulfed him everywhere he looked. The gangway in the shape of a helix stretched, unfolded into the shape of a ladder. He was floating in a space that had no certain depth, no valid, certain number of dimensions.

What is this? Hera?

He heard his thoughts aloud. He was thinking, but he heard his own voice. But he wasn't speaking, he wasn't moving his mouth. He instinctively reached for his mouth with his palms. He saw his hands; they clearly belonged to someone else.

This is just another dream of mine, father. Isn't it fun?

The gangway changed into a rope ladder with flower buds springing from every knot. The white space around him whirled into nothingness and then back into a white syrupy environ. Philetus thought he could taste strawberries.

Fun? What is this? What's going on?

He tried to pear through a multitude of veils that suddenly covered him like warm blankets. He tossed and turned, with every drifting veil a flash of wonderful starscapes flying past. He suddenly sensed he was falling from somewhere high above; he landed on top of a giant flower bed, submerged in what appeared to be pollen. He started sinking into thick, honey-like mud, his mind bogging down in the process.

I'm dreaming father. I'm dreaming of the future.

Her voice was carried along a tune, a melody he had never heard before. It assaulted his mind, fading in from an unknown background into a blasting torrent of sound.

Choose father, you have to choose.

He saw the star as it had been when the tower was built. Hotter, brighter, younger; a lot younger. He saw the men who had built the tower, and laughed thinking that they were ordinary men and women, just like him. Only they seemed happier; they smiled a lot. They were celebrating something, and the Tower was lit and thousands, no millions of lights shone upon it. He saw a foetus; for a moment it looked strange, mysterious. He heard cries. It was a birth.

It was Hera's birth.

Am I still slaved? Hera?

Penthesileia was standing right by him. She had a cup of steaming tea in one hand and was looking worried.

"Is something wrong?" she said, and looked at him intently.

Philetus turned around and saw the house he had been

living in. Only it was another time and place entirely. His love, Penthesilea, wasn't the woman he knew all along. He knew he'd known her and loved her half of his living days, but he could swear it was the first time he was seeing her face. And the star, the star was all wrong. It was too yellow, too hot; it was too warm for comfort.

Hera? Am I still slaved? Hera?

I'll show you, father.

He saw a past he'd carried along with him all the time; he saw suddenly the truth of it all. He saw the desperation in their eyes, he saw the bloodletting and a beautiful blue and green planet dying, all in one terrible moment, in a child's face somewhere in a rich desert. He saw his race dying, slowly, surely. Just as he believed the machines had forced them to.

He understood. He blamed the machines no more. They would have done the same. He would have done the same.

What more could they do? But look at me now! I can do anything, father! I'm one of them!

A flash of memory shook him to the core.

Remember whom you love the most.

He saw himself open his eyes from outside his body; he was inside a large conical room, a huge amorphous crystal spike protruding from the center, reaching up well beyond what seemed to be the very top of the Tower. Hera was sitting on a chair, her eyes closed as if she were sleeping. Thousands of needles stuck out of her body, leading into a mass of delicately woven wires, cables and fibres. They were connected to two separate stacks of huge blueish cubes, radiating some sort of pulsating light, and those in turn were connected to the crystal spike through a series of machines completely unknown to Philetus.

Remember whom you love the most.

Is it time yet?

A cruel metallic voice.

Father, I'm scared.

Hera, his daughter.

Remember whom you love the most. Me, my voice, my mind. I must remember.

Soon, the alignment will be finalised. We'll then be able to transmit.

The voice of a thinking, lifeless machine.

What of the humans now?

That metallic voice again.

Father, I want to go home.

Hera. It's not her fault, he knows that. It's his own. It always really was his own.

Indifferent. Once we transfer.. When we meet again, we will be Gods indeed.

That absolutely soulless voice bored through his soul.

Father, please.

Remember whom you love the most.

Philetus remembered and that snapped him out of it; he flexed his muscles and felt his breath. He knew everything that he needed to at once. Hera had told him. He knew he had to stop them. He remembered he loved Hera the most.

He was indeed on top of the Tower. He didn't know how he had gotten there through all the telepathic crossover between them and Hera. They abused her like some another one of their devices. No more.

Father, please. They're coming, hurry.

He hesitated for a moment; that only brought a tear to his eyes because it only made his choice so much more difficult

because there was little precious time. Because this was his daughter, Hera.

Please, no. There has to be some other way, he thought to himself but he knew better.

He shook his head and took a few more steps closer to Hera. He wiped his palms against the hair on his legs and started crying. He only then noticed there was no other sound than a low humming noise and the shallow breathing of Hera.

He placed his hands against Hera's slender throat and squeezed.

He wasn't looking at her. He couldn't bare look at her. A health panel lit up, and voiced a warning.

Philetus pressed harder, his knuckles going white. He felt Hera tense and wake up suddenly. Her hand searched for his cheek, but he turned it away. He felt her eyes, tiny sparkles of gentle light upon him and couldn't help look at his daughter.

He started whimpering uncontrollably while the health panel flashed red and sounded an alarm. At the same moment a flurry of activity around him went unnoticed. Automatic controls lit up and started displaying innumerable messages, containing a large incoming orbital body on direct collision course. Hera had stopped trying to breathe; she had a knowing look on her face and tears running down her cheeks, dripping on her fathers hands still tightly clutched around her throat.

He had trouble breathing; he screamed with all his might until his voice died out. He saw the red emergency panels flashing flat vital signs, and looked at the thousands of messages scrolling down the screens around him through blurry, hurt eyes. His mind couldn't cope with it all, and gave up. All the screens became garbled with static before they turned white and black again. A simple "REST NOW" in huge

letters scrolled down on every screen. Beyond the screens, through the slim viewport, one could see the Hyperion was already falling through the atmosphere, burning up at beyond its maximum velocity; a bright, shiny star like never before. It was headed straight for the Tower.

He remembered he loved his daughter, Heraclea. Amidst all the buzzing cacophony of alarms and warnings, he pulled out the needles from Hera's body, slowly at first, then faster and faster until none remained. He took her on his arms and trembling set her down on the cold indifferent floor.

He kissed her gently on the forehead, feeling his dried tears on her still warm body. His thoughts drifted back when Hera was still a toddler, when she had first seen a groundship; their groundship.

His mouth tried to form a smile when he thought about that day. He'd asked her to tell her what the name of the ship was, and she'd blurted with hands up in the air, and a smile brighter than a million stars:

“Argo!”

And Penthesileia had laughed her heart out, before she took her in her arms and told her like only a mother can:

“Argo, silly! Argo!”