

## 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 gravely, 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 inspite 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.”