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SPACE

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Space Scrapers

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SPACE SCRAPERS

To my grandmother.

“The Spring Wind does not distinguish between high and low, it reaches everywhere. And the flowers and branches of plants and trees, themselves grow longer and shorter.”
The Scroll of Perfect Enlightenment, 2d Millennium prior to the Age of Aquarius

Installation

Why does everything have to be so complicated? Ian thought while going through his classmates' change logs. He was finally old enough to be introduced into the Wire, among the first in his circle, stirring the latest buzz that he quickly grew tired of.

He put down his communicator, not understanding why his peers were so worked up about the installation. His parents, his grandparents, his neighbors, and heck, every adult he knew had the microscopic cord inserted into their heads, connecting them with the Hub.

About a thousand years before, Central Command issued the Wire as a precaution to keep human military agents inside the system. With the devastating wars throughout the galaxy at the time, a link with the Hub ensured safety. Somewhat paranoid, Central Command kept the protocol for centuries after the conflicts subsided.

The Guard eventually discovered that installation of the Wire provided the recipient invaluable protection from the mental instabilities that humans had become prone to—post-war radiation poisoning was anything but merciful. If only the find hadn't been a century late—by the time the Guard was finally ready to apply the Wire to non-military personnel, untreated people had formed groups and settled in unpopulated corners of human space. Dragged into an interstellar dispute at the time, Central Command neglected the issue at home but continued sending patrollers to keep an eye on the semi-violent dwellers.

Resisting the installation indefinitely meant becoming one of those outcasts, a Meltdown. Society had no place for them. Not the kind of life a young man dreams of at sixteen. Postponing installation was silly, as far as Ian was concerned. The Wire meant a ticket to the future, and no one in their right mind would give that a rain check.

The Guard did not accept recruits who hadn't been on the Wire for at least three steady years. Generally, short breaks during which the link was muted were allowed—the human brain had its limits and neurological processes needed to develop naturally. Everybody's adjustment cycle was different. But to get in the Guard, a candidate could not disconnect. They always looked for people

who could handle pressure, and Ian was determined to make it into the Guard by nineteen.

~~“A big day today,” Aaron Vanderbilt walked in with a basket of fresh strawberries. “Look—Mia grev~~
these in her ionic garden. What do you think?”

“Impressive. How is she?” Ian was less concerned about strawberries than about his little sister. She hadn't been doing too well since Mother's funeral.

“You can ask her yourself. She finished her botany class and is joining us for dinner tonight in Luna Plaza, after your procedure,” Ian's father smiled.

“Dad... I don't know...” Ian always felt awkward in public places, even when his own family accompanied him.

“Do it for me, son. We all need a change of scenery. Now, get ready, we are going to the clinic in an hour.” Aaron walked out of the room, leaving the strawberries on the desk.

Ian couldn't help thinking about Mother. He missed her voice, her hair, her gentle touch. She was like a fairy, a Fata Morgana. Surrounded in a veil of mystery, she had always understood him, knew how to talk to him.

Mia looked just like Mom.

The doctor exchanged a few words with Ian's father before welcoming the young man into the lab.

“Ian Vanderbilt? Anton Teig, neuropsychologist. I will be installing your Wire. Have you watched the instructions?” The doctor shook Ian's hand.

“I have. It's not supposed to hurt, right?” Ian remained as calm as he could.

“The procedure is indeed painless; we use a nerve block. Have you been sick with anything lately? Anything unusual?” asked Doctor Teig, looking for contraindications to the installation.

“The nurse just scanned me. Isn't that enough?” Ian avoided the uncomfortable eye contact.

“I'd like to hear it from you. Scanners are efficient, but not always reliable,” the doctor insisted.

“Well, I've been having headaches. They come and go,” Ian shared reluctantly.

“Your father tells me you have been under a lot of emotional stress. Tension headaches are not unheard of, but are of no consequence to the installation.”

The doctor sounded reassuring, but Ian found another something to worry about. “How will I know if it's working?”

“The activation will be done from a remote controller inside the Central Command's headquarters. There's a separate station for newcomers. You won't feel a thing though. That's how subtly they operate.” Doctor Teig opened Ian's sensorgraphic chart, “Let's take a look at your brain,” he said, locating the area where the cord would cause the least discomfort.

“Will I be hearing voices in my head?”

“Oh no, that is a ridiculous misconception. Nobody hears voices in the Wire. You will be linked to the Central Command's processor that registers your bio signs. If something happens to you, the feedback will alert the Guard and they'll send help,” the doctor explained.

“But I thought... My mother told me people can communicate in the Wire.” Teig's simplicity made Ian suspicious.

“They can after the third module, but not with voice. As soon as you have mastered the beginner skills, you will see for yourself. Now, we need to proceed; I have another patient scheduled in twenty minutes.”

Ian awoke with a heavy head. He had trouble focusing his vision on anything particular. His eyes wandered from one object to another, trying to recognize anything.

He was presumably still in Sydney, in a clinic, but was not sure he knew why. Ian pushed himself to sit up. His father stood not far from his unit, talking to a doctor who seemed familiar. Ian could tell

nothing from their facial expressions and decided just to wait for them.

“The procedure went as planned, but I discovered something you need to hear. There is an anomaly in his brain. The frontal lobe is understimulated and there are signs of myelin overgrowth. From the way it looks, I’d say it’s inborn.” The doctor pointed to an area on a sensorgraphic image of Ian’s brain. Dr. Teig’s last day in the clinic turned up an interesting surprise indeed.

“Is it dangerous?” Ian’s father did not know how to take the news.

“I don’t think so, but it’s important that he knows. I haven’t found evidence of myelin sheath destruction, which is good news and leaves me with only one possibility, given his other symptoms. He has Asperger’s Syndrome.”

Dr. Teig was as stunned at the discovery as his patient’s father was at the diagnosis. Since every known form of autism had been eliminated a thousand years before and there had been no new cases since, Anton wondered what caused the condition to surface now and whether he should expect more such patients in future.

“It does not sound like a disease,” Ian’s father protested.

“Indeed, it’s not. More like a different design. I talked to him before the installation. I can tell you he is not suffering physically. He might need social reintegration at some point, but that depends on what field of work he’ll choose. For now I think he’ll be fine.” The doctor patted Ian’s father on the shoulder. “His temporary amnesia and disorientation is a side effect related to the syndrome, but I expect it to wear off in less than an hour; then you can take him home. The Wire will monitor his development. I’m beginning a prolonged mission tomorrow, but I’ll be able to follow up on Ian’s progress while I’m still in the solar system.”

Lunar Plaza was filled with light and music — activities for every mood, food and drink for every taste. Ian was visibly uncomfortable, but did his best to not break down so his family could have a good time. Like his father said, they needed a distraction.

Their flight to the Moon fell in the middle of a meteor shower, which was always such a spectacular sight. Most passengers on the shuttle were either jumpers returning for the next round, a few alien tourists visiting for the first time, or Guard officers on shore leave.

The Plaza had been a family favorite, where synthesizers were able to create nearly every dish available on Earth. Last time, they came with Mother. Coming again so soon somehow seemed disrespectful. Ian glanced at Mia innocently sipping her chocolate shake while their father got up to get their order. Robowaiters customarily delivered meals to the tables, but Aaron preferred to do it himself.

“Ian... Do you sometimes think that life is unfair?” Mia asked with melancholy.

“Why do you ask?” Ian hadn’t seen the question coming and didn’t understand what it meant.

“Well...I’ve been having these scary thoughts lately...” she continued.

“What thoughts?”

“Do you remember Frankenstein’s story, the one Mom used to read to us?” Mia hid her face in a vase of Venusian spirals. “I don’t know, maybe it’s nothing... These are rare, did you know?” she said, changing the subject and avoiding eye contact with Ian. “Very tender, fragile, they require special treatment.”

“Have you talked to Dad?” Ian saw that Mia had this building for a while.

“I couldn’t tell him. I don’t want him to worry,” Mia continued sipping her shake. “But I feel so lonely...”

“Two years from now you will be eligible for the Wire. You will not be alone when that happens.” Ian’s brain was burning. He understood what Mia was saying, but was at a loss as to how to console her.

“What does it feel like? Has anything changed?” Mia asked.

“Not much,” Ian couldn’t lie. “But I feel more grounded, more confident. It’s a good feeling.”—

“I miss Mom. Dad doesn’t know how much. He’s been working a lot... I tried so hard to get rid of the sadness, Ian, but it won’t go away,” Mia teared up.

“I miss her too. Remember that slider she took us to last year? That was unforgettable,” Ian thought fondly.

“Why did she have to die? Why?” She wiped the tears from her cheek.

“I wish I had the answers, Mia. But I know it’ll pass. Don’t let emotions overtake you.” Ian tried to be useful to Mia, but didn’t know how else to handle the situation. If only their father would hurry back.

“Keep this for me,” Mia instructed, giving Ian a small bronze disk on a finely detailed chain. “Mom’s medallion.” With that, she stopped weeping and dried her eyes, stood up and made a few dance passes. When a catchy pop tune started, Mia leaned over their balcony and spotted their father coming upstairs. Ian was busy with his communicator. She took hers and stepped out of their lounge.

“Where’s Mia?” Aaron asked, stapling boxes of freshly synthesized food to the table.

“I don’t know. She was just here.” Ian suddenly realized he had been sitting alone for several minutes.

“Well, let’s find her!” Ian’s father ran out of the lounge in the direction of the Star Dust Attraction Park, Mia’s best loved in Lunar Plaza.

Mia was moving towards Crystal Hall on the far side of the assemblage when Ian caught her on a short range wave.

“Where are you?” the words screamed across her sensor transmitter as she followed the corridor.

“I can’t wait two years.” Mia cut her brother off and disappeared into the crowd.

A minute later, the Plaza was alerted of an integrity breach and an oxygen leak in one of the air refilling compartments. Apparently, its security seal had been overwritten to break and enter. Visitors were instructed not to panic while evacuation of the isolated sector was underway, to be followed by immediate repairs.

Ian clung to the transparent wall separating him from the vacuum. He stared into the Moon’s dark, airless sky, at the stars and the blue ball they called home. His legs felt weak and his head was on fire. He didn’t know how to explain to himself what he knew in his heart had just happened, didn’t know what to do with the pain and guilt that began eating him from inside.

He stood like that, his thoughts on hold, when a rescue jet closed in on a young girl’s body that was drifting in space after being catapulted out of the air lock. Do you sometimes think that life is unfair? It rang in Ian’s mind.

The Legend of Tal

Nobody knew exactly when or why the convent came to be there and why monks, dressed in long, shimmering robes, habitually made an appearance outside its walls once a month to do what no one else would. As years went by, rumors about the disturbing nature of their business spread from one star system to another. But as is the case with all such stories, the truth was stranger than fiction.

A lean dashing traveler in his late thirties walked into the tower on one of those deceitfully serene mornings while the monks prepared for the Gathering.

“We have been expecting you,” the Overseer smiled while serving Ian a hot meal.

“If you say so... but I don’t recall sending a memo.” Ian was no ordinary bounty hunter, not with the Guard’s legacy in his pocket. He had tried, though, to keep this venture on the down low and to appear disinterested in the monk’s doting.

“Ah! I see you don’t know yet. Not to worry, a little mishap like that is easily fixed,” the Overseer

responded in good spirit, if vaguely, trying to hide his concern. His guest had barely touched the plate and ~~only drank a few sips of tea.~~ “Life was not always so bad here, you know. Tal was once beautiful, beautiful place.”

“Tell me, when was the last time you saw a patroller?” Ian wondered if the Overseer’s narrow eyes were truthful. He came here on the trail of an urban legend, and was not yet ready to expose himself. He hadn’t realized that the true meaning of his being there had been revealed to the Overseer centuries before.

“A long time ago, a very long time... A patroller has not been spotted here for over a thousand years.” The Overseer was now looking upset. He wanted his guest to enjoy his breakfast. Instead he found himself answering questions about unimportant things.

“You do have a library of some sort, don’t you?” Ian winced at his own blatancy, but the Overseer seemed preoccupied with something else and didn’t notice. He submissively showed Ian the way to the library and closed the door behind him. As soon as the Overseer’s shuffling steps disappeared in the corridor, Ian threw his backpack to the floor and began with the nearest shelf.

The Overseer returned to his chamber where he was restoring an ancient codex, a collection of local entries from the time Tal was a popular resort, and only discreet security patrollers from time to time descended from the sky.

It wasn’t clear why patrollers stopped coming. Some blamed it on the supernova in the neighboring system, others on pollution and radiation. There were rumors of distant wars and other mysterious things, but in the end those things didn’t matter that much.

For generations, Tal was quiet and there was no work, but activity eventually resumed. While local monks lost interest in taking care of their home world, monks gladly took on the task and never complained. Although the technology was not as sophisticated as in ancient days, and the scale of the event was now much smaller, at least the monks again had meaningful work to do.

The library was overwhelming. A zillion items were accurately catalogued and neatly stored. The device should be here somewhere, Ian was certain. Tal was the last on his map and everywhere else he’d been invariably led to this place.

According to the tale, the last rewritten android was spotted here about ten centuries before, although nobody knew exactly why on this planetoid. Details of the design had been long lost. Now big corporations were looking to improve their sales. Reintroducing androids was thought to be the next step towards the order of things, with promises of unimaginable benefits for mankind.

They offered good money for information on the android’s matrix, so Ian went on the hunt. He was looking for a millennium old scanner that was used in this vicinity during one of the patroller’s last visits. The scanner was believed to be among the excavated items that the monks recovered while building their monastery. The scanner’s data chip would be a gold mine.

In another room, the Overseer shut down his workspace and took away his tools. It was time for the Gathering and he hurried out of his chamber. Other monks had already begun chanting. The Overseer swiftly passed by the library and his narrow eyes caught a soft beam of light streaming from under the door. Ian was still inside.

Somewhere after midnight, the monks returned to their cells and the Overseer embraced a moment of solitude. He wondered if Ian needed to know about the codex. The scrolls were clear about one thing—the legends that had never left Tal were meant for the Seeker. Ian needed to be taught.

Ah, Tal was once so beautiful. Humans didn’t have anything like it on their blue planet. Tomorrow the monks would show Ian what Tal looked like when things were cared for properly.

For Jade, life as she knew it ended with her transfer to the private security patroller that was now going on another round. The Guard had been hiring and Jade was available.

Their next stop was Tal, a small quiet planetoid, covered in bumpy rocks and looking like a huge war with odd sporadic forestation and sparsely dispersed arsenic lakes. The place inspired disgust, but Jade bit her lip. Her current unfortunate condition didn't leave her much choice. She was well paid on the job and needed every penny.

Cleanup crews were dispatched on a regular basis these days and since most capable workers were enlisting in military service, personnel for other duties were on demand. The Wire was failing, and so was intergalactic diplomacy. War seemed unavoidable and Central Command focused on survival. Domestic troubles were the last of their concerns.

After a few tours to Tal, Jade stopped throwing up.

This time when they arrived, the event had already passed. Bloody pools covered the surface. An evenly spread mix of human debris, decomposing flesh and organic fluids emitted an intolerable sweet, sticky and sickening odor that persistently filled the air. Pieces of decapitated bodies with bones still attached to shredded starship uniforms and remnants of torn apart weaponry lay scattered across the entire perimeter. Heavy smoke arose from numerous cracks in the crust, which instantly dissipated with each abrupt blow of wind in the so unpleasantly moist local atmosphere. Jade wiped the sweat off her forehead and turned to Li Chen.

"As if someone methodically butchered them and then laid out a carpet of their remains! I've been coming here for months and still don't understand it!"

"Simple really... Tal is very attractive, everybody comes here to unwind themselves, to do things they can't back home," Li Chen's casual answer seemed awfully unfitting the situation.

"Doesn't look like a humanoid work to me, but my scanner must be dead. This here seems fresh, yet there is no trace of any DNA... not even alien," Jade smote the device a couple of times in frustration.

"Androids! Old news, really. Must be a growing trend though, seeing it often here." Li Chen's cheerful confidence seemed misplaced too.

"Aren't they programmed au contraire, not to kill but to assist humans? I always thought their matrix couldn't be overwritten." What she just heard didn't sound so good, and Jade suddenly felt nauseous. Everything here made her very uncomfortable. She wanted to do the job and be gone.

"Don't be so naive. A few modifications here and there, and voilà you have a walking talking murder weapon. It doesn't surprise me. Everybody comes here to have fun. Apparently chopping each other up is one of the ways... decades of tradition! Now hurry, our clients could still be out there. We need to finish up before they detect us." Li Chen served on the patroller for slightly less than five years, having inherited the job from his late father, an accidental victim of his clients' murderous zeal. Li Chen wasn't particularly fond of the job, but the family had insisted.

With their scans finally complete, he opened the hatch and released an enormous machine with multiple valves and hoses, and in one continuous vacuum breath, everything non-native to the planetoid's crust was sucked in, leaving the surface innocently and becomingly clean.

Another season on the patroller and Jade will learn that things aren't always what they seem. She doesn't know yet that her patroller is making its last visit to the sector, and there will be no more such rounds for centuries to come. In fact, there will be no more patrollers at all, and no more killing androids, and their last visit will become the Legend of Tal, known only to the locals, and only vaguely.

Today, though, Jade is thinking in pink.

Ian woke up to a monotonous chanting right outside his window. The Overseer was already waiting with a cup of freshly brewed tea.

"You arrived at a fortunate season. We are going outside right after the Gathering, an event that you do not have on your blue planet." Narrow eyes pierced through Ian.

“I would rather take another look at the library. It is important—for me,” Ian added with slight irritation in his voice.

“No, no, the library can wait. You need to see Tal. Tal is beautiful this time of year,” the Overseer spoke gently. He knew how to be persuasive but did not want to push his luck. In return, Ian did not want to wear out his welcome and leave empty-handed, and therefore agreed to join in.

Led by the Overseer, Ian and the group of monks in their shimmering loose robes tiptoed down the hill from where their convent stood, surrounded by a thick wall and misty clouds. The monks had a funny disposition with a tall human among them. Hardly seeing anything in the mist, they walked another mile and suddenly stopped. Nauseating odor tickled Ian’s nostrils. A hot breeze blew away the mist and, aghast, Ian looked down at his feet and then at his surroundings.

It was impossible to make one single step without walking into a pool of decomposing flesh and organic fluids. Blood was everywhere. He tried to move ahead, but his feet kept stumbling on bones, some appearing freshly cut, with bits of flesh and bloodstained uniform rags still attached to them. He spotted a piece of metal that looked like a pusher spring of some kind, fused with the gun’s barrel, probably resulting from a violent fire outburst. Using it to shove human debris aside to free the pathway, Ian managed to find a clear spot not far from a large crack in the soil. On an uncharacteristic whim, he looked inside the crack. A beheaded human body, disfigured and badly burned in places, lay there on top of smudged weaponry and a pile of dirty stinking rags. Ian threw up.

Meanwhile, the monks took out portable cleaners and vacuumizers, and began zealously scrubbing the ground surface, gradually bringing it back to its previous arsenic beauty.

When they were done, the Overseer joyously glanced at Ian.

“Now you see?”

“See what? This is madness!” Ian felt renewed disgust at the Overseer’s and the monks’ calm acceptance of this carnage.

“There’s no other way to treat Meltdowners. This is their outlet; it’s very effective. They find freedom here on Tal,” the monk spoke calmly.

“Meltdowners? Freedom to slaughter themselves? You can’t be serious!” Ian could not control his outburst.

“Tal is in the outer leg of the galaxy, out of the Wire’s reach. Your Central Command and the Guard have no jurisdiction here. For some, this is coming home.” The Overseer narrowed his eyes again.

“Meltdowners are disconnected from the Wire, have no respect for Central Command and absolute no fear of the Guard,” Ian stated, not knowing what to expect next; his stay on Tal got weirder by the minute.

“And that is precisely the point. Humans consider linking everyone in one hub with that Wire of yours a solution to all your problems, a universal cure for unwanted behavior. Society failed Meltdowners exactly because of this wrong human thinking.” The Overseer paused. “Those who come here cannot be stopped, and there is nothing to do but wait. The habit of this event is slowly dying out again. Maybe another century or two and it will be over for good.” He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand.

Exhausted and drained, Ian was leaving Tal with more questions than answers. The Overseer spoke in riddles, deliberately avoided clarity, yet managed to pique Ian’s curiosity. He wanted to spend more time with the old monk and his followers, and regretted that he’d already made plans that could not be broken.

Prior to departure, the monk silently hurried his guest into the library and handed him a tiny tube, no bigger than his palm, with a chip attached to it and a nearly transparent scroll wired around its axis.

“This is what you came here for, didn’t you?”

An hour later while Ian was preparing to jump into hyperspace and head back to Earth, his shuttle sensors picked up an alien vessel closing in on his position at full speed. The starship did not respond to hails.

Ian’s sensors detected an energy build up. What the heck, he thought while initiating the evasive maneuver Alpha1, the only one he knew. He was not much of a pilot.

The starship was persistent. Ian needed to quickly come up with a better plan than spiraling around random asteroids.

Avoiding being fired upon would be out of Ian’s capabilities once the vessel established a clear lock and a preemptive strike without a definite provocation went against Ian’s principles.

Rushing through the shuttle’s database of the quadrant’s stellar maps, Ian located a small diffuse nebula several parsecs away from his coordinates. Having plotted the course, he sent a scrambled transmission to the only person he knew could save him from being instantly fried by this unknown adversary. Given his last known whereabouts, Ian estimated his friend would get there in about a day. He switched to the autopilot and headed to the escape pod.

The moment the shuttle entered the nebula, Ian’s pod was ejected into a purple gas cloud. A portable cloak he had borrowed from his old friend could be extended to no more than the size of the pod, but that was large enough. There was, however, one minor complication-the pod’s life support system had been damaged during the maneuver and he now only had enough air for twelve hours. Holding his breath for a little miracle, Ian navigated the pod deeper into the nebula.

“Someone call for a taxi?” Ian would recognize his friend’s cheerful voice, now coming through his brain fog, out of millions. “Seems you dozed off there for a while. Lucky you I had a few errands to run in the vicinity...So, you hungry or what?”

Famished, Ian thought. Wait a minute...what’s a taxi?

Return to Timbuktu

A youthful sturdy Kenyan in a midnight blue diving suit eased down on his knees at the far left corner of the temple. He reached inside a deep hollow under one of the building rocks where the temple floor met the bottom of an old mural.

When his hand touched a cool slick object, he whispered in Swahili: “Pongezi, Mbwana!” He pulled the object out, inspected it under his flash lamp to make sure its metal casing was intact, and stashed it into a small waterproof backpack. Now he needed to get going, and fast. Water would rise in a few moments and the temple entrance would again submerge into the depths of the Indian Ocean. Mbwana made his way towards the exit. As he was about to step outside, a tall dark figure came out of the shadows and moved forward to block his way. A brisk beam of light brushed over Mbwana’s face, accentuating his dark chocolate skin, and disappeared into the darkness.

“Leaving so soon?” Ian stood there with a stealthy smile on his suntanned face.

“I see you shaved.” Startled at first, Mbwana instantly collected his wits. He was glad to bump into his old pal, but puzzled as to what might have brought Ian to this neck of the woods. “Aren’t you supposed to be working on that thing you picked up on the asteroid?”

“It’s a planetoid.” Ian shivered at the reminder. Ian had not told Mbwana the reason he went to T

upon his rescue in the nebula, and he wanted to keep it that way, at least for the time being.

“Rumor on the Wire had it you were looking for a more detailed map of that sector. I figured the only interesting spot was that dusty rock. I heard the story of the last android too, just didn’t know you had the guts for it. So you got the chip or what?”

“Later, Mbwana, later. We have something else to talk about. Is your link muted?” Ian changed the subject, referring to the mandatory Wire connection that was checked at random.

“I have an unlimited subscription and a holographic double filling in while I am here. Nobody will notice I’m out. Is yours off?” Mbwana already knew the answer to that. Since Ian brought it up, the business he wanted to discuss was serious—more serious than almost being blown to bits on the way from Tal—and he had taken care of his own link before asking.

“Same trick for now, and in a few hours I’m a free man till dawn—luxury of Level-9 clearance. Listen, I’ve got a new lead for a huge score, but there might be a few issues. I’ll fill you in on the surface. First, let’s get out of here.”

The two men crawled out of the ruins, then hiked to Mbwana’s cloaked deep sea convertible jet that was parked just a few feet offshore. Ian arrived earlier on a transporter to the nearest habitat and walked to the coast. He intended on leaving with Mbwana, but needed first to explain the purpose of his sudden appearance. His next target promised a nice catch and he hoped for Mbwana’s participation. His friend’s infamous piloting skills were indispensable on this job.

Ian’s source in the Guard reported an increasing agitation in Central Command regarding a new discovery, over which covert interplanetary exchanges and several diplomatic visits from outside the system occurred. Immediate staff members were instructed on a need-to-know basis, while other officers were kept outside. A certain alien race from Alpha-Persei expressed an especially keen interest in the object and was claiming first galactic rights of ownership. Their mother ship arrived at Earth’s orbit the day before with the petition to Central Command based on historic accounts that dated back more than two thousand years.

Central Command was not convinced of the authenticity of their records and wanted more research before negotiations. The artifact had possibly been buried with the remains of the last Songhai emperor. Military shelf probes had been occasionally implored to assist in the grave digging pursuit, but testing was sporadic. There never seemed to be a budget for anything much more than weapons. As soon as the item’s location was confirmed, the archeologists on the set began working day and night, ransacking the dig site in the process. Unable to penetrate into layers of crust, miniature scanners with an inbuilt carbon dating utility were only good on retrieved and carefully prepped objects. The laser drills and mega excavators were crude and shoddily supervised, but it was only a matter of time before the artifact was located and retrieved.

Once inside the jet, skillful Mbwana switched controls to dry land flying, powered the turbo engines, and requested the destination.

“Delta Niger, my friend... We are going to Timbuktu.” Ian rubbed his hands in anticipation.

If a time traveler compared the modern Earth with the Earth of a thousand years before, he’d barely recognize the planet. Things had changed since the establishment of the Wire. Society’s need for discovery and innovation waned, in part due to the requirements of being hooked to the Wire. Regular violations were punishable, and everyone, including Mbwana and Ian, looked after themselves now. Mbwana Luo Akamba and Ian Vanderbilt saw themselves as no different from any other self-interested human beings and discovered their career talents lay outside the Guard. Ian kept mostly to himself, and Mbwana was a nomad. Artifact hunting was fun and lucrative, and could usually be done solo, but sometimes the two would get together for a hunt. The pair were unlikely friends, with complementary personalities and skills, and both wickedly smart. Ian, on the one hand, was analytic

and, some would say, cold. His condition manifested itself in a preference for solitude, a love for technology and the need to solve a good mystery. Ian did not make friends easily, but once friendship was established, the bond would be near impossible to break.

Mbwana, on the other hand, was charming, graceful and proud. His Masai roots asserted themselves by way of his exceptional survival skills and a good hearted nature, which often came in handy in his line of work. He and Ian worked well together due to their respect for each other's abilities and similar ambitions. Their efforts towards the current job and past missions, furthermore, illustrated similarities in their personal beliefs and ideas of morality and ethical behavior.

They landed on the border of the Sahara Desert slightly off Djenné. Irrigation attempts here never truly fructified. Abandoned construction, partially buried in sand with dysfunctional robots and other neglected machinery here and there, reminded of the failed ambitious projects.

Mbwana packed his gear, activated the cloak and left the jet. Ian was already waiting outside—he wanted to examine the area before proceeding any further. Who knew what could be hiding in those dunes.

“OK, tell me, why all the fuss?” Mbwana couldn't decide whether he was interested enough in the job. It seemed too complicated. But he was willing to hear the details.

“Apparently, there are people who are yearning for that thing. And we, my friend, are in the position to relieve them of their desperation. Let's see how far they can go.” Ian stopped walking for a moment. He pulled out his portable projector from a vest pocket and pressed a key. The device threw out a sensorgraphic image of an old rusty cylinder. “This is what they're after.”

“Hmmm... Looks like a container of some sort. What do you make of this?” Mbwana narrowed his widely spaced eyes to concentrate on the image. Time, it appeared, had not been merciful to the relic.

“I only have this one image, based on the Guard's probe. The object hasn't been excavated yet, but with the speed they're moving, it'll be any day now. We should be there when it happens. I intend to collect and will not miss it for the love of gods!” Ian put his projector in one of the many pockets of his multipurpose vest.

“All right, what do we know about those Persei guys?”

“Well, we know that the document they're flashing in front of Central Command is from the ancient archive. It says they visited Earth in the distant past and interacted with our ancestors. Now they want to retrieve what they left here millennia ago. What I wonder is why.” Ian continued up the sand hill.

“I bet Central Command is stalling for time. They aren't planning on delivering the item to our visitors, are they? I can see the problem here.” Mbwana was feeling the intrigue.

“Yes, as one of the possibilities. But it's not the only issue with this case. Look, Djenné is just a few minutes' walk that way. Their excavation site is close to the ancient mosque, at the cemetery. The ruins are heavily guarded. We will hide till it gets darker, and then try our luck.” Ian didn't have a clear plan, but he was sure that staking out the site for the possible heist would be worth the risk. Mbwana went along with his friend's hunch. He'd worked with Ian long enough in the Guard to trust Ian's judgment on most things.

Mbwana left the Guard to pursue his passion, a decision he never regretted, while Ian had been a career officer. Looking at what happened to Ian, Mbwana knew things could get ugly in the Guard and did everything possible to spare himself the repercussions of ambiguous orders, contract breaches, and political firings that Ian couldn't avoid in his time.

Sun sets rapidly in Africa. It literally takes a few moments to go from light to dark. After night falls when the dunes began to cool and local wildlife awakened, the two friends watched the camp from

afar.

“This was not what I wanted to do when I grew up...” Ian turned to his pal.

“No kidding,” Mbwana was visibly bored.

“I wanted to save people...” Ian continued. Stars always reminded him of Mia and how he made that promise to himself—a promise that had been impossible to keep.

“You weren’t so philosophical when I was your rookie. What happened?” Mbwana yawned.

“I don’t know. Maybe I learned that not everyone wants my help...” Ian shook his head remembering his very last visit to Lunar Plaza, the place he hadn’t set foot in for twenty years.

“Well, maybe you’ll still get your wish. The way I see it, there’s plenty of mending to do out there...” Mbwana was losing patience for this stake out. He wanted to see some action, and soon. Meanwhile, nothing extraordinary happened. The Guard agents patrolled the perimeter while a group of archeologists and their assistants rounded themselves up before going to sleep.

At a later hour, the men took turns keeping watch. It was quiet, with the exception of a family of aardwolves, whose population had grown significantly since their migration a few decades before.

A lonely weather balloon was about to dive into a heavy midnight cloud when a sudden shriek brought Ian back from his sky gazing. He activated his heat sensor array—in the camp, lights went on, and Guard agents moved in and out of the tents. A female assistant was trying to talk some sense into a very upset scientist. From what Ian could tell, the relic had been stolen.

In less than a minute, Mbwana crawled up to Ian, dragging his tiny backpack. His head and body were covered in dust, and his overall suit was torn.

“What have you done?” Ian screamed in a whisper.

“Get back to the jet... now! I’ll tell you there!” Mbwana got up and started running like a young gazelle across the sand. Ian followed after spot checking his vest to make sure his gear was in place. Minutes later, a group of agents appeared, chasing them in their steps. With Mbwana leading the way, Ian threw a grenade that emitted a heavy smoke screen, and then another with charged protons, which delayed the agents’ pursuit for a few minutes.

The jet was not far away. Mbwana activated the engines with a remote power controller while in mid-stride. The two men skipped up the stairs, and while Ian bolted the door, Mbwana took off in a blink of an eye.

Out of breath, Ian stopped to throw a handful of water globules down his throat and walked into the cockpit, intending to get some answers. Without a word, Mbwana pointed at the backpack. Ian peeked inside to confirm—the relic was theirs!

Just then, a shuffling sound came from the back of the jet, and Ian’s side vision detected a suspicious commotion in the corner behind their storage compartment. He pulled out his blaster and aimed it in the direction of the noise. One box with supplies fell to the floor, and the target of his gun, the assistant that had tried to pacify the distressed scientist at the excavation site, moved into the spotlight.

Mbwana heard the noise and looked back. At this altitude, their jet was for now out of the Guard’s range. He initiated the autopilot and walked to the back of the craft to see what was going on. As he noticed Mbwana come in, an armed woman in Guard uniform and Ian turned his way but kept the weapons pointed at each other. The show was promising to be good and Mbwana sat down to watch. Good thing the woman kept her cool, Mbwana thought, or Ian would have shot her on the spot. During his years in the Guard, Ian had been the fastest gun in the division.

“All right, who are you and what are you doing here? And what is that metal thing on your wrist?” Ian came to his senses and was the first to speak, stepping away from the intruder while he held her at gunpoint.

“Don’t worry, I am disconnected. This is an alien homing beacon,” she answered in a reserved voice, knowing they were anxious about the possibility of her being a Wire operative. “My name is Ava Nagoya. I am the Guard’s observer, assistant archeologist. I know you have the artifact. I am not here to get it back for the Guard.”

“Nagoya?” The name resonated in Ian’s memory. He remembered an incident fifteen years before when an accident in space claimed two lives of a scientific expedition. Nagoya was the perished couple’s last name.

Ian put down his weapon and showed Ava to an empty seat.

“Okay, you got our attention. Now spill it.” Mbwana was both irritated and amused by a female presence on board his men-only jet.

Ava hoped that these men weren’t a lost cause. She quietly gulped for air, sat down and began her story.

For several minutes, Ian and Mbwana listened in disbelief before Ian walked back to the cockpit to fetch his notebook. A device half the size of a human palm, it contained Ian’s personal database of documents and records obtained and generated during his stay in the Guard. Some things in Ava’s story matched his own knowledge. Ava wasn’t exactly lying, but was she entirely truthful? He ran a cross reference to confirm his suspicions.

“Do you even understand what you are asking us to do?” Mbwana was visibly disappointed. All their work for nothing...

“Why can’t they just pay for the relic like everybody else does?” Ian was not happy either.

“They need what’s inside the container. It’s their last chance of survival. The civilization of Alpha Persei is weak. In fact, they’re nearly extinct. They gathered their best and healthiest men to send a delegation here to discuss the release. But the truth is, they do not have many people left, and their mother ship in our orbit is the last of its kind. Nobody here knows this, but they stopped building spacecrafts because they invested their last resources in the medical research, which has been unsuccessful. For generations, they have been unable to produce a healthy genome. They are dying. A DNA infusion, untouched by mutation, is their only hope. This DNA that they kept here in stasis for two thousand years...”

Ian was skeptical. “I understand they had an agreement with Emperor Askia, but how much of the material has survived?” In his mind, Ian was calculating the odds. Ava sounded convincing. His own data confirmed there had been speculation in Central Command about Alpha-Persei degenerating. Still, what she shared just now was too big to comprehend. An entire civilization, one of the oldest in the Galaxy, being annihilated by a genetic plague?

According to Ava’s sources, the plague was caused by an environmental disaster that followed Alpha Persei’s experiments with a hazardous new energy source, but she was sure that something else was behind this disaster.

Realizing that her chances were rather slim, Ava threw her last card on the table—sensor projections of the disease’s effects on its victims.

Ian staggered at seeing the vivid graphic portrayal; Mbwana turned away before he’d have to throw up. The plague was brutal. Every single cell was affected by a mutation that caused tissue vermiculation in every organ, rapidly decaying flesh on still living bodies, bleeding skin abrasions and pus in every cavity.

Ian turned to Mbwana. Overwhelmed, his friend sat in a stupor, cursing and mumbling something in Swahili. Ian threw a glance at Ava. A concern in her sad eyes prompted the answer to his moral dilemma, as it all became crystal clear to him. He dashed back to the cockpit for Mbwana’s backpack. A sudden sound of a nearing siren alerted Ava of an approaching Guard’s patroller. In agitation, she

poked a bewildered Mbwana in the chest with her fist.

~~“Guard’s marshals are on our tail! Ian is in the cockpit. Can he pilot this jet?”~~ Ava was visibly worried. She cracked Mbwana’s cloaking code to enter the jet, but that was about all she could do. Decryption of his flight controls was beyond her current abilities. Otherwise, she’d act on an instant. Mbwana snapped to attention. “Not my jet, no.” He looked out. The patroller was coming right for them.

“What’s all that noise?” Ian showed up in the doorway with a cylinder in his hands. Ava and Mbwana gave him stabbing looks.

While Ava told Ian about the Guard’s new tracking device, Mbwana jumped off his seat and in one swift move disappeared behind the compartment door. He reached the cockpit in a matter of seconds, turned off the autopilot and transferred controls to manual. There was only one maneuver that could get them out of this pandemonium before the Guard’s weapons had a chance to cripple his jet.

Mbwana activated supplementary engines and after an abrupt full reverse, speared his jet under the patroller’s bow, pushing the craft up and off its course. He did not want to open fire on the Guard, nor collide with its craft.

Correcting the jet’s trajectory to ninety degrees, Mbwana released a side bumper extension, and at full speed, rubbed off against the patroller’s starboard, sending their chasers down into a whirling twist and leaving them adrift. Having gained velocity, Mbwana’s jet stormed into the thermosphere fifty miles above.

Then to Mbwana’s surprise and appearing out of nowhere, a weather balloon closed in on their position. At proximate examination, it turned out to be an alien shuttlecraft. Apparently, Ava’s homing beacon had done its job.

Several hours later, the mother ship broke Earth’s orbit. The alien delegation headed back to Alpha Persei. With them, they carried a torch of hope for their home world.

There was no way of knowing whether the Guard could identify them. Ava assured she had sneaked out without a trace, but Mbwana was not convinced. He pulled up his sleeves for a little cyber job on his own. Manipulating the codes of the Guard’s database, he deleted the most recent intel alerts and arrest warrants coming out of Delta Niger.

Ian sat quiet, processing recent events.

This could not have been just an energy experiment, it made no sense. The illness was consuming the alien race and they had zero resistance. The aliens were definitely infected from an outside source, but a virus like that could only be synthesized with the exact knowledge of the target group’s specifications.

They were known for having a centuries old strict security system for their medical data. The more Ian thought about it, the more certain he became that the plague of Alpha-Persei was the result of sabotage.

TERRA ANTIPODES

Ava stood alone in a cell that had no windows, no doors. She suddenly collapsed onto the floor, writhing in pain as a continuous convulsion wracked her body.

After an unknowable period of time, the pain stopped as abruptly as it started. Seizing the moment of relief, Ava crawled onto a white mat and pulled her vanilla hand knitted jumper over her knees.

Fumbling a loose thread, she ventured again to dash through a storm of chaotic thoughts in an attempt to recollect recent events. She remembered the accident—something went wrong and instead of

smooth discreet landing, her shuttle fell through that darn worm hole. Maybe, just maybe, Mbwana picked up her emergency transmission before the communications were cut off. Placing her stakes on that chance, she made a promise to herself to stay alive.

No matter how hard she tried, though, she couldn't recall anything between then and now. Terrified she grew concerned about possible contamination and an intelligence leak. Adding to her worry was the chilling void that occupied some part of her mind.

Over the time she spent here, and she wasn't sure how long it had been, lights went on and off by themselves at random intervals. Nutrition and sanitation equipment appeared in a white box that materialized next to her mat rather regularly. Nothing in the box ever suggested a tool.

Ava scratched the wall. Most of the perimeter was covered with her nail marks and a cozy company of scarlet smudges and blurry smears. She knew they were her prints, though she didn't remember making them. Everything in the cell suggested she'd been going through the same pattern for some time. In a zealous attempt, she drew a part of her sleeve, trying to wipe a dry trace of blood off her palm.

"I don't want to be doing it anymore! I don't want..." She rocked back and forth for what felt like an hour, then fell back, exhausted. White sound proof walls worked on her nerves.

Her thoughts drifted and fixed on Ian. He made quite the impression on her during their first encounter—good enough to from time to time accompany him and Mbwana on their heists. Good enough to develop a bit of a crush on the oversized heart and ocean deep eyes. Good enough to end up in this ridiculous predicament.

Shuttle doors opened. After hours of maneuvering inside the worm hole, Ian was all too glad to stretch his legs before jumping into a claustrophobically sized transporter jet that would take him along the planet's surface.

Transplanetary jets here operated on energy beams. Once considered safe and efficient, the technology was now rather primitive compared to the sophisticated engines that were employed back home. Ian wondered if whoever created this place, knew about their error. Amazingly though, they reconstructed every even most insignificant detail, made it look so much like Earth, almost perfect.

Ian needed to locate Ava's landing coordinates. Her distress call pointed to what appeared to be a densely populated area—a perfect site for getting lost. Ian was hoping that this is exactly what she did. He hated to think she could have been held in captivity and tortured. One single thought of such possibility caused fire to his brain.

Posing as a local was no trouble at all, given everybody here looked human and even the grass smelled so dearly familiar. For the time being, he could proceed undetected; his genome cloud was working just fine. As long as it was on, nobody in the vicinity would be able to spot an intruder.

Now, where the heck is she?

Compensating for the time dilation, Ian's optical processor was constantly scanning the insides of each moving object, each building and just about anything that appeared on his way. The signal from the processor transmitted a data stream to an implant behind his ear. He hoped to detect human residue, but was having no luck. All the organic matter was alien.

Not that he had particularly enjoyed it, but this wasn't his first visit to this side of the worm hole. The Guard had been watching this part of space for some time but wasn't interested in paying for the technology that was on display here. Ian's clients, on the other hand, were.

Knowing what to expect, he came prepared, but his mind was not at ease. He regretted having pulled Ava into the game. The soft spot he developed for her led straight to a serious judgment error on his

part.

Ava sat down on her mat and sucked a drop of blood off her finger tip. A box appeared in front of her. No sound, no movement. She was curious to know if what she saw was the result of mentally governed teleportation or a high tech transporter device.

Amusing herself with these ideas was what kept her from going insane. As usual, there was nothing in the box she could use to cut or break the wall, just a collection of colorless organic blocks. She guessed they must have contained H₂O compounds. As much as these nutrients were distasteful, she soon realized she needed to preserve her strength and therefore continued consumption, forcing herself to fight a persistent reflux.

She figured she was being watched, monitored, certainly checked for bio signs and physiological changes, too. She was needed for something, otherwise why was she still alive?

Once she tried to imagine what they could look like. From Ian's database, she knew they masqueraded as humans, but were they at least morphologically humanoid? She was curious to find out the truth, but her stagnating mind had begun projecting delusional images and maybe it was for the better that she hadn't seen a soul since her arrival.

Sometimes Ava wondered if they could read her thoughts. The idea was scary and she tended to dismiss it. The Guard hadn't collected any data to suggest the species was telepathic. Ian, too, hadn't thought it was possible. One of the stars nearby was emitting strong radio waves that would be fatal to a brain as damaging to an overly sensitive brain needed for telepathy. Survival under those conditions would be tricky.

Must have been a week by now, perhaps longer. With lights going on and off all the time she couldn't tell day from night. At some point, she tried to count seconds and minutes, but soon found this a brain killer. She occupied a timeless continuum now.

Ava threw her arm forward to reach for the box. A dark spot on her inner left wrist caught her attention. What's this?

She first pressed on the spot, then scratched it. It didn't hurt. She spit on her skin and tried to scrub the spot off. Nothing happened. She looked closer, trying to see through the epidermis. Her skin was intact; she found no visible incisions or other alterations. Palpation didn't reveal any foreign objects under the skin. She couldn't make much of it, other than the spot felt very alien. She chuckled silently at that observation.

Is this what they did to the others? As she tried violently to shake the spot off, her fingers got tangled in her hair, and she lost control over herself.

"Leave me alone! Let me go..." Her throat released a rusty flow of air that competed with the whispering. She stood up and began wandering alongside the wall, wrapping another vanilla thread around her finger. The silence in her head was deafening. Her nails danced off to scratch the wall above the old rows of bloodstained marks that she barely noticed any more. Her sanity was slowly betraying her.

Prompted by instinct, she stopped and rubbed the dark spot again. This time, an intense cascade of memories assaulted her mind—she'd seen this spot on her wrist before, remembered waking up and not knowing where she was and how long she'd been in this debilitating semi-conscious state. She remembered everything.

When that happened, an intolerable and powerful impulse, originating from the spot, shot down her spine. Ava lost consciousness.

Ian walked through the park and crossed a bridge over a pond, surrounded with segments of neatly mowed grass. The setting reminded him of midsummer Frisco. A little closer resemblance and he would hear Sinatra sing in the background. Anyone else would have been fooled, but not Ian.

On Earth, reports of abductions appeared on the News Wire nearly every month now. Sometimes people would be returned through the wormhole; sometimes they'd vanish without a trace. Those who came back were silent for a while, and when they eventually spoke, nerve chilling details of dreadful mental torture and draconic physical pain came to light.

Central Command spent a small fortune treating the traumatized victims, and the Guard was sent to spy on the new neighbors.

The Guard called this place Terra Antipodes, and for good reason. At first they thought they were observing a new cluster, and only recently it occurred to them that this was in fact a mirror universe with all things anti-everything they knew. So carefully disguised was it that the abductees could not tell they were taken away, not just from their own planet, but from their own reality.

A red dot appeared on a transparent miniscule screen in front of Ian's right eye. The dot was moving alongside a small perimeter.

Ava!

Ian's genome cloud had a life span of ten hours from the moment of activation. He needed to hurry. Ava was being held in what looked like a research facility of some kind. They surely did their homework. Back home, this would have been a pharmaceutical lab. Everything about the place was so nauseatingly human. It occurred to him while he searched for a way into the building that he had no idea whether the genome cloud would hold inside. One way to find out, he thought when an isolated hatch drew his attention.

Once inside, he'd be able to have a clear reading on Ava's infrared signature and would know her exact condition. He hoped that she would be able to move on her own. If not, he would have to go with a subatomic transit—a gadget he dreaded the very thought of using. The newly developed top-secret device was still in testing when its fully functional replica came into his possession. Mbwana had been curious about it, but Ian preferred not to elaborate on the where and how of obtaining this and the rest of his state-of-the-art equipment. The less his friend knew, the better. Plausible deniability, he thought dispassionately.

The red dot on his screen stopped moving.

An alarm sounded at that second and red flashing lights lit up across the perimeter. Suddenly walls began changing shape and the entire building turned into an ellipsoid. Ian fell. His hands touched the floor, feeling a growing vibration. An ear-splitting siren spread around the facility. Walls shifted again—the ellipsoid was powering up.

Maneuvering to avoid being squashed, Ian hid behind one of many panels inside the transforming corridor that led to Ava's cell. A few more steps...

Something in the air made him guess it was not his presence that triggered the current mayhem, but he could not afford the risk of investigating. This was not his idea of first contact.

If everything went according to plan, Mbwana's cloaked shuttle would be on standby at the entrance to the worm hole, ready to take off the moment he and Ava got on board.

What happened next, made nanoseconds feel like eternity.

Ian blasted his way into the cell, grabbed Ava from the mat, locked subatomic transit on them both, and pressed the key, praying that the device would work.

Warm sunshine was beaming through blinds and played on the ceiling.

Ava sensed a familiar presence and opened her eyes. Ian smiled and helped lift her up on the pillow. A lump formed in her throat. She didn't know what to look at, what to say, and stared at her left wrist where the mark was still there.

On a thin amorphous screen in the middle of the room, a cyber news anchor announced that Central Command collapsed the worm hole.

Ava cringed, bit her lip and turned to the wall.

Mission to Seta Prime

“Of all people, I know what it’s like to be in the Guard. They hook you up on the Wire, they tell you what to do, where to go, who to report to... You can still resist.” Ian couldn’t decide what he hated more—the Guard’s heavy pull on Ava or the fact that he had put her through so much torment, she felt she had to escape from him.

“Oh, they aren’t pressuring me into anything. You are. Look, when I began going after artifacts with you two, I didn’t exactly sign up for torture. Honestly, I need a distraction. Besides, Seta Prime isn’t that far away.” Ava didn’t want to look Ian in the eye.

“For goodness sake, Ava, it’s outside the galaxy! It’s not safe. You won’t be able to get out if—when—something bad happens.”

“What are you talking about? The place is as safe as any other.”

“But it’s not. I can’t prove it yet, but...”

“Then I don’t need to hear about it.” Ava dismissed the thought, whatever it was. Ian’s brilliant mind was obsessed with theories concerning the end of the universe. His evidence was always so esoteric and alarmist, however, so she found it simpler to tune him out while he lectured. “It’s only for a year. We’re flying on Lomonosov, which can handle the asteroid belts around Seta Prime just fine. And the fact that the planet is outside of direct reach only minimizes security risks. I’m not going alone, you know. The Guard is sending a colony. We will be just fine.” Ava sounded as if she’d made up her mind, but Ian thought that there was more going on than just a need to “get away from it all.”

The Guard was rushing to set a foot on this newly discovered planet. Ian understood from his sources that nobody knew quite what to expect there, although the planet was believed to be suitable for humanoid life. The atmosphere had a unique composition of gasses, with pockets of breathable air near the surface and inside the caves.

“All right, well, have you told Mbwana?”

“I will, as soon as he gets back from that Moon jumping trip of his. I am not leaving till next week. Mbwana had a strange and reckless hobby. Neither Ava nor Ian approved of it, but he never listened to anyone anyway.

“That’s insane! You can’t go.” Mbwana drew the panel behind her as she walked in and threw the news at him.

He didn’t know how to keep her from making this mistake. It didn’t matter if she went on a Martian safari which was practically next door, or on a just as innocent Pleiadian star gazing trip, as long as her games weren’t dangerous. If only he could find the proper words.

“You can’t go!” Mbwana repeated, feeling ridiculous.

“Jumping off the Moon must have fried a few circuits in your brain. Otherwise why would you be so territorial about my business?” Ava was getting tired of tossing the same subject around.

“Who, me? Oh no, you are confusing me with someone else. I, my dear, am simply trying to protect my investment,” he said audaciously.

“Whatever is going on in your head, I don’t want to know. I need a break, and I am not sorry if my decision hurts your little investment.” Ava turned around to leave when Mbwana stepped in front of her.

“Wait. Don’t walk out like that. Ava, I’m sorry, all right? I understand you need a change of scenery, but—no solid food for a year?” Mbwana felt idiotic for bringing up such a trivial point, and wracked his brain for a better argument. “All that radiation... it’s not exactly a vacation spot. Just how

subterrestrial is that new planet of yours?" He wondered if she'd figured him out, though he'd made quite an effort to hide his true feelings. She was feisty and tired, and Mbwana thought this was not a good time to tell her.

"All caves and ice," Ava fired back.

"Keep me—us—updated, will you?" he mumbled, loosening his grip and letting her go.

Landing clearance for the science cruiser Lomonosov was delayed. Seta Prime met the colonists with a storm that lasted forty-eight hours.

Rocks and thick ice covered the poles, dry deserted plateaus at its equator, and no hint of flora or fauna lay on Seta Prime. The only good it had, were its caves. Protected from the outer space radiation, they provided enough room and breathable air for acceptable living conditions. This was where the Guard wanted to establish a new presence.

Nobody was fooled by the cozy talk about exploration though; Seta Prime was clearly in the position of high strategic importance. The system linked the Milky Way with the rest of space, and if the need arose, the planet would become a fully operational launch base.

That information was a poorly kept secret. Central Command preferred not to parade their flags in front of anyone unless it served the purpose of intimidation. With the mounting threat from Terra Antipodes, the Guard was ordered to investigate each potential military asset. Seta Prime was one of them.

Ava saw Seta as a challenge and a welcome change to her recent lifestyle. As an assistant archeologist, she couldn't wait to get started with all those rocks. Burying herself in common, although exciting work was what she hoped would help her get over the haunting nightmares that she continued to have after Terra.

To accommodate the colonists, several of the ship's decks were dismantled and reassembled as a series of hexagonal hut-cells. The ship was then prepped for emergency take off, bolted and held on standby. Ava's roommate, Karo, was the ship's medical examiner whose assignment to Seta Prime was her first. Ava didn't mind sharing her cell. On the ride to Seta, the two became friendly and both looked forward to their new experience.

The task ahead was simple, though the crew held no illusions about the potential for danger. Even knowing the planet's hostile conditions, however, nobody on board could have foreseen the terror they were walking into.

"How soon do you think we'll start missing fresh food?" Ava looked at her sterile breakfast food package and knew the answer to that already.

"I know I won't. I got used to it in Andromeda. Dad worked on an orbital station around one of the minor planets researching intergalactic stasis technology and its long term effects on humans. Supplies from home came every month, but only seldom fresh. We used synthesizers now and then, but not too often. They're huge energy drains, and very expensive." Karo finished her protein shake and opened the hatch of a garbage compressor. "Here, let me get that." She took the empty packs from Ava's half of the table.

"Andromeda? That's so far."

"I was born there."

"But you don't call that galaxy home?"

"No. Soon after my mother's convergence, Dad requested a transfer and we moved to Earth."

"Convergence?"

"Andromedusans don't live very long. Because of a chronic shortage of power, they developed a biomed way to slow metabolism of their aging bodies and collect the remaining potency. At the end of

an individual's life cycle, one's physical energy is released into a pool, created by billions of other dying or already deceased."

"In other words they are recycling people's last breath."

"Yes. They do it to sustain young lives. This is why Dad went there; he wanted to improve the Guard stasis technology for extreme distance travel using similar methods."

This was all very new and interesting to Ava. She hadn't realized that Karo was a product of a cross-species union, especially such an exotic one. Although now that she knew, that explained a lot.

Karo Teig had a peculiar demeanor—unusually long fingers, long waves of dark shiny hair and emerald eyes like two saucers on a pale, chiseled face. Ava had thought it was her imagination as well, but Karo's movements appeared almost amphibian.

"So, Karo, will you too go through this process?"

"No, I didn't inherit the same features—courtesy of a human father."

"Dr. Anton Teig, right? I studied his findings when he was treating abductees from Terra Antipodes. I read some of the transcripts of those sessions." Ava pressed a tiny side button and the tablet disappeared into the cabin's floor.

"I didn't realize you were interested in clinical psychiatry. Isn't your specialty archeology?" After two months on Seta Prime, Karo was surprised to find something new about her colleague she could connect to.

"Yes, well, my research was more personal than professional." Ava shivered and paused for a brief moment, "I've been to that dreadful place. Not my best memory." She decided to come clean with Karo. While the Guard hadn't disqualified her from active duty because she managed to simulate remission, sooner or later everybody she worked with would know about her abduction.

"On Terra? Oh no...I am so sorry. If there's anything I can do..." Karo was moved by Ava's unexpected divulgence. It wasn't the norm these days to talk about such things; in fact, inefficient traditional therapies had long been abandoned. Rather than reveal such intimate details, most abductees who refused the semi-anonymous treatment on the Wire chose to work out their issues on Tal. "Is this why you're here? I don't mean to pry, but if you ever need to talk...Dad says talking helps."

"Actually...I want to get lost in my work. Forget all about the bad stuff, but I haven't been able to. The images keep coming after me. I never told anyone what happened. I don't even know if I can. Maybe I should try harder..." Ava stopped to catch a deep breath—she was heading straight into a panic attack.

"Put your head between your knees, now, do it. Now breathe. It's a very old trick from medieval times, but it works." Karo used the confidence of a medical officer to push Ava to control her anxiety. After a minute, Ava sat up straight and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Feeling better? You know, I could mention you to my dad. The connection with home hasn't been established yet, but as soon as the array is installed, we will be able to communicate with the rest of the world." Karo referred to Milky Way Galaxy, making Ava smile.

"I don't suppose he does distant house calls?" Ava didn't want to get her hopes up.

"You'd be surprised." Karo Teig winked in return.

Ian received Ava's transmission with a week's delay. She excavated some fascinating material and wanted him to take a look. The transmission carried a message for Mbwana as well. She was apologizing for her rudeness. Ian forwarded. He had no way of knowing that at the very hour Ava sent the message, Seta Prime began experiencing an avalanche of fatal catastrophic events.

“Code red, all hands to rescue stations! I repeat, code red, all hands to rescue stations! This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill...” The mechanical voice of the alarm system reached every part of the colony.

Harsh conditions on Seta Prime demanded a continuous stand-by for a command to leave immediately, but as time went on, the extended crew grew more relaxed. The code red alert incited agitation among the colonists, but after their initial shock, they systematically responded to the evacuation order.

First there was an earthquake, then a subterranean eruption that spread exotic lava throughout the caves of the western hemisphere. The surface temperature rose rapidly, leading to massive migration of graphitic ice on both poles. To add to the menace, a heavy meteor shower disrupted the flow of atmospheric gasses and pushed previously static masses of helium closer to the colony’s coordinates, infiltrating the upper caves and making them unsuitable for humans.

The colony sent a distress call minutes before the communications array was destroyed, but it would be another week until the message reached the nearest Guard outpost. In the meantime, events on Seta Prime were developing with a scary speed and the crew prepared to abandon the planet, salvaging the remnants of their valuable findings.

The infirmary was running out of medical supplies. Karo scurried into the cabin to get her private stash and found Ava still on the line with the main system controller inside Lomonosov. From several words she overheard, Karo deduced that Ava had a pretty clear idea of what was causing the destruction of the planet.

“Ava, hurry up, we need to get out of here,” Karo snapped. So many things had gone wrong, instantly turning her from a medical examiner into a paramedic. Among the wounded were colonists who worked in the furthest reaches of the caves, where a powerful tremor cracked the plateaus and lava was released. Karo treated the broken bones, second degree burns and gas poisoning of the survivors.

“Before I go, I need to take a look at the set where we removed that artifact,” Ava said as she disconnected her communicator.

“Oh no you don’t. It’s exactly where the break is and it’s much too dangerous. I just pulled out three victims with severe injuries from that quadrant.” Karo shared her friend’s passion for science, but times like this, the voice of logic had to rise above everything.

“I will be careful. I think I know why this is happening, but I need confirmation. It won’t take more than ten minutes.” Ava was already at the doorway.

“I urge you not to go, Ava. Come with me—I’m leaving for the ship now. The infirmary needs to be evacuated. Captain ordered an entire deck to accommodate the wounded. Sickbay is over its capacity.” Karo gave their cabin the final glance and turned to Ava.

“Go, Karo! We’ll remain connected on the Wire. The port to the Hub’s processor is still fully operational. I’ll be back in ten, I promise.” Ava seemed obsessed.

“Here, put this on. Whatever happens, do not remove this mask—the entire cave there is filled with poisonous gasses.” Karo threw a facial oxygenator to Ava, hoping for her friend’s survival instinct to take charge while reason was failing. She activated her hydroplastic gill protector filled with alginate gelatin, and the two parted from the rupturing hall.

Fleeing from the planet’s imminent destruction, Lomonosov broke Seta Prime’s orbit. The captain decided not to wait a minute longer—there was a good chance that the ship would get caught in the explosion.

Ava stared at the screen of her decoder.

Going down to the excavation site at the very last moment was a foolish thing to do. She felt dizzy after having inhaled heavily polluted air; her skin was still itching. In the cave, her oxygenator lasted

exactly eight minutes; after that, she was at the mercy of her human physiology and barely made it o
alive.

She wanted to know what went wrong on Seta Prime and spent sleepless days on the return trip
Earth analyzing the data, trying to find the exact cause of the catastrophe. Her calculations led her
one conclusion: the removal of a fossilized object inside one of the crust's deepest pockets set the
fireworks in motion.

Ava switched her scanner to the carbon dating mode and ran another series of tests. The artifact
age took her aback. A faint energy signal emitting from the object suggested this was a piece o
technology. Something in its configuration was oddly familiar. She reckoned there was also a goo
chance that the device was planted inside the planet's body on purpose. Whoever it was must hav
known about its destructive power. Could this be a set up, a millennia old trap they walked right into
Ava sent another message to Ian.

Karo came in with a cup of coffee.

"Keep going like this and you'll crash," she noted, handing Ava her dose of aromatic burnt umber.

"When was the last time you had a break?" Ava was just as concerned about Karo. Her glowing of
white skin masked signs of fatigue, but not those dark circles under her eyes. "How many doub
shifts have you been pulling?"

"Don't worry, my Andromedusan half compensates for losses like that. I'll be fine." Karo smile
She was grateful for the concern.

A buzz on the desktop interrupted their chat.

That was quick, Ava thought, patching through the incoming transmission.

Ian confirmed Ava's suspicions. The artifact was severely damaged, but with a few craft
manipulations he could tell its exact composition and uncovered what looked like a list of dates and
description of cataclysmic events, named metaphorically.

More work was needed to decipher the text in all accuracy. However, at this stage one thing was clea
the object bore the Makers' anti-matter signature.

A later buzz on her desktop awakened Ava from a dreamy state. What now, she thought, ploppin
down at the desk. When the transmission began decoding, her heart sank—it was the clinic. She
attributed Grandma's weak signal on the Wire to the distance between Earth and Seta Prime. She
been wrong.

Tarusian Flux

Mbwana lost his patience—Ian was not on the Wire and had been ignoring his transmissions again. I
didn't want to stalk his friend, but this couldn't wait. The information from his source on Sagittari
was worth the detour, so Mbwana turned his jet around and headed back to Earth.

Pacifying ocean waves along the room's walls were distracting Ian from something important—h
was trying to decrypt a code. Absentmindedly, he switched off the interior view decorator.

Right after her return from a dig in Sagittarius A, Ava brought an intriguing exhibit and insisted th
he work on it immediately. Solving the mystery seemed urgent to the Guard, and she wanted Ian
beat them to it. Ian had no objections—he was always up for a puzzle.

Disregarding the low pitched buzz from his desktop communicator, Ian succumbed to its countle
combinations. The thing looked more like an alien high tech device than an artifact, and he wonder
what it was meant to do.

Ava needed time alone to grieve. Her usual tactic of dealing with pain by condemning herself

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