



**CYRONAUT**

## Cryonaut

*Pins and needles shot deep into all nerves simultaneously. Someone put the kibosh on the little comatose ice-age I'd been having to myself. The window to my frozen coffin was too blurry; I couldn't imagine anything corporeal in place of the white blurs inching closer to me. A thick layer of ice had formed around the walls between me and... where was I? I had no clues beyond what lay between the ice and metal. The remnants of a sludgy-blue cryoprotectant sucked through two small drains next to my arms. The pins and needles feeling in my skin grew. My body started to shake uncontrollably. Strangely, no fear. Just... breathing. Just focus on my breathing. I think they're coming to retrieve me from this... frozen broom-closet.*

After the burst of air caused by depressurization, following the mechanical whirl of hinges lifting their grip, the door slid off.

As the numb tingling under my skin subsided, warmth took its place. Illusory warmth; the warmth that my body craved for god knows how many years. Just a smidge of warmth permitted, and I felt blanketed, hugged by warmth. Out of the ice womb and into the warm chrome walls and soft, white lighting of the room they had stored me in; sheltered by architecture that made one feel they were in the belly of an automaton. It turned out that I was the submissive recipient of a torment laden awakening. Dozens of chambers clustered about the expanse room and from what I saw, no one else was napping. All empty. A sight came into view, and all my fear thawed, taking motion. The shock made me stop shivering for a few seconds.

Thick glowing heads that were shouldered by bulky exoskeletons. Their necks were, proportionally, the largest part of their body, that is, if you compared them (which is nowhere near an easy task) to something anthropomorphic. Hard armored collars; ribbed bone covered the throat like a steel scarf, a very similar shape to the vertebrae covering a spine. They walked around spasmodically, carrying around their bulbous abdomens, on little needle legs and despite being thickly armored in most places, they had a smooth and round figure. Phosphorescent light glowed under their surface: slightly iridescent and slimy. I get the inclination they'd feel smooth to the touch. The fear and repulsion I felt was coupled with an appreciation for the creative beauty it took to make their forms. I beheld sculptures chiseled from nightmares.

Shards of ice hit the ground as I stood. My knees almost gave. If I'd staggered, one of those abominations might've tried to help me up with one of their filthy oozing feelers. Maybe they would have punished me for falling. Who knows what delights they'd have in store for a hairless simian play toy? I'm sure they'd have a wide variety of novel

torture methods they'd be oozing all over in excitement to experiment with. No, I did not fall. I missed the use my legs too badly to let them fail on me.

From my captor's presence, I could tell they wanted me to follow. What started as an attempt to walk, ended in painful limping and hobbling. One of my captors assumed a position in front of me, leading the way at a pace sympathetic to the state of my walking capabilities. The other captor followed from the back.

"Where am I?"

They halted. I waited patiently for a response of some kind, as if they'd actually understand me or care to give a response. None was given, at least not audibly. Gill like vents opened around their abdomen for a short time, then closed. Nothing. No sound. I continued to walk like a geriatric. How old was I? 1000 years old? ... 2000 years old? ... 20,000 years old? That would explain it. I guess I'm an old man now. I shouldn't be alive. cryochambers were never meant to last that long—besides, being frozen is supposed to turn your brain into mush. The only ones ever frozen were thanatophobes clinging onto their last stretch of life, with an excess of money burning a hole in their pocket. A scam. An elaborate rouse feeding rubes the hope that some day their cryopreserved bodies could be revived through some kind of freak breakthrough in neuroscience. I wondered how I had made it.

Smoothly sliding open, the door made a whirl that cut through the ambient noise of the ship. The walls of the hallways made me feel dizzy at first. They were animated. The wall's dim light pulsed. The exterior scurried and crawled over itself. I was insulated by, and led through, colonies of silverfish. Shifting and moving metals.

"Who am I?" I asked.

Nothing. My time spent in cryostasis must have triggered a fugue state or retrograde amnesia. It may have been bad, but as long as I didn't end up as their food, I'm sure one of those bugs would have made for a great lawyer. I'll sue... what was the name of that old corporation... *Cryo*—something or other... ah yes, *CryoAeternus. The warm, bright future is yet to be.* I guess that's where I was. The *warm, bright future.* The illusory warmth running through my body had subsided. shivering, naked, dehydrated. I had to expend my energy as best I could.

"Where are you taking me... I said, where are you taking me damnit!"

This time they didn't stop to open and shut their gills. We walked for maybe twenty minutes. I never thought it was going to end. My legs burned. I couldn't lift them by the time we got to the holding cells. The layout of the ship, if I was aboard a ship, was far from linear or uniform. The walls, morphing, seemed utterly different than just out of the napping room, like a Victorian, Constructivist, and Gothic architect all designed the same hallway. It wasn't exactly like that though, it was all alien and ungraspable;

dizzying. At first, they reminded me of silverfish; glossy and damp, alien skeleton. The further I walked, the more I perceived that the wall was made up of warm, dark, and begrimed crustaceans. Again, I think I'm failing to fully articulate the horror of it all. The walls wriggled and the build of it all made no sense to me, however there was fluidity to it. Whatever I was in, it felt alive. It felt like the inside of an organism. An organism might have different organs, musculature, and skeleton inside, and it might have different pathways that connect those parts like veins, arteries, etc. but the parts were not truly realized unless added toward their sum. So, I was failing to realize what kind of beast I was in. The different sectors we moved through were so alien and colossal, there was no way of wrapping one's head around it. The passageways, tunnels, and hallways made me claustrophobic sometimes and puny others. What started to make me queasy was the faint smell of burnt metal. It smelled like a workroom full of burnt solder. There was something else in the reek. I don't have a word for it other than something organic; bile or manure. My head started to hurt.

"put me back under the goddamn ice."

We stopped. They beckoned me into one of the darkest voids I'd ever seen.

The door hummed close behind me. I felt around. The floor was sleek, like it had just been mopped with oil. I took a long breath. The air in here was fresh. If I had to guess, I'd say I was in an 8x8 room. The walls too, were featureless and smooth.

Something darted past me, agile and small. Just my eyes messing with me in this thick dark. I felt my veins tightening. My heart, the metronome of my waltz, pounded as if it wasn't a thousand years old. Slowly the ambient lights undimmed and revealed the burning reflections I had touched earlier. All six enclosing sides bounced warm yellow light off each other. I was in a chamber of reflection—the still mirrors contrasting what was outside made the shock even greater—with no possible way escaping the sight of my pale hairless body. No hair on my head, no eyebrows, no pubic hair. My lips still retaining streaks of pale blue. "That's who I am," I thought. I stared into his eyes. "I'm the pale bag of bones in front of me. The eyes... horrific, magnetic, and filled with black matter reflected back into themselves. . ."

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Primordial man is molten and poured into a soul binding cast. By chance or by god's creation, he takes the shape of a hero. And when faced with a hopeless situation, an opportunity for courage and sacrifice, he has the volition to raise his sword. Most people, either by grace or by negligence, who are poured out of the great existence invoking crucible, are misshapen after being molded. The common men among us have

many cracks, dents, and deformities, alterations in structure, but not alterations in substance. We are all molded from the same clay. We are all god's great creation, no matter our disfigurements. Finally, there are the monsters, who possess a shine that looks realer than the real thing, and yet, they are made of a completely different alloy. They are not the same as us. They have tar running through their veins. Monsters do exist. The hero, the every-man, and the monster.

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The crowd's stares had been unvarying; both reflective and penetrating like silver. A line of perspiration had been slugging its way down my forehead for an unnerving amount of time. I wiped it off onto the sleeve my uniform. I never liked this sanctuary, no stained glass, no beauty, no life; people don't know how to worship unless they're surrounded by things that give them meaning. The room was grey, metallic, and sanitary. Nothing like the cozy brick chapels living under the Sycamore trees and in the humid grasslands of central Kansas, where I grew up attending church. I've delivered worse sermons here, on this TTRC bubble, than I ever did in Kansas. The Terrain Transforming Recorrection Colonies held about 20,000 workers per camp. Everyone and Anyone who had been tried and found guilty of breaking the law got sent here. The worse the crime, the harsher the planet you'd be staying on for your sentence. Although, even if the judge sent you to Zeta Alon, you got off lucky. No chains, no guards (although there were peacekeepers) watching your every move and waiting for you to slip up to pounce on your head and back with a truncheon; you still had to wear uniform, just out of practicality reasons. Space rations were about as bad as prison food used to be when they were still around: *SOYFUL: Ain't it just joyful to drink Soyful - meal replacement drinks and snacks!* And *SynthJerky: Grown in family owned labs and sent straight to your cupboard.*

I can't say that I'd be able to sit and defend the new ways of incarceration after missioning in one of them. If an old jailor, in favor of abolishing the 78<sup>th</sup> world peace amendment, sat in front of me now, and debated me over whether we should start erecting prisons again, I wouldn't be able to argue a case for the new ways. Many people still think the colonists (or 'criminals' as they used to be called) belong stuck between 3 cement walls and a set of cast iron bars, shackled and caged. Not free to their own devices after their allotted amount of labor has been finished. I don't know whether we should regress back into using shackles, officers, CNS stabilizers, Artificial Empath Interrogators, the infallible MindScreens, or any number of those medieval, barbarous implementations. As the historians, sociologists, and psychologists would be

quick to point out, we all know that would lead down its slippery slope until we were using pincers and Judas Chairs again. Either that, or we'd be complete and total slaves to the law. No living in a surveillance state for me, thank you. The only thing I'd have to say about the whole ordeal is that I've seen a lot of monsters, real life monsters, down there on those colonies. Real evil does exist.

There's a colonist I visit from time to time. Nicolaus and I would talk for hours some days, although some days not so long; he was a shaken man, unable to find any good footing no matter where he tried his heel. There were worse men there than him, but they didn't show up to congregation. That isn't to say that there weren't many there looking for redemption, because there were. Oh, at least they knew how many demons took up lodging near their hearts. They knew that evil existed too, some more keenly than others. A lot of them knew they were evil, real material evil. The people sitting in the folding chairs in front of me, as I speak right now, couldn't have a clue.

There was a good turnout this Sunday. ... "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" ...

Nicolaus was abused as a child by his father. His mother had died from an untreated brain tumor when he was around seven years old. His father would drink the money he earned, if he was capable of holding down a job for a while. His mother's salary was used for Nicolaus and his brothers. His father would even drink from that money too. Anyways, I guess his mom was too busy and too down in the dirt poor to see a doctor. After she passed, there wasn't ever a time he saw his dad sober. Nicolaus told me that she wanted to die, that she was secretly praying for it. By the time Nicolaus came home from Academy, his dad had already spent the better part of the day wasting away. Always loaded, ready to go off at any time. If he came home and didn't do his chores right away, if he missed a spot scrubbing the floor or mowing the lawn, if he got a tiny speck of mud on the carpet, if he slammed the door closed too loudly, if he greeted his dad the wrong way, if he missed a speck washing dinner off his plate, if he looked at his dad the wrong way, then it was the leather strap.

"I'm grateful to him. he taught me the most important thing there is to know in life. Fear and pain. One day I came home late from drinking with the guys and without fail, he was waiting for me in his favorite chair, fidgeting with his favorite cut of leather. I had grown older. My dad was a tall son-of-a-bitch, big too. He asks, "What the hell took you so long, shit heel?" I stopped going to academy. I would wake up, get dressed, go out the front door, wait a few minutes, and then sneak back in through the window to my room and sleep. At night I went to the arcades, drinking until dusk. "I'm going to bed." I said. "Not yet you aren't", he moved quick for a drunk, whipped me across the ear and side of my face. I caught him on the jaw, real clean, and he fell back into the chair. All he could do was just look at me. "I'll see you in the morning" he said as I was



going up stairs. “How about right now?” he didn’t have much to say then. I remember thinking, this must be what’s it like to grow up.”

Nicolaus moved out. He got involved with the Triad somehow in his youth. Became a salt pusher. He got hooked on the stuff himself. He met a girl out hustling and they became friends. When the first child came, he quit the business and got a job with Labor Corp. When the second child came he went back to selling. He would take more than he sold, something that the Triad caught on to and didn’t approve of too much. He was in the arcades pushing when a couple of Itami took him out back. Bats, rods, feet, mercilessly mangling his back. More than one vertebra in his back, twisted and broken. One of them had jutted out against his spinal cord and pinched the nerves, giving him chronic pain for the rest of his life. Salt wasn’t enough to dull the pain.

“I would take Fentanyl until I couldn’t feel anything. The only problem was the withdrawal. The morning after when I had nothing. No hope. My kids starving. My wife whoring herself out. When the withdraw kicked in, I lived the injury all over again. I would catch myself screaming and delirious, paralyzed in bed. I would get mad at myself, at the world, at God, screaming hoarse. At a certain point I learned to enjoy the screaming. Fear and pain. My kids couldn’t understand why I was screaming. I beat them, so they could understand.”

His kids showed up at the ER with brain trauma and cranial bleeding. Four and six years old, malnourished and abused. They’ll be stunted for the rest of their lives. God’s most precious beings: children. Tragedy doesn’t describe the kind of wickedness of it all; the kind of black hopelessness one feels when hearing a story like that. Unimaginable cruelty that hits you in the gut and drops you to your knees. Kids are the most undeserving, innocent, and sweetest of God’s creatures.

I want to say that God always granted me strength for these kinds of dealings. I want to say that God exalted me so that I could in turn lift the people around me. I want to say that I was always prepared to listen to confessions and be confided in and still have the strength to guide God’s will into any sinner’s heart I came across. I want to say these things, but being a pastor wore on me. I’m tested day after day just like everyone else. Where are the fruits gained from my effort? Preaching can be rewarding, but it’s never in the ways you’d expect. There are times that it took pouring every ounce of my strength into helping someone, but to no avail. I’ve failed many. And then, blindsided, there are others whom I’ve made fundamental changes in their life without noticing. It is never by my own accordance that I make a difference in the world, but by God’s hand.

“I’m going to be here until I die. A life sentence here, and an eternal sentence after I die. What am I supposed to pray for? What do I tell god, father? What am I supposed to say when I know I deserve ever-lasting torment? I deserve Hell’s most agonizing

attractions, everything it has to offer. I believe the wicked, like me, will pay our debts. What can God do for those who are so wicked, who's souls are so black that they suck in and nullify every living thing around them. Well, what do you say father? Don't give me any of that clean slate or forgiveness bullshit. There are some people on this ship worse than me. Are you telling me that the ones who've killed and raped and cheated are going to be given everlasting paradise because they've gotten bored with it all and decided to take up the gospel? Is that what you'd say, father?"

I said 'I think your reasons are justified, but I'm afraid are completely wrong. Man is greater than even his greatest mistake and that's the gift god gave us when he sent his only son. Even the worst atrocities are too weak to shut God's love out.'

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I woke up to two sets of clothing, two trays full of green and orange mush, two buckets of water. The doubles were false forms created by the smooth reflective floor. There was also something else here. An ancient, worn leather bound book wrapped in cloth. I stood, still weak. The food was hot, but it smelled bland. I took a bite, and then another, and then I couldn't stop until the tray was clean. It tasted bland too, but It felt like mainstreaming pure energy. After the food, I gulped down the water so fast that I almost puked. I laid back down. I could feel my digestive track starting to wake up again. Sharp pains started in my sides. I could feel my stomach turning in knots. Good thing I emptied the bucket.

I took a few hours to adjust. My stomach started to feel better. I remembered the creatures and the cryochamber, it felt like a dream. I spent most of my time lying there trying to remember who I was, how I got here, and where I came from.

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I heard "come in" like it had originated from inside the sealed and pressurized, carbon printed door in front of me. It leapt from the speaker system in the waiting room. Entering Commander Benson's office, the end of his Terran cigarette sizzled as flame rubbed against it. The weightless streaks of smoke rolled through the air, doing summersaults over each other, until they dissipated into the vent above his desk.

"ahhh, father, just the man I wanted to see, take a seat." He got up and poured two glasses of brandy, the good stuff, distilled and aged on a Cygnus colony. He sat down and scooted the drink in my direction.

"I appreciate the offer, bu.."



“yeah, yeah, yeah, all that ‘the easiest way to lose your soul is down the hole of a whiskey bottle’.” He shot the drink he poured for himself and nursed the one he poured for me. “you’re gonna need it though.”

“If it’s about those men in my congregation.”

“stop. not now. We’ll talk about it another time.”

“Then what did you call me in for Benson?”

He sighed deeply and then took another drag of his cigarette, “I need to ask you for another favor. An important favor.”

“No.”

“I need another group of… men. The ones I have are becoming restless.”

“I’ve made up my mind. Find someone else.”

“Find someone else! You’re the only person on this colony who can put them back together again. The ones we have down there are starting get a mad look in their eyes. I need replacements and… and the ones who came back, I need you to screw their heads on straight again. ‘All the kings’ horses and all the king’s men’ that’s everyone except you. You’re a freak saint; ‘Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils.’ He let out a brief sardonic laugh. “You can save them after they come back. When the go down there they turn… like… like cigarette smoke turns stale.” He took another drag.

“I can’t save them,” I was starting to get agitated.” The folds of my eyelids sat lazily above my iris, wanting to slip and sink shut. A restless night and a restless day behind me. “I’m the one who walked in on Mercer. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Mercer’s case was a tragedy, but his death might benefit mankind forever. He died a hero. Most people never have that opportunity. Look, I’m sorry that things turned out this way.”

I got up to walk away. When I got near the door he said, “We found something there, under the ice.” Hesitantly, I looked back at his spade jawed face. I sat back down.

The colony we were living on sat in the misty purple tundra like a tick. Almost unnoticeable when focusing on the vast body it was attached too. When one finally sees the black repulsive eyesore burrowed under the skin of its colossal host, the defilement

of it all sits with you and doesn't leave. The blemish sat a dozen miles or so from a soaring ice crag surrounded by an expanse crystal azure terrain. Throughout fretted landscape laid sparse pockets filling the air with blueish-purple ice vapor. Near the crag stood a jutting coast dividing the ice from an endless ocean filled with stinging blue water.

"It's truly remarkable, like nothing I've seen before. I want you to take a trip down under the ice tonight."

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The exosuit felt like a tailored coffin, in exchange for claustrophobia, I could survive the trek through the sub-cavernous ice. We had become alien termites, burrowing through the foreign ground, intrusively terraforming our way through the neighboring planets and environments we didn't belong in.

"How are you holding up down there." It was Benson lined in through my comm-system.

"I'm fine. What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"Not yet, you've got a ways to go. A subordinate will be approaching your position soon in a TORaX."

The tunnel seemed to span miles under the surface. The ice seemed different than any I've ever seen before. Almost like it didn't fit in with our conceived notions of matter and the laws of physical states. It was veined, but I don't think the substance contained in the cave walls had an element of preciousness to them like in most mines. The element laid in the streaks was too abundant and strange looking for me to think that it could be beneficial if extracted and exported back to one of our system hubs. It had a viscous luminescent quality to it that saved our excavation team the trouble of setting up a lit way down. I wanted to go home back to the sycamores.

A big drilled vehicle zoomed towards me. My ride down.

It continued like it had the entire way, at the same slope. It could have been half an hour until we reached the site. The stuff in the walls oozed its way down into a sub-cavernous pool. A bridge of ice, only wide enough for two men to walk over if they were striding shoulder to shoulder, laid as our way into the cavern. It led up a little, arching over the blue antifreeze looking sludge, into a natural made cave. In each subsection of the cave, the ceiling bounded upwards like in a cathedral, the glowing ice

looked like monochrome stained glass. The entrances and exits to the subsections seemed like they had been modified as such, but not by our men.

“Did the maintenance team chisel these pathways out?”

“This is the way we found it. Keep going.” Benson commanded in my ear.

“Are you going to tell me what this little errand is all about?”

“it’s further down, keep going.”

When I took my last step through the passage way, I didn’t expect to see anything. My mental state had taken a static form, preparing me in no way for whatever Benson had in store for me. I had respected his position and he respected mine, that was until he eluded to his true mission. Through the silently consuming hush of secrecy I did his bidding, sending certain members of my congregation down here. Few at first, the healthy ones, the ones with the capabilities he had specified.

The first came up utterly broken. Shells of men. They all came back with that same icy stare. I did it to them. I sent them to their ruin. I’m only a shepherd of husks and a creator of hollow men. Will God forgive the preacher who guides God’s hand over lost men? Will I be absolved for standing up and dictating the good word over a room full of empty stares? Mercer was among the first to go down here. Am I going to end up like him? Is someone going to walk in on me swinging by my neck from a rope? At what cost did I take this trip down here?

The expanse square hallway spanned on for at least a mile. The width of hallway was as large as a military hanger. A group of men were standing around something in the wall. Then, I noticed that what they were looking at wasn’t unique to just that spot in the ice. Whatever it was, inside the ice, appeared over and over again, making neat, uniformly periodic rows and columns, stretching all the way down the end of the room.

“I’ve planned a little show just for you. Tell me what you think.”

I ran toward the men, startling a few of them. Two were holding plasma cutters and some others had flamethrowers. I had hoped that my eyes had deceived me when I first entered the room. Unfortunately, they hadn’t. I had been right. Stagnant lifeforms.

Something goes pitter patter in the dark and in a nanosecond, you’ve conjured something out of the umbrage of the deep tar pool of nightmares that you hide down within; a chimera, a razor-toothed cacogen, and of course the serpent is always there. But it was just a nanosecond and you supply enough plausible realities to cancel out all

horrors you had just thought of, although, what is to be noted is, it was much easier to see the serpent than it was to see the crooked twig. It was much more natural to see a shape shifting demon than to see a deer delicately feeding in the peace of night. But now I knew I had not been mistaken.

The two men with the plasma cutters assumed their stage marks. The incisions caused a strange reaction to occur in the ice. It all started to gain motion and the slender white alien body inside began to shift. Whatever devilish form I was looking at that laid inside, was too hellish to belong in Gehenna or Tartarus. Its slender white lanky body fell through the torrent of icy fluid. As it poured forward its skin started to gain a blackness to it and its eyes, its horrible bulbous eyes, started to glow and flicker. It convulsed violently. Reborn. Wanting to live. Waiting for its chance. It took it, moving grabbing, pulling its way out of the sludge.

They flamed it, aborting it before it got the chance to live again. What was left pooled together in a flat sphere, drawing into itself. The substance that made up the ice deceived one's notions of the elements like mercury.

“What did you think.” I could feel him smiling. “this is worth more than any Mercer. Just wait until you see the little encore we've got planned for you. Ohh Ohh Oooooohh this is going to be a good one. Hold on, don't go anywhere, hahaha. Let me get a cigar. When's the last time you've been to a play, preacher? Oh, never mind that, never mind that. Actually, have you ever heard of Chekhov's gun? Chekhov wasn't a Russian Hydragnat manufacturer, he was a playwright. Fine, fine works. Chekhov's gun: Never write about a gun mounted on the wall above the dacha fireplace unless it's going to be fired by one of the characters. I'll give you a piece of advice. It's not just a rule of writing, it's a rule governing those who wield power as well. What do they tell colony recruiters? Never draw your weapon unless you intend to fire it. In my position I don't get to draw my weapon that often. A good commander doesn't need to. A good commander knows how to play chess. When to move which pieces where. Just remember, I will use all of my pieces.”

Before I knew it, they had my arms behind my back. Then, hypodermic tranquility.

“The first reports to come back from biology were contradictory. I didn't know what to make of it all myself. If they were alive, then where were their settlements? At first, I thought this was some kind of graveyard, but when we tried to extract them, we found out they weren't dead, just sleeping. If they were still alive, then where were the others? It wasn't adding up. We reached an impasse; the tests were all found out to be inconclusive. The last option was extracting a live specimen, but we're just a TTRC. Piss poor armaments wouldn't stand a chance if something went wrong. What if one got loose and decided to wake up his buddies? So that leaves a few options, phone it in to

command or keep researching. I've come too far to have this taken away from me. Do you think I'm just going to let them come in here and take it over? 'Thanks Commander Benson for finding this. We appreciate it so much that we're going to send you to another shithole planet filled with prisoners.' This is my discovery. It doesn't belong to the octarchy. It belongs to me."

They started tying ropes to my arms and feet. A few of the men hammered pitons into the sides of the section in the wall where the alien had been suspended. They prodded me into the wall and tied my ropes to the spikes. After I had been drooping there for some time, another man entered our section of the cave. On his back he wore a tank on his back connected to the large gun in his hands.

Benson was enjoying himself, there was not an ounce of remorse in his voice. "You've done a lot for us, preacher. Let me return the favor. I'll give you a blessing before you go under. Our Commander Benson who art heavenly, holy be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done..."

The same blue element that had been in the walls shot out of gun. As soon as it hit my legs, no feeling.

"Give us this day, our daily brandy and cigars, and forgive us our stupidity. For we forgive those..."

\* \* \*

"Jonas, wake up. We're going to be late."

"10 more minutes, even God sleeps in on Sundays."

Outside my window, the trees were ablaze with oranges and reds. Ember leaves floated toward the ground. Underneath the sycamores laid scattered wheels of hay. The harvester's combines threw year old dust into the air. Thank god it was fall and the brutality of summer had subsided. I had to wake up extra early to help father with the service and he would be upset if I slept in.

"This would be your twenty-second autumn. You were born in the heat of summer and grew during the decay of autumn. What a fine son you've grown to be, Jonas. Come over here and help me." I could tell that something weighed on his mind. "When is your ship leaving for the mission?"

"You already know. I'm leaving in two weeks."

“yes, of course. What a complicated thing it is to be a father. Part of me wants to postpone the entire thing. If I could have brought myself to call off the mission, I would have. Then again, you’re always going to be too young to grow, until you do grow. One of life’s funny paradoxes. It tears me up inside thinking of seeing you board and lift out of orbit.”

“You worry too much; the eight kingdoms of Sol aren’t as dangerous as they make themselves out to be. Besides, you travelled them when you were younger than I am now.”

“Yes, that is true. I made many mistakes too. What I wouldn’t give to be young again. Youth is wasted on the young. Haha, another paradox. Life is full of jokes if you have a sense of humor. There is something I wanted to give you before you left. I’ll be right back.”

I lit the candles and knelt before the altar. Was I going to miss my home? It’s all I’ve known. Was I going to miss my family? Yes. Why do I itch to get away? I only see my trip as a haven, as if the walls of the transport ship were made of happiness itself and the planets having no malignant agents. I could picture some things going wrong. Our ship could malfunction, we could be robbed or imprisoned by slavers, I could fall victim to the temptations of the eight pleasure spheres and lose my faith, I could get lost from my party and not be able to get back to earth. I could imagine all these things, but I never truly believed in them, as if they could surely happen to someone else, but not me. They didn’t seem real, just some grim fairy tale I’d contracted from my father. No, like I said, all I saw was happiness and freedom and adventure. Like none of my problems could find me up there, off earth.

“Jonas,” my father said. I got up and saw a water logged, stained, and warped book. Its leather binding was still holding the antique pages together. “It’s a bible, Jonas, our family’s bible. My great-great-grandfather and your great-great-great grandfather, bought it on a colony, bought it for your great-great-great grandmother the day after they met. It’s yours now. Don’t use it to preach with, use a regular bible. This one’s for safe keeping and cherishing. Keep it out of the sun, wrap it in silk, and make sure it stays in your care. Only open it when it calls you, you will find what you are looking for if you search hard enough.”

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Without memory, time ceases to exist and the gift, the present, only remains. Try to think of this exact second, the span of time you are currently existing in, and as soon as you do, it slips out of your hands like ether. The tighter you try to hold on to it, the easier it is lost. The present is the past then. If you had no memory, would you too

become ether. Could you even call yourself a man? What would you be other than habit. When your past ceases to exist, your future too can exist no longer. I think that whoever decided to call this exact moment present, was mistaken. It should be the future that is called the present, because it is the gift of life that will be received. The present is ether. The past is as dead as death.

My memories came back to me in the form of hide tides crashing over my head. Or sometimes as flickering specters. Or sometimes they knocked on my door and I answered to what will never be again. I remember that I am a preacher. That one was a surprise. I guessed that I had been a desk jockey for a mining company. I still feel that way. I remember I was on a prison colony when... Benson and the ice. Aliens different than the ones who thawed me. They're just as ghastly though. How long before they devour me? Or worse.

I could not discern where the door stood in my cell. It was all mirror. I must wait until they open it again to feed me. But, what if it's too late then? I grabbed the weighty tome on the floor and unfolded its spine. It was in fact the bible my father had given me when I was a young man. Now, grey shines through my unkempt beard. A picture fell to the floor. It was old and grainy. A woman was hugging and kissing a man in front of an old obsolete cargo ship. The man was smiling and wore a uniform of some kind. I don't think he was with the force however. I picked up the picture and eyed it a bit longer. Turning it over, reading *11-17-20, Nastasya and Ash*. I put it back where it had been.

The cleansing relief of tears clung to my cheeks. Down, down, down they poured and down, down, down my body fell. It sunk into me, the absurdity, the grief, the regret. I hurt more people than I ever helped. The colonists and, more importantly, my family. They're all dead, everyone. And although my body was preserved, I am dead. I died when I was in space. At least, that's what I pray for. I am a tree without branches or leaves or ground, suspended in black. I'm a heart without organs or veins or arteries, that continues to beat.

I held my bible to my chest and prayed.

\* \* \*

They let me go. Out of the chamber of reflection, into the moving halls. Out of crawling corridors, into a long and narrow escape pod (I presume, for it was shaped like a large torpedo and did not look like it could accommodate one of their own). There was a vacuum sealed window in front of me. If I wasn't lying down, I would have fallen. The purple, blue, and pink of burning hydrogen flowing across a billion diamonds. The alien ship was in my blind spot, else I wouldn't have minded it obstructing my view to sate



curiosity. Maybe I'm not dead. The promise I made in my prayers, the pleading... No, I am not dead. I will live.

Why? Why did they let me live? Why didn't they enslave me or cook me for dinner? Why did they put me in that room? Why? Why? I've lost my mind. I must have lost my mind.

The heavens sped past me until all I saw before my eyes was analog noise. It continued like that for a long time.

\* \* \*

I couldn't tell how long I'd been fasting for, it felt like three days because I was ravenous. They crammed me into the torpedo with a weird, slimy, translucent pouch full of green tinted water; I held my bible across my chest. It tasted very bitter, the water. The pouch holding it was semi-sweet and turned out edible. I saw what I thought to be Saturn but wasn't sure if I could trust my eyes. Then Mars. Then Earth. It didn't look like the earth at first. The continents were smaller; they looked like someone had taken a chisel at them. They were torn, uneven, and crooked with almost saw-toothed coasts. It was a bluer earth than I had left. There were more islands and archipelagos. The tectonic plates had shifted to such a degree that there was no point of familiarity to attach my eyes to. The battered new world.

The torpedo hit the atmosphere, gradually slowly until gracefully landing upright atop the pale-green soil of steppe shrubland. The door opened, and I fell to my knees, bible still in hand. Grieved and troubled and wary, cast up onto dry land, I stood, and commanded myself forward.