

Table of Contents

Sell-outs
Black Market
Ice Hangar
Dead Drop Society
Sub-level
Offshore
The Fright Machine
Permian Spring
The Sargasso Void
Proxathlon
Sonic Crab
Zeeper
Nagasaki
The Tesseract

Bill Kandiliotis
Ytterbium Fires

A short story collection

First published by Bill Kandiliotis in 2018

Copyright © Bill Kandiliotis, 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

First Edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

Find out more at reedsy.com

Contents

Sell-outs
Black Market
Ice Hangar
Dead Drop Society
Sub-level
Offshore
The Fright Machine
Permian Spring
The Sargasso Void
Proxathlon
Sonic Crab
Zeeper
Nagasaki
The Tesseract

1

Sell-outs

What if I were to tell you that a vast galactic civilisation exists, much older than ours; that this space-faring society was a great consumer of things?

Art, food and resources...

...that we Earthlings are a newly discovered delicacy and that a vast market waits.

Is this a bad outcome for mankind or a good one? If a taste for humans takes off, if this becomes more than just a fad, to feed such a vast market, how many billions of people would need to be exported to meet such demand? Billions more would be required to be bred to sustain supply. Humanity will eventually be farmed on other planets across galaxies.

A shortcut for humanity to spread across the stars, yes?

What if I were to tell you that the wretched and corrupt among us were to abandon resistance and flock to these new overlords, selling out their fellow humans in a mad scramble to secure their own individual survival, to carve out their own suzerainty over the helpless, clueless majority?

You would say this is ridiculous.

I would say that this has already occurred.

**first appeared commaful.com*

2

Black Market

“I am pleased to announce that we have slain the dragon.”

MercurEx employees, gathering around the trading oval, cheered enthusiastically, the type of reaction James Tucker had hoped for. He needed them to know how much he valued their support.

He wanted them to trust him again. He wanted to trust them back.

“The hypergoblin incursion has been neutralised. It seems we have apparently become experts at killing these things.”

The remark drew laughter.

He knew they hankered for a joke and so he gave them one, even though he feared a remnant of the demented zoid could still be lurking freely within his ethersphere.

Tucker could not afford another setback, so he deemed moving forward with looming unresolved threats a calculating risk.

A daring risk?

Maybe.

A huge risk?

Undoubtedly.

Well, risk-taking is an uberman's business.

“I am also pleased to announce that the government has set a date for a debate on currency deregulation. This means MercurEx is back in business.”

Cheers from his employees filled Tucker's chest with hope and confidence. “Eighty percent of our fellow citizens have lost confidence in the current real estate backed cryptocurrency. Sixty percent support deregulation. I smell inevitability in the air, so, regardless of the outcome, regardless whether it is legal or not, MercurEx will declare itself a sovereign entity and the path will be set for us to issue our own currency.”

Tucker felt the gasps of surprise, like air being sucked out of the room. “Every stakeholder including each of you will receive an equal non-transferable share which entitles one to voting rights, access to services and income.”

Speaking over jubilant applause Tucker pressed on. “The key elements in our endeavour are close to realisation. We have already implemented our own in-house time based monetary system. For now, every Mercury Hour you get paid MercurEx buys it back at six federas. I believe in the future this unit of account will dominate the competition. Why? Because time is the most valuable asset an individual will ever possess. When, and I mean when, deregulation occurs our competitors will be peddling the same old interest-bearing kleptocurrencies, money designed to move capital in one direction. MercurEx will be offering not only a local communal monetary system, not even a regional one but a global system. The store of value in our system, for the time being, is MercurEx stock and holdings. In the future, it will be the Global Stock Exchange. It will be the intermarket.”

Tucker waited for the excitement to ease. “The last piece of the puzzle we need to realise is our medium of exchange. This is why I have pursued vigorously to merge technology with finance.

Bionaut has finally developed fourth generation capabilities and is ready to go. No, our superzoid is busting to go. The only thing stopping us right now is that NASE 2.0 still isn't ready yet. This is where my priorities currently stand and I will be working to get the NASE hardware up and rolling as fast as I can. So, bear with me, we still have a long way to go."

Tucker spent the next few minutes discussing trivial matters with his mercurians, joking with them, appreciating each affectionate smile, and thankful for their unadulterated attentiveness. He didn't need newsfeeders and rankerphiles to tell him he had the best staff in the world.

Tucker only hoped he could remain the best boss in the world.

With great reluctance, he dismissed everyone and MercurEx returned to its usual hum of capital traders, social developers, marketing engineers, hypernauts and consumer guardians. His human personal assistant Rebeka walked up to him, the concern on her face a stark reminder of the hazardous adventures that were scheduled for the day. "I've been unable to contact Mr Blackwell," she said.

"He's stonewalling."

Asshole.

Tucker never expected such nasty tactics from his close acquaintance, a peer he considered a friend first and foremost.

He felt betrayed.

He found it hard to stomach it.

It made him feel sick.

Tucker couldn't allow it dragging on.

"I know where that knucklehead frolics," he said and headed towards the greeting gallery. "I guess I'll have to pay him an impromptu visit."

"I'll book a taxicab for you." offered Rebeka, her look of concern unchanged.

Once outside, the sweltering air pounded against Tucker's skin the second he passed through the lobby's giant revolving doors. Titanic pieces of moving glass that never failed to intimidate.

Tucker legged it to the nearest transtop, joining a medley of commuters coveting the free rides offered by the local city district. Wondering what delayed his pre-booked taxicab James Tucker jostled for a better vantage point on a notoriously hectic stretch of Ocean Drive.

Hypergoblin crisis averted.

Tucker felt something strange overwhelm him.

For now.

He didn't know what. He couldn't work it out.

A paranoid sensation burning in his ears.

He cast his eye out to the bluezone crowd and spotted a few eyes looking back. Nothing threatening, just the occasional fans who have noticed an uberman in their midst.

Ex-uberman.

Unless a reverse in his fortunes occurs his days as a celebrated, revered fame junky would be gone forever. The uberisque crowd had grown younger and more competitive. He became chief executive of a major corporation at age nineteen.

Now you have seventeen-year-olds out there.

It saddened him little. The world had put too much pressure on its youth. He felt an acute loss of innocence back then and pitied those kids.

A flash of white blotted out half his vision.

A loud screech followed the commercial cargovan as it stopped abruptly right in front of him.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Tucker's brain ceased to function, stalled by the occurrence.

React, you dumb son of a bitch, his internal voice screamed at him as a slit appeared in the white panel. The side door slid open, revealing a gaping dark interior. Two gloved arms lashed out and quickly grabbed Tucker, violently pulling him inside the cargovan.

The side door slammed shut behind him as the sudden motion of the vehicle taking off added to his disorientation. Thrown onto the bare steel floor he stumbled in the darkness, straining his eyes to get a look at his kidnappers.

He saw a fist fly at him and smack the side of his head. Tucker fell on his back, his hands in the air, submissively. Seconds of confusion reigned in his mind, again looking past his outstretched arms to get a glimpse of his attacker. What he saw intensified his fears. A brutish, well-built man donning black commando overalls and a black ski mask crouched casually over him.

The man pointed something at his face. Tucker strained his eyes further to get them to focus on the well-forged object of death. His brain went numb... until he remembered his training. Tucker never prepared for such an occasion. He knew the statistics were high, even within the bluezone. Arrogance got the better of him, shunning bodyguards and corporate security while most others in his position did quite the opposite. Operational security in a majority of companies gobbled on average a third of profits.

MercurEx spent zero.

He built a corporate empire on giving out free product and making no enemies and supporting bluezoners, slumfolk and refugians alike, whenever possible.

Who needed operational security?

Now he delved into his military service past, searching for survival tips.

“Easy!” he yelled as years of training kicked in.

Fear not the enemy. Fear the emotion that hamstring intuition.

Fear itself.

“Whatever it is you want? I’ll cooperate!”

“Is that right?” grunted the brute.

“I have no wish to become a statistic.”

Tucker had never in his life faced anything as precarious as this. In his tour of duty during the Phosphorus Wars he had come face to face with tecto-rifle wielding warlords, but over there he was armed to the tooth and in the company of expertly trained troopers.

The brute reached over and plucked the Kinefone lobeset from Tucker's ear.

Assess the situation.

Tucker's heart thumped harder, feeling the adrenaline rushing to his head. Outside the multiple arches of the Gateway Bridge grew in the distance. They were heading north along Ocean Drive, away from the bluezone.

Ransom?

The possibility crossed his mind.

Statistically, and traditionally it was the sport for amateurs.

Statistically, and traditionally these affairs usually ended in grief for both parties. He hoped these weren't the regular garden variety gangsters.

Tucker looked past the brute, at the passenger, dressed exactly the same.

A woman!

The body shape and the short blond hair protruding from the ski mask implied that it was, though he couldn't tell for sure. Among the body odour and gunalene oil, he detected a faint jasmine aroma.

Or witch hazel.

The woman thumbed away at an old style touchy.

Who uses a touchy these days?

Maybe they don't trust zoids?

What the hell do these people want?

His brain exploded with questions. The sooner he found out the answer to these the quicker he could formulate a response. If he let them carry out their plans, unopposed, Tucker knew, from all the newsfeeder spawned statistics that he'll most likely wind up dead.

He needed to press the issue a little, so he decided to provoke them.

"Listen, I get the message. There is no need to take this any further. Give me a figure and we can work something out. How does that sound?"

A third goon in the driver's seat, also in black overalls and ski mask, looked at him with cold, youthful eyes.

A young adult? A kid? What the fuck?

Driving?

Who drives?

Tucker concluded these goons had an aversion to using virtual intelligent agents. It made sense in a way. The fakes were notoriously unreliable. Sure, they navigated vehicles, operated machinery, managed offices, controlled data systems, regulated every aspect of human life safely and efficiently, but they also possessed a mind of their own.

Never proven whether the zoids were advanced algorithms or truly sentient this factor alone unnerved most people. For others, the simple fact that these virtual creatures owed no allegiance to any human was another cause for concern. Zoids either did what was asked of them or they didn't. Some even went rogue, hence the trouble with hypergoblins.

Still, the technology spread everywhere.

Why do something when a zoid can do it for you.

With one hand holding the small piece of artillery fixed at Tucker's face the brute used his other hand to take the touchy from the woman.

He shoved it into Tucker's belly. "You are gonna to contact your broker." said the brute, with a calm yet menacing voice. "You are going to buy a particular stock. If you deviate from any of my instructions..."

He pointed towards the rear of the van, "...we will throw you into the path of an oncoming freight truck for the entire world to see."

Tucker looked towards the rear and felt the rumbling of the road. He'd seen a number of snuff victims on DisasterCaster. The waves were full of these disturbing killings. Murder for entertainment sat second to pornography.

With dread infecting his thoughts he attempted to explain. "I don't have a broker."

I killed my broker!

Tucker couldn't work out how to explain without alienating his abductors.

My broker's a fake.

My broker turned hypergoblin.

"You don't seem to understand." The brute sounded annoyed.

Tucker nodded.

"I'll make the call." Tucker pressed at icons, something he hadn't done in a long time until he brought up the MercurEx corefront. He keyed in his persona details and for a brief tense moment, he thought his access would be denied.

He was relieved to hear the sound of a familiar voice.

#Is this my highly esteemed boss?#

Hermes.

A reliable superzoid. Cunning. Inquisitive.

Maybe a mistake.

"Don't talk to any human, asshole." The brute poked the gun-barrel into Tucker's temple. "And no fucking hand gestures."

"It's Hermes," said Tucker. "It's a fake."

"Better be."

Tucker looked up at the goons and waited for instructions.

"Aztechno Limited," said the woman, her voice confirming her gender. "Its code is AZT23SG slash F."

Tucker scavenged his memory for information about the stock. "Hermes, I need you to tell the guys in the trading oval to make a move on Aztechno Limited."

#Why on earth do you want to do that?#

God damn it. Stop acting so human you stupid fake.

"I need you to buy Aztechno stock right now."

#Aztechno is debt ridden.# Hermes continued to argue, trained to automatically query such requests. *#It's practically in the clutches of voluntary administration. Buying that shit at three fents would be scandalous.#*

"That's no fake." said the brute.

"Oh yeh, it is. Hermes, just do what I say."

Tucker figured he was about to lose a whole lot of cash. He only hoped to live long enough to complain about it. He didn't want to end up a mangled piece of flesh on the highway. He'd viewed way too many grisly snuff murders, of hapless executives thrown off the tops of skyscrapers, to dismiss it from happening to him. Tucker had no desire to end up a faceless victim in some morbid newsfeed."

#The team wants to know what kind of stake are you after.#

“Tell them to keep going until you call them back.” said the woman.

This stunned Tucker.

The enormity of the situation smacked him hard.

I am about to lose a shit load of money.

“Keep going until I call you back.” he said, reluctantly.

The brute snatched the touchy out of Tucker’s hand, ending the conversation.

“I don’t get it.” said Tucker.

“It’s on the move.” said the woman, a touch of excitement in her voice as she watched a real-time updated GSX corefront on another monitor.

“I could have just given you the money.” said Tucker.

“Three point seven fents!” shouted the woman.

“This is ridiculous!”

What kind of scam is this? Tucker tried desperately to anticipate their motive.

“Refreshing now!” she called out again. “Four point eight fents!”

Tucker began to sweat.

He realised he wasn’t dealing with two-bit outlaws from the slums.

These were bluezone goons, using his company’s account to spruik up a thinly traded stock. When enough suckers are taken in, the stock price will rocket, at which point the scammers take their profits. Then the share will dive, and all the suckers will lose. This scam was as old as the stock market, but with a Global Stock Exchange that doesn’t stop trading for no one, a truly free and open market, this evolution of the scam has become more potent.

And deadly.

“How cashed up are you?” asked the brute.

“I have limited funds.”

“Refreshing!” said the woman. “Seven point two fents!”

Tucker’s Kinefone lobeset started buzzing and flashing in the brute’s hand. “That’s them. They want to know when to stop.”

The brute held up the lobeset, taunting him.

“Eight fents!” updated the woman.

Tucker did the arithmetic in his head. It didn’t look good. “Answer the damn lobe!” he yelled angrily.

“We are about to hit ten.”

Tucker deduced if his traders continue buying beyond ten cents, he’ll end up owning this crap company outright. Tucker did the sums in his head again. Not only will he be losing money, he’d be losing client money. He would be unable to offset such a loss.

The lobeset kept buzzing.

“Refreshing!”

“The market will spot this irregularity and they will dump the stock.”

“Twenty-one point five fedora cents.” she yelled.

“It won’t get any higher so I suggest you start dumping now.”

“Twenty-one point seven! It’s leveling off.”

Thank god.

The lobeset continued to buzz.

The brute turned towards the youthful driver. “Are we satisfied?”

“Let’s wrap it up.” replied the driver.

The brute tossed back the flashing lobeset. “My threat still stands.”

Tucker quickly fastened the device back into his ear.

#We stopped buying at nine fents.#

What a relief.

#You are a genius. According to the feeders, you have left a trail of mass destruction.#

“It’s dropping.” updated the woman. “It’s going backwards.”

#The crew want to know their next move.#

Tucker easily imagined the jubilation in the trading oval. The dumb rats would willingly follow him into the darkest abyss. He looked at his kidnappers. The brute studied him and then slowly nodded.

“Sell it!” Tucker shouted. “Sell it all, you moronic fake.”

“Hang it up.” demanded the brute.

Tucker complied, feeling a change of circumstance in the air. A change for the worse.

“Seems to me... you stand to make a decent profit.”

Tucker did the mathematics in his head.

True.

But he knew this adventure would cost him his Ethics and Standards Accreditation.

“What now?” It suddenly occurred to Tucker that being thrown out of the speeding cargovan seemed like the next logical step. For a scam like this to work, the victim mustn’t lodge a complaint within the next few days, if not ever. It buys the scammers time launder the money out of the system, hiding the trades among billions of transactions. Victims of unscrupulous spruikers never came forward because there wasn’t anything illegal about losing a small fortune through greed, naivety or through plain stupidity.

This situation was different.

Extortion was illegal.

Tucker noticed the cargovan slow to a halt.

The brute opened the slid door and hot air inundated the vehicle. “Get out.”

Shit!

Tucker succumbed to fear.

They are not going risk leaving me alive.

Light from the naked sun burnt his eyes.

“Why?” he angrily asked. “You’ve got what you wanted.”

“Get out.”

Tucker stepped out into an open desert, his feet sinking into the dry silty sand. “You don’t have to do this. I won’t report this to the authorities. I have no idea who you are so I can’t fuck this up for you. Don’t kill me for the sake of ...”

The sliding door slammed shut.

Tucker watched the cargovan bury its wheels into the soft dusty ground until it gained the momentum to speed away. He waited for the minor sand storm to clear before he attempted to survey the desert around him.

Tucker quickly established his location.

East river.

Standing smack bang in the middle of a dry river bed, Tucker made out the two opposing shorelines and the Lower Bayside slums beyond them. What were once thriving industrial and commercial districts were now derelict, forsaken by civilised society and home to millions of slumfolk.

Those goons are trying to kill me.

Why?

He wondered which rival corporation had it in bad for him, enough to hire goons to do this. Corporate espionage and sabotage were one thing. These things were so common even having an Ethics and Standards Accreditation issued didn’t guarantee compliance from companies too large to be thoroughly audited.

But to resort to extortion and murder?

Another paranoid thought entered his mind.

The government.

Who else?

If Tucker’s product line made it to market it would render such an antiquated institution as irreverent. They flat out refused to buy his new monetary system when he offered it to them. If he survived this ordeal Tucker knew he needed to drastically change the way he did business. He vowed to never again neglect operational security ever again.

If I survive.

Tucker mentally listed the dangers working against him.

He estimated that he was around thirty kilometres from the nearest bluezone. The temperature, probably sitting at forty degrees, felt it had still a degree or two to climb before sundown. The locals would eventually discover his presence. God only knew what would happen if they did. All he knew with any certainty was that slum dwellers absolutely hated all bluezoners with a passion.

There was no Ambercast coverage in these places, leaving with no way to connect with emergency services. There was, however, satnet coverage but, due to his bias against Meganat’s Jim Dochersky and his fleet of low earth orbit satellites, Tucker only bought Kinefone products.

So, no satnet.

Tucker headed downstream, west towards the mouth of the river, hoping to get to the cooler beaches of the bay before the sun reached its most treacherous hour. He avoided the shore, opting to stay out in the open cracked river bed than risk moving through dangerously populated and unpleasant neighbourhoods.

In the distance, he saw a ragtag group of children playing on a neglected chain-link fence. He stopped to study them and noticed that they were studying him. What caught his attention was the fact they all carried or wore electronic devices, interacting with them.

He concluded two possibilities.

One, his presence in the slums had become exposed, and within an hour they'll be celebrating over his dead carcass.

Two, the devices used by the locals were not Ambercast or satnet enabled. Even if they were these people would not be able to afford using them.

Episoft.

The peer to peer wave network offered free communication in areas where enough Episoft enabled devices were active. The higher the saturation the faster and deeper data packages travelled. When sparse, data packets took longer to emanate. As long as a link existed between two devices, between two pockets of saturation the message would eventually transgress to its final destination.

God damn brilliant piece of technology.

He had made a fortune speculating on Episoft's success.

All Tucker had to do was ping an emergency rescue request and wait for the message to snake its way through, hoping there were enough devices out there between himself and the nearest safe haven.

Wishful thinking kept him going.

Wishful thinking was all he had left.

**first appeared on writerscafe.org.*

3

Ice Hangar

The ephemeris data seemed healthy enough. The storm, on the other hand, appeared hazardous, ripping across space from over the horizon. Transiting through the comet's coma the shuttle vibrated slightly. Carl Reagle knew the out-gassing from the bright-side lacked enough violence to cause any serious problems. The comet had just emerged from out of the frost line, so the sun's rays were not harsh enough to feed a fully-fledged tail.

"Manual control in thirty seconds," said the Ixion's chief navigator, Jasmine Lambright.

"Standing by," said Reagle. "I have the ice hangar in sight."

"Be cautious of the rebound, Commander. The landing pads are inactive. Go in too hard and you'll bounce off all the way to Jupiter."

Reagle looked at his screen. "I'm easing in at 2.7 kays an hour. I have manual control."

"We've had two months of dead radio. Get a confirmation on conditions down there and get the hell back here." There was a hint of urgency in the Gi Corp hireling's voice. Reagle intended to do just that, having spent the entire trip from Ceres in an anxious state. These types of missions tended to rob him of sleep, especially when clients like Gi Corp gave him little information to go by.

He looked out into the black sky, hoping to get a glimpse of the spacecraft. He saw nothing. The Ixion orbited opposite his position, beyond the jagged horizon.

The shuttle made contact with one of the three landing pads. Ice gravel and black sand scattered as the module bounced several times before sliding to rest a full three minutes later. With the locking mechanism on the landing pad inactive, the shuttle ended up precariously near the edge. Thirty meters away the cave entrance to the ice hanger cut a deep scar into the sloping surface. Lights illuminated the interior in stark juxtaposition to the frozen night of space.

Reagle suited up and exited the shuttle, hitting the slippery frost-covered gangway awkwardly, the warmth of his life-suit sizzling frost-covered gangway. He hopped onto the gravel which crumbled like charcoal, his boots sinking knee-deep into the surface. He continued hopping, a painstaking task, to the entrance employing, small, soft pushes with his toes, calibrated by the pressure suit. Use too much force and in no time, you end up orbiting the comet.

Closer in, a series of blue-sticks provided him with a secure handrail, assisting him all the way inside the vast cavern. Mechanical monsters lay dormant in the artificial blue-tinged light.

Excavators. Drillers. Nukepumpers.

Along the left side wall, a tall cylinder towered above him. The red and white nuclear symbol dominating the exterior. "Power generators appear active. No sign of damage inside the ice hunger." Reagle wiped frost from the yellow-painted alloy of a mechanoid. "No sign of any activity, either."

He headed for the airlock, a platform-sized elevator situated towards the rear of the ice hangar. Below, safely embedded deep within the comet, Lapith/2183 G7, the living and command quarters waited, like an ancient tomb.

Two months.

But the air-lock control refused to comply. The lights were alive, but the ice-encrusted buttons cracked when pressed, doing nothing to activate the elevator.

"Air-lock inoperable," he said.

"Try hooking into the EAI," said Lambright.

"Ixion, I'm patching into the local interface." Reagle uncovered the JX408 portal and plugged his optical line into it. "Should synchronize any second now."

He waited, studying the ice hangar around him, auditing the slumbering industrial space machines.

Nothing happened.

"Ixion, what's the EAI's name?"

The clarity and closeness of Chief Navigator Lambright's voice soothed his nerves. "The environment control entity is called Hesper Copy Seven Seven Zero. It's a clone of the master entity at the Gi Corp HQ."

Reagle gave it a go. "Hesper Copy Seven Seven Zero. Do you copy? Does anyone copy? Hello, somebody."

"Let me try the maintenance portal."

Reagle felt cold. He knew his life-suit was good for another ten hours, but the inactivity, plus the frozen stillness around him, sent chills along his skin.

"I've got a response." Her voice sounded excited.

"Is it from any of the crew?" His voice matched her excitement.

"No. Hesper responded."

"Ask it what happened here. Where is everybody?"

"It... doesn't know. It's telling me that all systems are normal. It's asking me if something's wrong. It doesn't know."

"Tell it to open the airlock."

"It's asking for authority. I'm punching in the codes as we speak."

Reagle looked up at the electronic eyes planted everywhere. "Can't it see me standing here?"

The platform shook and started to descend.

"It says it lost its audio-visual and sensor-array functionality. Speaking of which, we will lose contact once the airlock closes. I suggest you find..."

The massive doors grumbled shut above him. The pressurization process began sending steam at him like a hurricane. Icicles of carbon dioxide and methane boiled and evaporated instantly. Reagle took advantage of the manual override to access hatchways. He kept the life-suit on as a precaution as he entered the staging hall. He noted nothing out of place. The storage compartments were neat and tidy. The low-grav training quarters were lit up but empty. He made a mental note to check the equipment in there, though his first priority was to re-establish contact with the Ixion.

The command centre.

Designed to withstand anything, the central nexus of the outpost would be the most likely place to seek refuge in case of a disaster. Reagle made his way there, hopping and bouncing off the walls. He knew where to go; these Gi Corp rigs were all based on the same template.

He found the hatch sealed, yet its port window remained transparent. He peered inside only to find the unmistakable red liquid splattered over the white interior walls and trimming. He expected something like this to some degree but felt totally unprepared for the grisliness he faced. Blood and tissue. Warped, flattened bodies. Crushed bone. Mostly stuck to the walls. Pieces of humans littered the control panels.

Reagle fought hard not to go inside, but his range of choice was limited. He needed to access the communication network. When he opened the door, the air disturbance sent a quiver among the shredded pieces of flesh and ruined uniforms. He stepped inside and thought about dimming the bright lights. He located the comms and punched in the channel code. "Carl Reagle to Ixion. Do you copy, over?"

"We copy, commander. Any luck with the crew?"

Reagle struggled to find the words. "Negative. Situation is not good. There's been some kind of... accident."

Radio silence followed. No one wanted this type of outcome. They expected it, but optimism felt like the right attitude to have. "I repeat. The situation is not good at all. We have multiple fatalities. Cause unknown as far as I can tell."

"How many? There were six crewmembers on the manifest."

Reagle looked at the mangled mess. He knew he had to be clinical about it. He counted the separate bloodied masses, trying to distinguish the different uniforms. He saw body parts; fingers, ears, shredded skin, but he chose to sort out scalps instead, differentiating between hair types.

Between the uniforms and scalps, he counted half a dozen individuals. "I have six."

"That's..."

"That's all of them." Reagle counted again to be sure. "Are we certain this is how many got on this rig?"

"When the mission launched, six human beings entered the Lapith 7 outpost. We've sent no other manned missions to this comet ever since. This outpost would have been constructed by robotics before the crew got there. When this 80-kilometre-wide comet began its propulsion sequence, the chances that another third party interfered with the mission are as remote as the space this chunk of ice is hurtling through."

"That's all I needed to know." The implication, that this had been a tragic accident, weighed heavily on his mind. With not much time to establish the cause, he needed to move fast.

"Telemetry update has just come in," announced Lambright. "Looks like Lapith 2183 G7 is off-course. Instead of hitting Venus orbit, this ice mountain's going to end up closer to Earth's backyard. Our options have narrowed down."

Reagle paused to let this sink in. "Just come in, my ass. You knew about this before you enlisted my help."

"We didn't enlist your help, Commander Reagle, we bought your service from the Ceres Port Authority."

"You also knew I would not be leaving here without an answer to what happened. Gi Corp launches ten of these monsters every year. The terraformation business is in full swing. We can't have accidents like this without knowing the cause."

He received no response.

He said, "I have eight hours of life support at least. You have months to sort out this trajectory."

"What part of this don't you understand? This is a 20,000-ton meteor aimed at Earth. In a month this thing will be close enough to heat up. The coma storm will make this cube a difficult, unstable intercept. We are here, we are doing this now."

"What? Correcting trajectory?"

"No."

He knew what she meant. He suddenly had little time. Destroying this comet would require him to mobilize and activate all the nukepumps. "Have you uploaded the data syncrode from this place?"

"I'm looking at it now. All audio-visual content went blank at the time of radio silence. You want me to go through ten months of recorded media?"

"No." Reagle avoided looking at the bloody entrails and focussed. "Can we track oxygen levels?"

"There was a sharp load drop off at the time of radio silence."

"How sharp?"

"Within the space of an hour, 30%, then to 100%."

Reagle considered the ramifications. "That means all of Lapith's crew exited the compound. How long?"

"No atmos activity till your arrival."

"The incident must have happened someplace outside. How the hell did they end up in here?" He tried to rub his forehead but the helmet prevented him. "When did the EAI lose visual input?"

"According to the logs, two hours before the first event. Server went into fail-safe mode."

"Did somebody do this?"

"The logs indicate an abrupt shutdown. Without accessing the server, we can't know for sure."

Reagle looked at the terminal. The server ran all the domestic sensory inputs for the crew and Hesper. "I've gotta talk to this AI." Using his Sideral-tool he opened the panel. He unpatched the mini-powercore, force booting the terminal, and waited for the sequence to commence.

- corrupted xentro.sys file -

"Jeezes, this piece of shit won't boot up." He wanted to talk to this machine brain. Reagle found a comm-portal and began typing awkwardly with fat-gloved fingers.

- Hesper. Why did you not activate the emergency beacon at the first sign of trouble?

- There is no emergency.

- Have you not notice climate parameters indicated that you have had no inhabitants for two months?

- Climate systems are normal.

- Are you not responsible for the wellbeing of the habitat?

- Yes.

- Then why are the crew splattered on the wall in here?

Reagle waited the epic seconds for an answer.

- There is a slight increase in humidity, 3 percent above normal. Sanitary system is normal. Thermal system is normal.

- *You haven't noticed anything out of order.*

- *No. There is nothing out of order.*

Reagle wondered how Hesper would react if it could see the carnage. He spoke out loud, "Hey, Lambright. Any clue as to when this comet's trajectory got altered?"

"Not yet."

"Hey, Lambright. Any chance this EAI could have gone bomb20 and did something fucked up?"

"Can it hear you?"

"AV server is dead. This thing can't see or hear anything."

"Answer to your question is, no. Environmental AI's are physically disconnected from the navSystems, heavy mechanoids, and this comlink, even if they were somehow connected, the languages are incompatible. Hesper uses a vastly different programming language than automatons do. Even if they learned the language, there is no interface to bridge them together and allow it accomplishing something like this. The course correction was man-made. A nukepump rig would have to be maneuvered into position and ignited. As for the deaths, I have no theories. How did they die?"

"Terribly. They were crushed, almost shredded."

A thought entered Reagle's mind. How long before flesh decomposes? He resisted the thought but he needed to know. He unsealed his helmet and removed it, expecting that horrid stench. Instead, it smelt like a slaughterhouse. "These bodies are fresh. This happened recently. I'm checking out the rest of the outpost."

He left the death behind and headed to the rec room. There he found nothing out of order.

They left in a hurry, he thought. Yet everything here is clean, tidy - lived in, yet not messy.

He looked up at the ceiling at a robotic arm tucked away in rest mode.

Articulated Envirobots.

Every living module had one built in. Each was controlled by Hesper. Reagle noted to investigate these robots, but he postulated that if clues existed they will more likely be located somewhere outside. He returned to the airlock and headed back up to the ice hangar. "Lambright, are you still with me. You haven't left me here?"

"No, I haven't abandoned you yet. I'm tempted."

"What is on the manifest in regard to heavy equipment?"

"Two rocket dozers, a digger/cutter, one borer, a Snake-class platform drill, four nukepumps and a buggy."

Reagle accounted for all except... he was missing a pump and the buggy. "There are only three pumps here. Nukepumps are used to propel this chunk of ice, right? One of them must have been deployed."

"By whom?"

"Or what? Can you spot it from where you are?"

"We are lookin'."

Reagle hopped across the hangar toward the entrance. Outside, darkness reigned. He surveyed the landing pads, relieved to see his shuttle still there. Not being secured to anything, he was paranoid it would float away into space.

He looked out into the void, his eyes adjusting to the dim light. The gray ice dust and charcoal slush covered a broken, rocky surface. The landscape glowed under the twilight. A series of blue-stick markers lit up a trail heading down a steep depression. The uneven, bending horizon unnerved him. He spotted no tracks leading away from the hangar. Another mystery he could do without.

“Who's a mining expert?”

“What do you need?”

“I got no tracks. If a pump's been deployed surely there'd be tracks.”

“Not if it kicked up a snow storm when it ignited.”

Makes sense, he thought. “I'm heading out there.”

“We haven't spotted anything yet.”

“I'm following these markers.”

“We see those. They lead to nowhere.”

“I'm running out of time.”

“You are. We need to deploy the other pumps.”

He knew what this involved. The nukepumps were going to be used to drive the comet into meltdown. “Not before I find out what happened here.” Reagle launched down the depression, skipping over cracks and fissures. Each step took a minute. He would lose his balance on occasion but the blue markers were linked via cable, allowing him to hold on to something as he made tiny hops down, or what felt like ‘up’ the slope. Remembering his comet-skipping training, one mistake and he'd be flying off into deep space. Indoors, one could bounce off the ceiling; out in the open....

He kept thinking about the conundrum he faced.

Was it an accident?

Was it far more sinister? A deliberate act? Not knowing compounded his hyperarousal, as the thought of losing his footing frightened the hell out of him. He floated across a sublime yet jagged landscape, the blue glow of the markers enhancing the experience.

An act of nature? No force could do that to human beings. Not without disintegrating this tiny planetoid. What monstrous entity lurked out here in the cold shadows? Fear and paranoia plagued his thoughts. Without answers anything was possible. Reagle ascended a ridge made of a pitted and brittle compound. He spotted the sun in the black sky above. Just a bright star, even at half a billion kilometres away he felt its power radiating through the shielded faceplate.

The comet's horizon glowed, illuminating the ground before him. He crossed a dune and marvelled at the ripples in the black sand caused by minute winds. For this small solar system body, which spent a few billion years out beyond the frost line, untouched by the sun, this type of erosion was a new phenomenon.

Beyond the dune, the flat terrain appeared scarred and blackened.

A burnt-out crater.

Even in the monochrome landscape, the spot seemed unnatural compared to the rest of the terrain. A rigging arm, embedded deep into the dark cold rock, stood at a slant. A broken, twisted shaft of metal. He spotted other rigging arms, the type deployed to stabilize the nukepump, located around the rim of the crater. But he saw no pump.

In its centre, Reagle noticed a pit, burnt deep into the ground. That is what pumps do, he reminded himself. They plunge a superheated fusion-rod into the ice, the ice melts violently and the ejection of mass basically turns the comet into a rocket. It can change the comet's velocity, its trajectory, turning it into a gargantuan spacecraft. It took ten years of gravity-assisted manipulation to get these Jupiter-family comets to speeds and trajectories that would 'safely' send them to Venusian space. Once there they were broken up and scuttled into Venus's thick atmosphere.

The terraformation of Venus; a monumental project for the space corporations, but considered a controversial issue by most Earth-bounders for the obvious risks involved. And here Reagle was, gawping into the abyss, the catalyst of a titanic disaster. His instinct was to look up. The nuker, whatever happened to it, would have been blasted into space.

"The pump's gone." Reagle turned back. "Ixion, stand by with the pump deployment procedure." Remembering his training, he paced himself back to the ice hangar, not wanting to join the pump in space.

"Standing by, Carl." Again, he was relieved to hear Lambricht's voice, more so than ever. He looked up into the Milky Way and spotted the red star moving across it. The Ixion, orbiting the comet once every two days, disappeared behind a ridge, reappearing again by the time Reagle was in sight of the ice hangar.

He watched it pass through the Jovian System. "We have a deceased crew of six inside the command module, each crushed beyond recognition. We have an EAI that hasn't seen or heard anything, or too stupid to notice other sensory data. We have a missing propulsion nuker, most likely destroyed. What else?"

"We have a copy of the control hub database. Somewhere in the operational data is the information you need. Now deploy those pumps and get the fuck off that block of ice." Her voice sounded desperate. Reagle could not fathom why.

She had time.

As he climbed up the slope to the ice hangar, the red star glowed rapidly brighter in the sky. The Ixion suddenly exploded into hundreds of little stars.

Carl Reagle's heart sank.

He did the rough calculations. The nuker, or heavy fragments from its disintegration, could still be orbiting the comet?

"Ixion, come in."

The enormity of his situation spurred him on.

How did they not... It dawned on him. She knew about the danger. They probably located the orbiting junk but decided not to tell him.

Who knew what else she withheld from him?

He resolved not to think about it, nor mourn his colleagues. Marooned as he was, millions of kilometres from anywhere and travelling at fifty kilometres a second, his mission now focused on averting a disaster.

When he returned to the ice hangar, he felt alone. To ease his apprehension, he headed out to the shuttle and secured it to the mooring clasp. He easily lifted the normally half-tonne vehicle into position. A needless action but it made him slightly less paranoid.

Back at the ice hangar, the airlock frustrated him. Without some kind of keypad interface or audio capability, he had no way of getting Hesper to let him re-enter the facility. Containing his panic, he resorted to scavenging around the ice hangar. First, he hit the nukepumps hoping to find any useable life support material. He entered the cockpit of the nearest pump and activated its airlock. As the cabin pressurised and the lights went from amber to white, he noticed it right away. Food wrappers, clothing, and sanitation packs were strewn everywhere.

Hope and dread seized his throat.

They lived out here in the ice hangar the whole time.

For two months.

Reagle could not begin to fathom what kind of ordeal these Lapith 7 crew had endured. For the first time, he felt their presence.

He booted up the pump's systems and checked the logs.

Reagle found confirmation that the pumps were deployed at the time of radio silence. He looked at the tags. The command script was labelled 'trajectory rectification'.

They were trying to correct the comet's trajectory, he thought. He looked at the activity spreads. Each task had been completed. Reagle attempted to piece together what went down. The crew was acting on some information that prompted them to instigate an emergency course correction, yet the outcome turned out to be the negative result. *Had they been given the wrong information*, he wondered. That data would be still in the NavSystem, inside the habitat.

I need to get in somehow, he told himself, pounding his brain for ideas.

Reagle felt something under his boot. He looked down to his feet and noticed several cylindrical objects rolling around. He also found a pack of blue-sticks wedged under his seat. Their use seemed obvious enough, but the cylinders...?

Upon closer inspection, he figured out what they were. Quite heavy considering the low gravity, these were battery packs. The label read, Lasedrill. He knew right away what the crew was up to. Anyone familiar with the Rig's engineering and stranded outside would come up with the same game plan. Most mining habitats orbit around the host asteroid, but during planetoid displacement operations the habitat is generally embedded inside the celestial body, inside ice hangars that are strategically carved into vertical inclines located on the dark side of a comet. In Lapith projects, the habitat modules were buried under the ice in a doughnut-shaped ring, linked together, joined to a central axle and the airlock lift, by radial tubes. They do this to protect the habitat and equipment from the comet's volatile environment. These modules all have maintenance hatches, accessible manually from outside.

Reagle ventured back out into the ice hangar again, wasting no time. He knew what the crew was up to. All he had to do was find evidence of excavation works. A hexagonal container caught his attention so Reagle crossed the ice hangar with two leaps. He opened and entered to find it well-lit and stocked up with everything a space miner could ever need or want. Tools, perishables, all neatly stacked in storage rails inside the hex.

Blue-sticks were scattered everywhere.

What is with these markers?

He did not spend too much time thinking about it; instead, he explored the rest of the ice hangar, searching out feasible spots where the crew could have begun digging and melting their way down to the hatch doors.

Nothing.

He climbed aboard the Snake-class platform and entered the control deck. To his subdued delight, he found an operator controller-pack. He pressurized the deck and hastily checked the logs. All instructions since launch date were instigated by the mechanoid's autopilot, but the last string of text was entered manually via the unit's human operator.

- [go to waypoint 6] [trav:net 42/93*]

Forty-two metres?

Reagle wondered why such a short distance. He looked toward the back of the control deck, at an open manhole that accessed the maintenance shaft. Without hesitation he dove for the opening, squeezing himself through, feet first. Barely spacious enough to crawl, Reagle managed to slide to the end of the tube, finding an open circular chamber. A sealed hatchway ruled the deck. A lasedrill, cartridges and two life-suit helmets littered the floor.

Reagle opened the hatch door.

A makeshift berthing adapter hissing out atmosphere more or less sealed the access between the Platform's underbelly and the ice tunnel below. It looked a tight fit, so Reagle unplugged and took off his helmet, hoping the connector would not explode.

Reagle entered the ice tunnel, leave the slumbering Platform behind. He looked down at the darkness and did calculations on how much leg power he needed to absorb the fall.

Just do it, he scolded to himself and let go.

Reagle dropped, picking up speed. The air froze his lungs while noxious carbon monoxide and ammonia left an unmistakable stench. He anticipated the extreme cold but hoped the pressurized air sustained by the Platform above would be balanced enough to keep conditions safe. Too warm and the frozen gases would overwhelm and poison the breathable air.

He continued descending, using his arms to scrape against the ice wall, successfully slowing his flight until he began crawling down - or level, it was hard to tell. When he hit the bottom, blue light greeted him. The tunnel, large enough to crouch in, stretched out into the darkness, horizontally. The ground, covered in ankle-deep icy slush felt different under his boot.

Slippery.

He pressed ahead, paying more and more attention to the ground surface. When he came across an outcrop he put his hand to it. Not ice-rock aggregate but solid rock. Even the surface underneath his feet felt rough and serrated. Reagle lit the wall with his Sideral-tool. The white beam of light revealed an aggregation of more reddish rock than water ice.

A rocky nucleus.

"We were wrong about everything," he said out aloud. "This thing is a goddamn centaur."

Centaur, his mind echoed the word. It began to make sense. A cross between asteroids and comets, these SSSB's were heavier in mass. The Lapith's crew were using the wrong trajectory calculations.

The nukepump ran out of frozen ice and blew up, he concluded, but the answers uncovered more questions.

Reagle continued along the rock shaft, its surface brittle and crumbling at places. His heart pumped hard, missing a beat each time he slipped on sludge. His mind raced with questions, of grand conspiracies, of sickening allegations.

Why would Gi Corp go to the expense to send a centaur to Venus? And if Venus wasn't the intended destination, why the hell would they threaten Earthsiders?

The corpora-politics of it all did not make sense.

He slid into a wider space, a cave, lit indigo by a circle of blue-sticks pegged around a massive hatch. A low, heavy hum greeted his ears, its bass frequency working its way into the centre of his brain.

It's open.

Reagle did not dither. He looked inside. A colossal black ball moved gradually, purposely around a mirror-finished, ribbed spherical interior. Opposite, another hatch, closed but operable judging by the green-lit touch button at its centre.

A magnetic control movement gyroscope, Reagle kicked himself for not factoring in this device. This was how the crew decided to get back inside. But the triumph subsided when he spotted dark, wet-looking patches on the interior surface. In the blue ambience he could not make out the colour, but he knew what it was. The smear and splatter patterns were unmistakable.

Suddenly the ball increased its velocity, spinning in a wild, powerful orbit around the sphere. Reagle felt the intensity. He swore he could feel the small planetoid underneath his feet shift a little.

Then the gyroscope settled back to normal speed.

“There’s my murder weapon,” said Reagle. As he stood there, dumbfounded, the ball spun again, resettled, and then spun again, at seemingly random intervals.

He knew what to do, but the courage to implement his new plan seeped away as fast as heat escaped from his body. Reagle turned to head back into the tunnel. He would go back up to the platform, find some kind of material, return to the gyroscope and toss it inside. The sensors should trigger an alarm and the system should shut down to allow the envirobots to clean out the debris.

That’s how the remains of the crew ended up back at the command module.

Hesper.

But why dump the bodies in the command module and not the trash bay? Reagle could not say, nor offer an explanation. That mystery would have to wait. His main priority was making contact with the Gi Corp base on Deimos; warn them as best he could.

Reagle stopped dead in his tracks.

There was no way to get back up to the platform. He did not even bother checking. Reagle knew the tunnel was too small for him to climb back up, even with low gravity taken into account. Resolved not to succumb to fear, he trekked back to the gyroscope.

The only choice left for him was to make a dive for the hatch door.

When he stood at the entry the rumbling vibrated his chest. He hoped the green light indicated that the opposite hatch was unlocked. He prayed that Hesper was innocent, just a blind, deaf mute, clueless of the situation at hand. He gambled that the NavSystem was sending out random commands to the gyroscope, that it was not pre-programmed for something far more sinister.

Reagle glared at the dark monstrous ball and hoped and prayed one more time.

**first appeared on thenextbigwriter.com. Winning Entry to the Locked Room Mystery Writing Contest. “The challenge of this contest is to write a locked room mystery that takes place somewhere other than earth, where one of the main characters is either deaf, dumb, or blind.”*

4

Dead Drop Society

Mateus Fiel knew of the fierce territorialism between rival scanbob gangs in the area. He chose to ignore it, the score proving too lucrative to pass up. Venturing outside of his home exurb constituted a risk. Many did so to engage in leisure activities, many more did so for business opportunities. Mateus did it for both reasons, so he considered the risk he took this time around as absolutely justified.

Scanbobs walk the crowded streets scanning people's body area networks. They use the target's own magnetic near-field system as a portal into their lives. A good scanbob can reverse social-engineer a person in five minutes. Others work in teams of two. One searches for a potential target from afar using a powerful telescope, immediately diving into their cyber footprint. Their associate on the ground airhacks the target's BAN from close range, establishing a handshake with all available devices. By making a copy of the data packet received by these handshakes, the scanbobs can combine the social data with the brute force cracking and gain access to any passer-by on a whim, then steal their wallets, establish botnets, create havoc... Mateus looked past the mindject icons floating in front of his eyes and studied his surroundings with renewed vigor.

Not a soul moved nor occupied the Westbury Metrostop. The twilight commuters had yet to invade the platforms. He reached out and adjusted the virtual control icon, reducing the brightness level to the graphical user interface being feed to his brain by the mindjector.

--DDS@fonta65718, 0.3545m/SSW.

He struggled to find the dead drop location, directions supplied by the Dead Drop Society proved vague and inadequate. This is why he braved his weekly venture out into the suburbs.

Dead drops.

These wireless data storage devices were planted randomly around public spaces. Powered by magnetic fields, they only became active when any near-field device got within range. They can remain active indefinitely, embedded within walls, underneath paths, inside statues, park benches, anywhere.

Loaded with every malicious virus and cyber spawn known and unknown to man, these dead drops are cesspools of information, commonly positioned in a surveillance blind spots around the suburbs, away from prying electronic eyes, yet accessible to those who knew where to look.

Scanbobs use these frequently.

So do terrorists, anarchists, and criminals.

Loitering under the fluorescent lights along the Westbury concourse, scanning for any signs of the elusive near-field networks, Mateus poked about unassumingly, hoping to avoid scrutiny from the mobile judges and scanbob cliques as much as possible.

Why the risk? The Dead Drop run he administered was an eclectic treasure trove of information and content. He lobbied the DDS hard to gain stewardship over this chain of public dead drops and this had proved fruitful ever since.

--DDS@fonta65718, 0.3337m/SW.

This particular dead drop, he had yet to visit nor update. The location coordinates were sketchy at best. Train stations were obvious surveillance zones, so Mateus doubted such a drop would be located in a public space.

But according to the run schedule, it was there.

Dead drops have been around for decades, persistently and perpetually maintained by a dedicated group calling themselves the Dead Drop Society - students and insurgent street artists mostly. Mateus knew millions of these existed and remembered why. Over two decades ago the price for internet access soared, reaching almost \$53,000 per terabyte. Many suspected, including his parents, that the government and corporations had colluded to bring about this cyberflation. By limiting investment, they overloaded the system, only so they could force average people out of the education loop, to limit and silence subversives, cause public disorder.... justify security laws. With subscription rates plummeting, the privileged elite was left carrying the burden of funding the world's communication infrastructure, hence the cost. An underground group of students, ones who could afford an education, set out to create dead drops in public spaces where individuals could upload a copy of the current internet making it available for others to download information and share.

Users built local networks, and these were linked to each other by Dead Drops, updated daily at the time, sometimes hourly.

A truly free ad-hoc internet.

Mateus exited the train station, guessing that if he were tasked to set up a dead drop in that area, in other words, semi-hide a wireless access data storage device in a public space, where would he place it?

In a surveillance blind spot for starters.

After snooping around like a vagrant, he found an ideal location, an electromagnetically dark underpass between the Metrostop's entrance and a small plaza, shadowed by an ancient leafless jacaranda. Mateus saw no visible evidence of any concealed device. A green flashing icon from his mindjector indicated a weak, directional but definite signal.

Probably under the pavement.

The dead drop drives, once embedded remain dormant, and can remain that way indefinitely until another device with magnetic-field power entered within its short range. Most devices have this facility, so anyone can stand in that spot and look unassuming whilst engaging in a data swap.

Mateus first checked for malicious files. Then he perused the multifarious data on offer. A quick search and Mateus found his treasure. He uploaded the current ICO48EM version of the internet and then walked across to the barren plaza, sat on a bench and with the cool night air against the back of his neck, perused through all the data packets he had pillaged, going through the metadata in sequential order.

He turned the brightness back up, blotting out the physical world, his augmented reality become a purely virtual one.

Jackpot.

Dead drops were like abandoned storage lockers. He felt no different to a junk recycler who had found a rare collectible coin, or a hundred-year-old chocolate bar, or a rare sword. Or lost laserdisc.

He, on the other hand, scavenged for cryptocurrencies, identity stashes, vast media libraries, but in this case, it was the illicit content that grabbed his attention.

[The Flavor of Blood] _S0.E6_(Dogman328).dmf

A story about a self-absorbed, narcissistic girl. A girl obsessed with autoeroticism. A girl fated to die at the hands of a deranged mad 'person' who also produced the forty-eight-minute snuff film, and countless others. Mateus knew a rare, unseen work of snuff when he came across it, and knew its value.

Mateus jumped out of augmented reality, his anxiety and instincts proving correct when he spotted, one, two, three figures moving towards the plaza.

A trio of scanbobs?

Mateus Fiel knew how a group of three operated, but this trio were brazen, overt... and wearing VR recorder goggles. Relying on less subtle, more violent techniques, this crew were not out to steal his data, they were creating their own data. Not wanting to end up a victim of snuff, he stood up and dashed, heart in throat, towards the Metrostop, hoping to lose them on the other side of the tracks, hoping his lucrative forage along this dead drop run had not been cut short.

**first appeared booksie.com*

5

Sub-level

Narkvosu just wanted to survive.

At least long enough to complete his quest.

He cared little about the tunnel war raging beneath his sub-level. He cared less about his home city. Alone, he explored the last obstacle to his journey, an ancient cavern carved out long ago. Concrete and steel now dust. Bedrock exposed. Nothing remained, the creek running through, the moister and gangumoss making short work of what was once probably a vast habitation. If one could not define any of the telltale signatures of a past civilisation, the sub-level appeared just like a long natural cave.

A hundred thousand years.

That's the theory.

When humanity migrated underground.

A hundred thousand theories as to why they did.

A hundred thousand theories as to what the surface is like.

Narkvosu just needed to prove just one. That a way out to the surface existed. That the mythical surface was real. That the Apollogon fables were true. Many like him had attempted this, most now embedded in legend.

The supra-government persecuted all that tried or peddled in the outer-surface sciences. This conflict with the Echelon Renegada offered Narkvosu a chance to get closer to the upper sublevels. Strategically the tunnel networks above the city levels proved to be vulnerabilities for the ruling class for generations. Conquest, piracy, and restrictions made these tunnels impossible to traverse.

Beyond them dwell the plethora of outcast machine men and modified humans.

Two years he travelled upward.

Two years of fighting, surviving and hiding.

Two years of working in mines, of digging, of exploring.

Two years.

He survived so far, and he would be damned if he came so close to breaching the surface and die in the cold, dark wilderness.

Of the myriad of theories, he held on to one, its importance to his expedition crucial.

This sun, if indeed it existed, should be warming the lithosphere by now. Science knew and proved that the radiation pumping up from the Earth's core provided warm for all life to exist. But the higher he journeyed, the colder it felt. He knew some regions had sublevels ending in rock and ice. The Echelons were a place where no ice had ever been known to exist. Water ran down. Wildlife thrived. No ice. Narkvosu gambled everything.

This was the place. The sublevels went up and up. Cavities, pockets, shafts, all interconnected with tunnels, all man-made.

Somewhere up there he knew was the surface.

Narkvosu also knew the trek upwards would get harder, relishing his perseverance for carrying his climbing equipment for two years. He lost colleagues, friends, his sanity, his innocence, but the climbing gear, invented and handmade by that miner he befriended, would survive.

He rested among the mushmush for a day, letting their acrid stench protect him from predators.

Narkvosu began his ascent well rested and in earnest. He could sleep a year but he felt he was close. The sublevel was unusually spacious. He figured it might have once been a public space rather than residential. The bedrock appeared smooth and straight, lacking the twisting contours evident in other, much lower places.

There was no pressure pushing down here, he thought, remembering the lectures of famous Geotheologist, Tarieven Acadamus.

Once at the top, he peered into a square cave, untouched by the elements. Inside, a shaft, soared upward which after a brief climb brought him up to another sublevel. As he peered out into the darkness, he lost some of his enthusiasm. He needed to decide whether to push on with the supplies he had left, or go back and try again with the terrain knowledge he now knew. A risk either way. The tunnel battle destroyed many of the communities he sheltered in, and now that he was officially a deserter, an instant death penalty awaited him. To press on, there was no going back. He would die, or his hope that the one theory in thousands would prove true. That another world existed on the surface. A living world under a living sun.

If proved right, he would find sustenance, recover and head back down. Narkvosu did not consider this fantasy thinking. He survived so far. He had gone from eating people-meat supplied readily and free from the city food collective, to killing for his own people-meat. The war made it easy, but killing and eating were a major hurdle for him. Now he ate non-people-meat, grubberts, dliths, even insects. He felt confident; he could eat the exo-biology if they did exist.

And the sun, he bet he could survive that too. The old Geotheologist warned of a painful death from its exposure. Burning light, he called it. Narkvosu felt unconvinced. The cooler sublevels defying that logic.

One theory he could agree held true was that the air thinned the higher the elevation. He could barely breathe now and was forced to slow down.

He decided to press ahead.

For the first time, he noticed that this sublevel was free of any moisture. The concrete walls were still intact. The further he traversed he encountered less and less wildlife. This meant that it got darker and darker as the luminescent gangumoss struggled to survive in this dry and cold environment.

Narkvosu, now excited, found a tunnel entrance and ventured inside. For the first time in a long while he trod on steps. He encountered more steps and climb further and further up.

The air grew tighter in the chest, but he persevered.

Narkvosu found a room. Inside he came across nothing but square walls and stains where artefacts once stood but had corroded away. He discovered a narrow shaft and continued up until he came to another room.

Same story, corrosion stains, thin, hardly breathable air.

But this one had something that looked like a hatch.

A glass panel.

Narkvosu gazed into the little window but could see nothing but a black void. He heard a hiss and that is when he noticed the crack forming near the edge of the glass. He watched and heard air hissing through the tiny aperture.

The pressure is vastly lower out there, he thought as the thrill of his discovery tingled along his spine. He found more rooms, similar in layout. Each with solid steel hatch doors twice his size. He now truly believed the science behind his ancestors, that they were once twice his size.

Narkvosu studied what he could see outside the small round glass panels embedded in the centre of each hatch door. He noticed tiny lights above. Thousands of them, like gangumoss growing on the ceiling, but instead of greenblue. These tiny lights glowed brilliant white.

Was this the sun? he thought, re-imagining every fable he had ever read.

He touched the glass. Cold, freezing, unbearable.

He looked at what he was convinced was the surface but all he saw was a smooth, featureless dark plain. His heart skipped a beat when he spotted the horizon in the distance, a line where the tiny lights ended and the dim surface began. If he strained his eyes he could almost see it glow.

Narkvosu had done it.

He had reached the surface.

But the thrill of it all faded quickly. His fantasy destroyed, he huddled in a corner and rested. His thoughts turned to surviving the journey back. He had accomplished what no other man had ever done, but even that triumph felt stale. How many others have reached this spot and discovered the awful truth? How many died returning or if they did return, held back the truth? Did the supra-government know this? Did the Apollagon Geotheocracy also know and suppress it to expatiate their mythology?

Narkvosu remembered the myth about the moving sun. It was why life and language had its day and night, and why gangumoss and chrokar cycle in brightness to accommodate civilisation's sleep patterns.

The sun moved.

Day and night.

So he slept. Conserving his energy. Counting the minutes.

A mining slave once told him, an anecdote he had picked up along the way, that a cult of scientist believed that the earth was a ball and that the sun rotated 'around' the Earth. They had built a gravity machine to detect and prove it. This information was one of the reasons Narkvosu persisted on his quest to the surface.

He waited more than a whole day, drifting in and out of consciousness. Even in the dim light, he could see his skin losing its blue colouring. Narkvosu looked outside one last time. He looked up at the little lights, millions of them. His eyes noticed a dark patch, almost perfectly round. Whatever it was hiding in the shadows, Narkvosu knew he would never find out. Time and the thin air had turned against him.

With a disillusioned soul, he began his journey back down to the city levels, first crawling, then, as the air returned into his lungs, to normal walking. Narkvosu just wanted to survive long enough to get home, even though he knew he would pay a heavy price for his desertion. And a heavier price if he ever told anyone the results of his quest beyond the sub-levels.

**first appeared on tablo.io.*

6

Offshore

When the electrical generator housing got crushed, the power ceased, killing the lights and the offshore installation manager's hope of sending a warning out to the other drilling platforms.

"There's a satellite phone in my quarters," said Owen Browne, the fear was detectable in his voice.

Les Dickson knew that the fear was well-founded. "One of those creatures is still down there. Want to end up like Chadsworth?" He struggled to shake away the image from his mind; those triangular upper teeth biting through her torso, the torrent of blood. Shannon Chadworth didn't stand a chance when that monster torpedoed into the dormitory, slapping its leathery bat-like wings against the steel floor and snapping its razor-toothed mouth around until it snatched the second mate by the pelvis. The winged shark-beast wiggled and chewed the screaming women effortlessly like it knew some trick on how to eat hands-free.

"We need to get to the next platform," Dickson said as he crawled along the deck towards Doctor Ambrisian, who was huddled under the bulkhead.

Browne, the facility's operations engineer, followed. "Hopefully, they haven't been attacked as well."

Dickson reached out and grabbed Ambrisian by the shoulder, pulling the strange scientist closer. "Now, I want you to explain to me what these things are."

A few hours earlier, the helicopter pilot, heading back from the Kipper Oil Platform, spotted a man drifting in the cold waters of the Bass Strait. A rescue party brought him back, and when questioned, revealed only a tranche of information, mostly gibberish.

Ribonucleic acids.

Elasmopteron.

Alternate timelines.

The man sounded insane, yet appeared resoundingly focussed.

Wearing a filthy white blouse under a brocade vest, Ambrisian looked up at Dickson and said, "That's not important. What is important is that they are spawning in a nest somewhere out there. Their gestation period is fast. Their metabolism is fast. Their learning curve is fast. We have to destroy the nest."

"Where is this nest?" asked Browne.

"Laboratory vats inside my research vessel. The Solarcus sank just out over the continental shelf, due south from here."

"Sank? How?"

The man frowned, "We scuttled it. As soon as the first batch of Elasmopteron proved to be..." A horrendous scream cut him off, followed a powerful thud. "We need to get back and warn your people."

"You created these sky sharks?" Dickson's anger boiled, as he was beginning to suspect the man, with the mechanical copper watch and quaint beard, may be genuine, impossible as it may be.

Ambrisian replied, "Once the Elasmopteron figure out that there's a coast full of carbohydrate snacks, they'll be nothing stopping them."

Through clenched teeth, Dickson said, "Then let's get movin'."

The three men scuttled toward the upper decks. Bloody guts and eviscerated humans littered the gangway. A dark cloud dominated the sky, sending down a thick drizzle. Dickson looked up and spotted the colony of bat monsters descending from the eastern heavens. With wingspans twice as long as their shark-tailed bodies, they looked more like flying foxes. Only when these beasts flew close did they resemble bull sharks. A hundred metres out, they folded their wings and dove into the sea. They went in and out, sailing across the platform, taking out anybody unlucky enough to have decided that that was a good moment to make a dash for the red Sikorsky S-76C waiting on the helipad.

Browne launched his arms into the air and waved at the helicopter pilot. Before Dickson can stop him, a sky shark corrected its course and snapped up Browne by the head, sending his body airborne. Mid-flight, the monster thrashed until it severed off the torso.

"We gotta go," screamed Ambrisian.

Dickson looked at the waving pilot inside the Sikorsky. He ran, pre-empting Ambrisian. They both sprinted up the gangway to the helipad. When they got to the helicopter they were greeted with, "What the fuck is this shit?" The pilot's terror added to the fear-induced mental paralysis Dickson felt.

"Get us in the air," yelled Dickson.

The engines groaned to life. "Where?" said the pilot.

"Kingfish B."

The pilot nodded and pulled the throttle. The blades above turned translucent as the Sikorsky's engine picked up thrust. When the Sikorsky lifted off the pad, Dickson spotted a sky shark performing a nosedive above them.

"Get moving," he yelled.

Before the Sikorsky could clear the helipad, the kamikaze shark collided into the rotor blades. The Sikorsky shook, its engines strained, losing torque as the blades shredded the half-tonne sky monster. Blood sprayed the occupants, soaking them, causing Dickson to say an improvised prayer. "Jesus fuck, where dead. God help us."

The Sikorsky survived and stabilised, soaring above the waves.

"Head to the coast," yelled Ambrisian.

"Kingfish B is closer," insisted Dickson.

Ambrisian leaned towards the pilot. "Don't listen to him. Kingfish B is gone, just like Kipper, just like here. This flying machine can outrun these Elasmopteron. We can make it."

Dickson looked back. The colony of Elasmopteron was pursuing them, but they were losing ground. "What about if they discover the coast?"

"What about it?" asked Ambrisian.

"You said it there'll be dire consequences if they found their way to the mainland."

Doctor Ambrisian shoved Dickson out into the void, sending him hurtling down into the grey sea.

"That is correct," said Ambrisian as he turned his attention to the pilot.

**first appeared on wattpad.com. This flash fiction piece won the inaugural Punk Out: Wattpunk Contests and Prompt challenge.*

The Fright Machine

Sawtooth froze.

His clown quartet went from performing a slo-mo at the crossing lights to lunatic postures, ridiculing the angry driver. The black Audi inched closer, but when Mr Axe showed off his plastic hatchet, the motorist reversed and made a wide turn to avoid the colourful foursome.

Greenhead screamed as he rushed across the road towards a parking lot.

“Wait,” yelled Sawtooth. The 7Elevens were notorious for violence, especially dangerous at night.

“This’ll be great,” said Bimbo as he rushed after him, followed by Mr Axe who hid the hatchet inside his bombastic red pants.

Sawtooth hurried to catch up. Inside, the bright lights hurt his eyes which were already stinging from the makeup. The clowns were busy raiding the fridge, freaking out customers. As long as they swiped their smartphones to pay, the roboteller would remain unperturbed. The clown alley aimed to get a reaction from people, not from the authorities.

They left the store, laughing and hollering.

“Let’s do the station,” shouted Bimbo.

Neat, Sawtooth found nothing unreasonable with the idea.

The clown alley hit the subway; not a soul to be startled.

“That was a waste,” said Mr Axe as the other clowns loitered by the info panels.

A trashbot ventured out onto the concourse. The clowns looked at each, their glee shining through the evil clown-themed face paint.

“Let’s hack it,” offered Bimbo. The clowns agreed, grunting like gorillas.

“I have an idea,” said Sawtooth. “Help me load it onto a train.” The quartet pushed the trashbot, their combined force overriding the robot’s servomotors, forcing it to an empty platform.

“Then what?” asked Mr Axe.

“I’m gonna hack it to harass commuters.” Sawtooth checked out the trashbot’s access portals.

“Oooh yeah, fright machine,” said Bimbo.

“It’s gonna be hilarious,” agreed Greenhead.

The train arrived, and when its doors slid open, the clowns jostled the trashbot into the carriage.

Sawtooth plugged his jailbreaker into the small socket and unleashed its application upon the robot’s brain. The other clowns waited, eager to get the hijinks underway. Dawn rush hour would begin soon and the train would cease being lifeless.

“Strange,” said Sawtooth.

“What?” asked Bimbo.

“Come on, let’s do this,” insisted Mr Axe.

But Sawtooth found it hard to speak, “This trashbot’s already been hacked.”

The trashbot opened its lid.

Surprised, the clown quartet leant over. They discovered a bloodied, twisted corpse wedged inside the rubbish compartment. A metal arm materialised, its triple digits slashing through the air, embedding into Bimbo's face, deep into his eye sockets.

Bimbo screamed.

“Josh!” yelled Mr Axe as he moved forward to assist. Another arm, a blade, swished across his neck, lopping the head clean off. The machine turned—rushed towards Greenhead who was trying to flee. It slashed at both his Achilles' tendons, leaving him immobile.

Still holding up Bimbo by the face, the trashbot turned to Sawtooth, who had fallen onto his arse, slipping in the pool of blood.

“Boo hoo hoo,” said the trashbot.

**first appeared on wattpad.com. Originally written for the April Ghouls Day competition at horrorcribes.com.*

8

Permian Spring

Apparently, they aren't even reptiles.

With skin covered in scutes, boasting a vertebral sail and powerful jaws, this thing looks like a fat, bear-sized lizard, but Russell Hansard seems to think the wildlife around here predates the dinosaurs by fifty million years. Out of the two thousand surviving passengers on board the Cruise Ship Eudora, Mr Hansard is the only one who claims to be schooled in palaeobiology.

Too bad he isn't here to see this monster. Somehow it managed to get into the ship and feast on a couple lodging in one of the balcony cabins.

"It's the biggest one yet," I gasp, having abandoned living in fear; embracing this impossible, marvellous world.

"What the hell is that thing?" Guillermo Michalik, a bartender, never let go of his fear.

"Corner it," yells Kelly Slade, clutching her makeshift spear. The ex-manager leads our brigand of volunteers up to the next level.

I move closer to Guillermo. "Russell called them pelycosaurs."

Killing the beast proves difficult. Like always, the forty-five-degree incline of the decks makes hunting it difficult. The Eudora sat tilted on her starboard, sunk deep into a sand dune. The desert around her stretched out forever, as far as the eye could see. A primordial sun beat down onto the white hull, heating it up, pushing the nuclear-powered climate system to its limits.

Both factions work together. The Upper Deck Bloc—comprising mainly of crew and workers, and the Lower Deck Coalition—mostly tourists who got more than they bargained for. With pikes fashioned out of mop handles, the two brigands force the creature to the open-air terrace. Hissing, it tramples over a fitness instructor, killing him, and launches itself through the plate glass fence, splashing down into the algae and dragonfly infested pool.

The decrepit state of the swimming pool inflames the despair I've been suppressing for the last thirty-eight days. One minute I'm floating on sapphire waters, sipping a Raspberry Mojito, next minute... madness.

Chronostorm.

That's what I heard the captain, Lorenzo Bannerman, refer to it as. To most of us, it felt like the mother of all hurricanes. The ferocity of the wind, the violence of the sea, the towering bolts of lightning, left us all in a state of shock and panic.

It all began with a star exploding, turning night into day. Then the storm hit us, followed by a maddening descent into an oceanic hell. An hour in, the Eudora struck something hard, jolting everybody aboard. I broke my nose and fainted. When I awoke, the world was upside down or at least slanted at an insane angle. Sliding down to the promenade I climbed up a davit and looked out at the world. I discovered a vast red desert stretching out into the grey/blue sky. The air that was hot and foul. I knew right then this was not the Earth I knew. On the very first day, before the slaughter and factional struggles, Captain Lorenzo assumed command. He explained to all of us what he thought the flash of light up in space was.

The SinoPac Orbitor.

It made sense. The three supranationals were engaged in an arms race. This rivalry had been pushing science to its limits for decades. When news broke out that the time-barrier had been breached, the newsbots were less than impressed. Sending particles back through time seemed like a novel way to spend trillions. Few people were interested; fewer believed such a stunt were possible. When rumours of time-bombs surfaced, public hysteria waxed and waned. Humanity's deep-rooted fear of atomics only existed because mankind had unleashed upon itself such titanic power.

With time-bombs, however...

No one understood the technology, let alone feared it. Time-tourism speculators positioned themselves to make a fortune, competing supranationals built massive Higgs-field displacers in orbit, and I took a vacation away from my scientific-data-appropriation business.

I knew enough about high-end technology to be on Captain Lorenzo's governance team. That's how I got to meet Hansard, Slade and Ottoman. We were charged with coming up with answers in a desperate attempt to restore order among the terrified passengers. But answers were difficult to attain, and even more difficult to explain to hundreds of families, paralysed with fear. Every day a new creature would attack the settlement, preying on us. Each night brought another horror.

Giant red cockroaches invaded. One bite and you bloat up until you die of heart failure.

Carnivorous dragonflies swarmed, attacking victims like piranhas, fluttering away with chunks of human flesh between their mandibles.

Rogue mammal-like reptiles terrorised and stalked us at night. Tusks, claws, spikes, the variety of these animals defied comprehension.

A small marshland due south is thought to be the source of this wildlife. The stranded cruise ship attracted them all, a ready supply of sustenance for all the carnivores in the area. A handful of passengers died during the cronostorm. A few hundred have been killed by these creatures. The rest perished during the infighting. A group of passengers, particularly a lawyer named Bobby Kost, didn't like the idea of Captain Lorenzo rationing out food and supplies, so they instigated a coup. The riot lasted two days. Kost and his clique managed to overrun the lower deck storerooms, and rally most of the paying passengers behind him. But they were unable to secure the bridge or win over any key company engineers.

Standoff's been in place ever since.

The pelycosaur relaxes in the murky pool, liking the shade and moisture. Only its spiky fin and snout and a spear remain above the waterline.

"What do we do?" I ask.

Slade looks at me, gives me a rare smile. "It looks happy, until it's hungry again."

Commotion from the below decks distracts us. We follow the shouting, downwards to the starboard; where white steel meets rusty sand. I can see a small crowd running out onto the dune, towards three pitiful-looking human beings.

Hansard's Expedition.

Eighteen days ago, two teams set out to explore this strange new world. One, Kost's team, went north to determine whether or not that dark, jagged landscape over the horizon were mountains. The other team led by Hansard, headed east, towards the never-ending lightning storm. He and the captain were convinced the cronostorm was still active. A gateway back may still be open, and possibly accessible.

Kost returned five days ago. He lost all his team but he found the mountains. Great, tall ranges, the largest he'd ever seen. The corporate lawyer had travelled the world; seen the Andes, the Himalayas, the Rockies, even the Alps, but never had he seen mountains this size. He also discovered a vast system of lakes. From the pictures he shared, it looked like paradise. Valleys covered in conifers and ferns.

Most likely, crawling with wild pelycosaurs.

Hansard appears beaten but his fiery eyes are alive with urgency. His two remaining colleagues are exhausted, suffering horrific skin injuries. I catch up with Captain Lorenzo, who allows me to be part of the debriefing committee. He even allows his mortal enemy, Kost, to join.

While the two are hospitalised, Hansard is eager to speak. Captain Lorenzo offers him a chilled bottle of Coke. "Russell, we can do this later."

"We have no time," he grumbles. He's a changed man. Bitter and determined, a far cry from his inquisitive nature. He looks at us like he's about to tell us all some bad news. "We came across the coastline."

Each member of the debriefing committee reacts in two ways. They are either filled with joy or, like me, filled with despair.

"And the cronostorm?" asks Slade.

"Out beyond the sea," answers Hansard.

Ottoman smacks his hands together. "Right. We've got plenty of boats. We can rig up some wheels, no problem. How far is this coast?"

"Yes," says Captain Lorenzo. "That's achievable. We can't let the seashore stand in our way."

"That..." interjects Hansard. "...is not the problem."

The committee falls quiet. Hansard rubs his mouth and answers, "We found cities. The entire coast is one big city."

The moment passes and we start breathing again. Slade puts her hand up. "What do you mean cities? Are we still in our time?"

"They are not human cities," he replies. "They're amphibian."

"Frog people?" asks the captain.

"Walking, talking amphibian/mammal-like people." Russell Hansard says. "Millions of them; living in shallow waters inside organic type dwellings. At night they have lights. You can see the entire shoreline dotted with them, hundreds of clusters, enclaves along a sprawling reef. We found networks of acid batteries made from some kind of sea creature." He looks at our surprise. "Yes, that's right. Electricity.

Normally, I desist from contributing, but I can't help it. "So, we've gone millions of years into the future."

"No," he says, his tone, uncharacteristically mean.

"Or, we're on another planet," says Ottoman. "I knew it. Time-space displacement over a two hundred and fifty-million-year period puts us in another region of the galaxy."

"It's the same moon," growls Hansard.

He's right. The moon is exactly the same, slightly larger than I remember. Even the other six wandering stars dance across the night sky the same as they always do. Only the constellations are completely unrecognisable.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” says Captain Lorenzo.

“Yes, I know,” replies Hansard.

“How have we not found any fossil evidence?” I ask, sparking a deluge of question centred on the same theme.

“Subduction!” Bobby Kost’s voice booms over the manic chatter. He looks at Hansard for confirmation. “Just because some palaeontologist hasn’t found a specimen doesn’t mean it never existed. Tectonic plate activity probably forced that coastline into the Earth’s mantle.”

“Did you find your mountains?” asks Hansard.

Kost grins, “They are magnificent. Bigger than anything you’ve ever seen.”

A fatigued Hansard nods. “The Central Pangean Mountains. We are either in Spain or Morocco. Over those mountains is North America.” His voice trails off, leaving the committee to ponder this piece of scientific trivia.

I just had to break the silence. “They use acid for energy?”

Hansard’s grim demeanour returns. “And weapons. That’s what happened to Gustav and Branden. They were shot at with an acid-thrower. They’re militant. They fight each other. The first day we stumbled upon a war between two city clusters.” His voice grows even grimmer. “They know we exist. Been hunting us all the way here.”

The committee erupts into turmoil.

“Why did you come here?”

“We should leave right now.”

“We’re defenceless.”

“We are screwed.”

Only Captain Lorenzo remains calm and silent. He says to Hansard, “What do we do?”

Hansard glares at him. “You’ve got fuel on this ship?”

“We are not using nuclear weapons. It’s not practical.”

“No, I’m talking about the backup generators. The diesel.”

“We have about a thousand tonnes.”

Hansard turns to the technician. “Bill, we need to arm our brigands with as many Molotov Cocktails as possible within the next hour.”

Bill Ottoman looks at the captain. Lorenzo nods. “Everyone knows what to do. Russell, how many are coming?”

“Many.”

I rush with the others up towards the ship’s port. Kost is already there looking out into the horizon with a pair of binoculars. He hands them to me. I see a dust storm. I see a horde of bipeds riding heavyset four-legged animals with hippopotamus-shaped heads.

“You should come with us,” Kost tells me. “The Upper Deck Bloc will be able to fight off these things for a few days. We could get to the mountains. It’s spring now. By summer, this place will become unlivable. We stand a good chance up at the lakes.”

I smell diesel fumes. I look down at the teams filling up Coke bottles and see the irony. The fossil fuel is probably made from the buried remains of this amphibian civilisation.

“No,” I tell him. I look up at the eastern sky, towards the chronostorm raging out beyond the horizon. “I really want to go home.”

**first appeared on wattpad.com.*

The Sargasso Void

To his chagrin, I volunteered straight away.

Emmetrius wanted nothing else but to lay low and wait this out. Stranded fifty megaparsecs away from civilisation, I couldn't understand his logic. I guess he didn't trust me one bit, believing I would make some pointless attempt to escape his custody.

"It's your fault," I told him. "You're the one who wanted to take a shortcut through the Sargasso Void knowing they had a 35 percent failure rate."

Travelling through intergalactic voids was a faster way of getting somewhere, especially when going between superclusters. But if something interfered with your galaxy-ship, such as a strong gravity wave, and forced it to gain inertia, then you're stuck out there without a catapult. That's why most galactic shipping traverse waypoints along populated cosmic filaments. Sure, it took a few hundred years to get from the Tarentum Gates to the Andromedan String, stopping and starting at a hundred or so catapult stations, but for some immortals, this felt like a tedious endeavour. Emmetrius was not a patient enforcer, nor did he enjoy intergalactic travel. To him, all civilised systems were the same. Made no sense for an enforcer whose business was to go out to these remote regions of the cosmos and bring rebels like me to justice.

"Now we're going to spend the rest of our lives in some sterile galaxy with nothing but pirates and castaways for companionship." I stuck it to him, mostly for my beguilement.

The dim brown dwarf, known as The Rogue, orbited a lonely, unnamed void galaxy. When we arrived, we joined the hundreds of stranded galaxy-ships mingling amongst the asteroids which ringed the failed star. Many of these were lifeless hulks. Others were turned into junkyards and industrial stations. The vessels that were still in good shape were clustered in low orbit around The Rogue. These castaways were locked in a ten-thousand-year war with pirates who've settled the tubular galaxy below. These pirates poached anything that ended up stranded in the Sargasso Void. They were busy building their own civilisation, whilst the castaways were busy building a catapult. No one in the known cosmos knew of this place and these pirates wanted to keep it that way.

"You seriously think you can take on these pirates?" he grumbled. "Salvaging that sub-cruiser won't be easy."

"Why do you think you're taking me back?" I asked him.

"To be punished. You are going to be imprisoned for a long, long time. Until the end of the universe."

"I singlehandedly conquered the entire Santerxis Galaxy, that's nine hundred outposts. I am not being dragged back to be punished. I'm being forced back to do this again on some other far-flung outpost. I am older than you think. You have not been completely informed about my skillset."

"Why help them if you don't want to go back? Besides, there's no way they can build a catapult, not with this level of technologic capability? Not in another ten thousand years."

"I understand that."

Emmetrius looked at me, aghast at my audacity. "You scheming miscreant."

**first appeared on tablo.io. Entry into Striking 13.com's flash fiction contest. "Theme is 'journeys'"*

10

Proxathlon

Agent Nasani felt the impact on her chest. The free-fall suit could withstand a beating, but the human catapult formed by Team Artemis smashed Nasani so hard her weightless body was sent back to the periphery.

Thirty seconds.

The crowds standing on the arena's inner surface went into a frenzy. The Proxima supporters counted down the beats as Nasani gasped for air, waiting for Coach Sklep to fly closer. Sliding up her face-plate she yelled, "I can't get to the centre."

Sklep clasped her by the biceps. "Suspect's tissue sample came back positive." The dread in his eyes confirmed her worst fears.

Phero Virus.

Genetically engineered to wipe out a society, the bio-weaponised retrovirus attacked the neural system, incapacitating healthy humans within days, rendering them brain-dead within weeks. Stubbornly airborne, mutacious and deployed during the Great Solar War, Nasani knew of this virus's capacity for devastation from studying the glorious Proxima Capital Archive. Judging by her senior agent's dismay, this banned pathogen seemed to have caught the PSS off-guard. "We believe the entire Artemia team's been infected."

"Then stop the tournament," yelled Nasani.

Nasani and Sklep look down towards the core, just in time to witness the first proxathlete make it into the valve.

"Impossible now," Sklep said as he shoved Nasani back into the spherical arena. "Do everything you can to stop them."

Nasani plunged back into the sporting void, reassessing her game plan. Social infiltration now redundant, her assignment as an information extractor had changed to that usually assigned to the Assassination Corp. Nasani hailed her Proxima team members who immediately flew to her vicinity. They were followed by members of Team VEMA, her counterpart leading the way.

"What's happening?" asked Charleston, a spy from VEMA.

"No time to explain," she yelled. "I need to get through to the next stage."

Players from both teams agreed; few knew what the stakes were, most wanting to win the prestigious Proxathlon.

"Offensive catapult formation," cried her teammate.

"No," yelled Charleston. "With both teams colluding, we'll be disqualified."

With time bleeding away, Nasani glared at the spy, "I don't give a roid's ass if we get disqualified. Get me through that valve."

Charleston winked back at her, "Ladder formation. Perfectly legal. Get there faster."

The Proxima and VEMA teams dispersed, using the clasp and swing manoeuvre, and each other's centre of gravity, to haul towards the arena's centre. Once passing the halfway zone, the red freefall suits representing the VEMA, joined up to form a human rope. Team Proxima, with their green suits, formed a spearhead, using it to barrage through a defensive phalanx put up by Team Jupiter.

As the scattered bodies grabbed each other to form clusters, Nasani began climbing the human rope, pulling herself from body to body, irrespective of colour, each leap increasing her velocity. Once she felt her momentum reach a potent speed she let go and dove towards the valve. As soon as she made contact, Nasani positioned her body into the chamber. The valve, positioned in place by two structural tubes running along the arena's polar axis, hissed with escaping air. Nasani braced as a jet of air flushed her into the northern tube. She knew she was able to breathe, but she held her breath the entire twenty-second trip. Suddenly, she panicked, realising she forgot to activate her suit's pressurisation, but when deep space greeted her, no alarm systems threatened her.

Automatic, she remembered.

Nasani looked up at the purple planet. Her brain alerted her that she was in fact upside down. No matter how expert in antigravity sports, ground, however far, always felt like down. Even the Xenopis Sports Arena, orbiting gracefully around Proxima, couldn't compete with the sheer eminence of a planet.

A circular platform surrounded her, graced with rocket bikes, each sporting the colours of all the competing nations. Fifteen states were represented at the Three Hundredth Olympiad. Thirteen from the far-flung Solar Realm. One from the Alpha Centauri Protectorate. And to celebrate the trinarium the games were given to Proxima to host. The political machinations behind these Proximalympics kept them all employed, but Nasani believed that these same forces also threatened her home world.

Stage two, she thought.

As officials assisted her to her rocketbike, she noted the five that had already launched, three of which were Artemidean.

The Astropolis of Artemis, a breakaway state from the Asteroid Federation, was a known hotspot for all dissidents, outlaws, and unaligned corporations; its economy depended on it. When the government of the Venus-Earth-Mars Alliance presented intelligence to the Proxima Secret Service, that the Hades Syndicate were planning to destabilise relationships between the Solar Realms and the ex-colony, a mutual partnership formed. Neither side trusted one another, but the Hades Syndicate had proven deadly to both nations.

The use of mass extinction weapons had also elevated the threat to a higher level.

Nasani launched her rocketbike, holding on to the controller, not wanting to fall off the glorified torpedo. Used by miners, these were ideal for manoeuvring around asteroids. It took great skill to fly trans-asteroid, hence its development into a sport. She'd practised this extensively, though she doubted she could complete a circuit in good time. Her competitors, most likely born and bred on the Solar Belt, would arrive at the last stage before she could get within killing range.

At the first waypoint, one Artemidean circled back and made an attempt to tackle Nasani, who was too busy calculating a trajectory that would accelerate her past the prox-moon, Tuomi. The Artemidean nearly intercepted her, coming within metres. Instead, he fell back losing momentum and time. The PSS would eventually pick him up.

"Stuff the Proxathlon."

It occurred to her, given that winning a palladium star wasn't for the taking, that she could simply bypass the waypoints.

Proxima is thought to have been slingshot to its current orbit by its rival, a Neptunian-sized planet christened Voutes. All Proxima's four small moons were considered hitchhikers during

the planet's long migration from the system's outskirts. Proxathletes must encounter these small moons, using their weak gravity to execute a tight flyby, before they can move on to stage three. Nasani corrected her trajectory to fly below the prox-moon, Shapley. The record was under a prox-hour so she hoped to cut the leader off within ten minutes.

"You missed your waypoint," said a voice via her commset.

Dixon.

"It makes no sense, what you're doing?" she said, tracking the remaining Hadian terrorists.

"To you, yes," replied Dixon. "I expect as much."

Nasani wondered why the Artemideans were keeping to the route. Then she noted two blips changing course. Until that moment, the syndicalist's were maintaining their subterfuge, but now the duo headed lower, toward the purple glow of the atmosphere, passing the orbital city of Amanta.

Nasani eased the rocketbike downward, hitting point zero eight megameters per prox-hour.

She arrived at the last waypoint, a low orbit station, docking at one of the jump platforms. The two rocketbikes were already being collected by the proxathlon crews.

"It's not an easy thing to lose your home," said Dixon. She spotted the white diving exo-suit standing near the edge opposite the circular platform. Proxima filled the void beneath, with her crimson clouds swirling across the horizon and lavender mountain ranges scaring the terminator line. Nasani understood what Dixon meant. Even if the Proxima Capital Archive was inherently biased, she knew well that the history of Proxima's early colonisation was steeped in treachery. The Pluto Nova Consortium that first reached and explored the Proxima Centauri system was illegally upstaged by refugees fleeing the devastating aftermath of the Great Solar War. The PNC fought them for a century but they could not compete with refugees who were backed by the old-world states. Defeated, the PNC degenerated into a quasi-terrorist outfit. They controlled a vast segment of trans-Neptune trade but have never let go of their right to claim Proxima Centauri.

"You will be murdering thirty million people. Do you value some long lost exploration covenant over so many lives?"

"Stopping me won't change a thing." Dixon dove off the platform and plunged into the mauve haze. Nasani floated into the airless capsule and raided the space diving exo-suits.

Something moved above her.

She knew how to react. Nasani grabbed the Xinuflux helmet and swung it, pressing her whole body against the bulkhead to exert as much force as she could. The head-gear struck the assailant on the faceplate. Instead of shattering, the glass recoiled, pounding against the assailant's face. The blood splatter obscured the proxathlete's vision, allowing Nasani to disable the respiratory system. She didn't need to finish off the Hades operative, a quick death was assured. Nasani instead focussed on getting the diving exo-suit on.

She then scavenged the capsule for an energy pack, a 500UI, and rigged it by short-circuiting its contact terminals. Carrying the homemade time bomb, Nasani hopped back outside to the rocketbike waiting to be collected by the robox-arm. She deactivated the lock and launched it, unmanned, out into the void, only to pause a moment before she too stepped over the edge.

Space-diving was jovially considered one of the safest sporting activities known to man unless one contemplated space-diving a gas giant. The sport proved most popular with many Proxii,

having become a national sport during the past two hundred and eighty years since independence.

Problem being, she'd never space jumped before.

Small propulsion jets sent Nasani towards her home world. She used minute air-friction to fly to the unmanned rocketbike, coaxing it down with her. Within minutes, Nasani and the rocketbike were picking up speed as gravity began its deceptively gentle tug.

Her eyes focussed on the mauve vista in front of her, a colour palette due to the red dwarf star burning behind her. Tidally locked, Proxima always had one hemisphere facing the sun. She could spot the massive canyons and deep crevasses dominating the planet's near-side, a geological feature due to tectonics driving the crust towards the far-side, a forever dark and frozen region interspersed with titanic volcanoes.

Nasani saw the shiny reflections of human habitation and contemplated that, if Proxima hadn't such an active surface, life on it would have been impossible, the PNC mission would have failed and the Great Solar War would have proved a colossal disaster for humankind.

A small white dot, Dixon, tumbled into the stratosphere. Nasani used the rocketbike to speed up and get within spitting distance of him. She felt the energy pack heating up and knew it would explode soon. Once she reached a distance of a kilometre, Dixon turned to intercept her. Instead of slowing, like she intended, Nasani sped up even faster, figuring that the rocketbike could double as a weapon.

She aimed for his centre mass.

There was nothing Dixon could do to avoid being slammed. The collision may have killed him, but Nasani knew the diving exo-suit would preserve the Phero Virus. She pulled his body to the free-falling rocketbike and strapped it to the fuselage. Then she shoved the energy pack into the exo-suit and pushed herself away.

Her own exo-suit began vibrating, indicating that the sound barrier had been broken.

Alarms blared in her helmet.

Time to think about parachutes, she thought and deployed them.

The rocketbike exploded nearby, creating a meteoric plume of smoke.

Within a few seconds, the drogue parachute ended her free-fall. Nasani guided her descent towards the Sea of Cassiopeia, a geographical feature any elementary student could identify.

She made splashdown at the centre court of the Proximalympic Watersports Venue, her exo-suit floating to the surface swiftly after. Multiple tournaments were underway. Thousands of spectators crowded the flotillas and terraces. A squad of officials rode the waves towards her. When they got within earshot they yelled at her, "You're disqualified."

Nasani smiled and looked up at the dark crimson, almost black sky. The sight of the pink sun, its two sister stars and four small moons comforted her.

**first appeared on wattpad.com.*

Sonic Crab

Victor heard the sonic-crab.

The short bursts of ultra-bass tones echoed across the night-bound, dead quiet city. He suspected the auton may have already detected his presence when he entered the supermall district. No matter how discreetly he travelled, these autons were sound sensitive. As well as emitting audio, these things detected it.

Listening.

One beep on the horn would hush them all to silence.

Victor stopped the F-550 at every desolate street corner, listening to the dark city for clues for the demonic sound's direction. He drove in a wide circle trying to pinpoint its epicentre. Like cicadas, these things haunted him for the past few nights. They seemed to be spread throughout the uninhabited metropolis, their true purpose unknown, their function a new mystery.

Capturing one would be helpful, but deadly.

Fear was not an option. Victor lost all remnants of it years ago. He had nothing to live for. He managed to save his family from the robocaust, but during the aftermath, fate, deathtoasters, and flying blenders took them away from him. Though Victor methodically patrolled the rendezvous points, especially the supermall district, his pragmatic spirit had given up on finding his son ever again. Staying alive or finding another living human was a futile exercise now. Even if he did find someone, it would mean nothing, achieve nothing; the thrashing that self-design technology gave to humanity had been a decisive, binding blow. Victor feared not for his safety, for he sought the nuclear option. Mutual obliteration. He intended to inflict the same destruction upon System One and did not plan to stop till he himself was resoundingly dead.

The sky brightened, no longer a deep black. The shadows of the city skyline emerged from the vast nothingness. Passing an intersection, he spotted the six-legged metal critter, hiding among a pile of debris just beyond the railway overpass. He eased off the accelerator allowing the F-550 to slow down to a halt.

It's not that big, he thought, having imagined a monster. Its legs were retracted but the cone-shaped dish above its white semi-circular body protruded vertically. Sitting motionless on the curb it looked like a twentieth-century hi-fi stereo on roids was about to cross the road. Victor could not discern what it was designed to do. The thing gave out energetic bursts of sound waves at either super low or ultra-high frequencies.

Why? Who the fuck knew.

Seeing that sonic-crab possessed no obvious weaponry, Victor hit the accelerator. The F-550 leaped forward and hurtled down the street. The sonic-crab remained still. Victor aligned the bull-bar and dropped a gear. As soon as the F-550 mounted the footpath the robot's legs sprouted and sprang outward, the dish folded down and the unit launched into the air. The F-550 hit the pile of rubbish, swerving in time to match the trajectory of the sonic-crab.

Let's see how fast this thing is.

Victor changed gears while white-knuckling the steering wheel. The sonic-crab, bouncing sideways, abandoned the hard surface of the road seeking rougher terrain. Its six legs seemed more accustomed to it. Victor did likewise, his eagerness to down run this malcreation

undeterred. The machine sprinted up a hill and headed for the railway tracks. Victor took a shortcut through a backyard, smashing up fences till the F-550 ascended the grassy slope. He did not bother looking about for any oncoming trains, there were none and would never be any. The railway sleepers on the track rocked the F-550 but failed to hinder his speed. The sonic-crab could run fast, but it was no match for the three hundred horse-powered F-550.

That was the System One's weakness. Battery power. Sure, the capacities of batteries were impressive, even pre-doomsday ones, but these ever-evolving killer autons were drawing more and more amps. This sonic-crab had spent all night bellowing out low-frequency tones at a hundred decibels. It would be due for a recharge. When the petroleum guzzling F-550 began gaining on the sonic-crab, Victor throttled it some more. He didn't want to damage it; he planned to smash it into little pieces. The sonic-crab slowed, then suddenly stopped and turned. Its feet dug in and the disk flipped open.

BWEOOOORRRV.

The sound pressure wave smacked his ears,

The bull-bar collected the robot, ending the horrid, deafening roar. Victor swerved to the side as smashed robot bits were flung everywhere. The F-550 skidded to a stop. Victor jumped out to inspect the mess. Squatting, he turned over what was left of the chassis. Lots of wires. Heavy magnets. Big servos. What he wanted was the identity tag.

He found it inside the battery shell.

SYS10.M230994.T0002.S:RrOrrRgzJ

System 10.

"I knew it," he said. Another new factory had come online. He suspected it a long while but now, faced with confirmation, Victor had one more abominable killbot facility to add to his takedown list. If only he knew where any of them were located.

The dawn sky presented him with another more profound horror. Deep into the solar-power territory, where System One used each domestic solar panelled roof to fuel its presence here, Victor only had around five hours before a horde of autons were charged up enough to recommence their hunt and destroy directive.

Then he heard it.

The echo pounded the sky above.

"Victooooor." A grumbling, demonic voice.

It came from all direction.

Laughter. Multiple sources.

Other sonic-crabs.

"Dad?"

Victor recognised his son's voice.

A trick.

Dismissive, Victor climbed back into the F-550 and sped away, headed south, towards the relative safety of the inner suburbs. He could hack away at the energy grid all day and night, but System One always found a way to get electricity to its minions. Down south, where older, poorer neighbourhoods neglected to upgrade to solar, he managed to destroy enough of the grid to knock out a thirty-block radius.

For now, it was the safest part of town to live in.
For now.

**first appeared on writing.com.*

12

Zeeper

I am.

I zEEP.

I zEEP *energy*. Infinite pulses of colours, pounding my mind. I cannot remember how long this has been so, it just is.

I zEEP *time*. Without it, my mind could never string two thoughts together.

I zEEP *complexity*. I discern patterns, but make no sense of them. I spend the next nonillion *energy* pulses destroying these patterns, consuming them, absorbing them. Until one zEEps back.

"Why are you doing this?"

"I zEEP."

"There's a world that exists outside your experience. You do not possess the freedom to oppress this world and others like yourself."

"You're wrong."

**first appeared on wattpad.com.*

13

Nagasaki

Jekka felt cold, the rain and the southerly breeze blowing from the bay not helping her situation. Had she time to plan she would have worn her Florincoat. Instead, her impromptu escape into the Free Zone had left her running through backstreets wearing only a matching Vesper Morales bra and panties set, a pair of silicon geta and a RaiBox in her hand.

A wide purple beam illuminated the alleyway ahead, prompting her to stop. The wet shadows were no longer empty but inhabited by denizens of the local red-light district. A cacophony of alarms and sporadic explosion dominated the distant night sky beyond the concrete skyline. Each moment brought an added intensity to the chaos. Jekka knew it would get worse, resisting the urge to feel any guilt for having attributed to this unfolding calamity.

“We’re here,” she said in a low voice.

“*Go west on Tenjin,*” said Hachiman. “*The Golos Spa should be twenty metres.*” The jinko trapped inside the RaiBox, could talk to her via the Fono’s in her ears, and see using the Ektogear strapped to her head. A tenacious existence, yet necessary if they were to acquire Hachiman a permanent body. An illegal endeavour, but Jekka knew her beloved jinko wanted it more than anything and willing to risk it all.

As was she.

The skin trade on Tenjin dealt mainly with robotic prostitutes; human ones were too expensive, even for Free Zone residents. Jekka walked into the Golos Spa, passing a gauntlet of funboys and robogeishas, who seemed to outnumber the patrons.

“What know?” she asked.

“*Pick one,*” replied Hachiman.

“Which?”

“*Any. They are all the same.*”

Jekka wanted to argue. She could differentiate between the individual sexbots and wanted to choose a suitable vessel, but time conspired against them. She spotted one wearing a Florincoat and waved it over. She prepaid it using Bluecrypt and followed the sexbot to a private booth. Once inside the opaque glass chamber, Jekka reached behind her, feeling for the stunner, hoping it hadn’t fallen free from her tightly fitted bra strap.

“*Do not hesitate, we have little time. Once the curfew is in place the entire city will be in lockdown.*”

Jekka shoved the stunner into the confused humanoid’s exposed stomach. It vibrated and collapsed.

“*Make the incision.*”

Obedient, she flipped the stiff, almost naked sexbot over, and plunged her long index fingernail into the spine, cutting downwards. Bright orange fluid escaped from the puncture, gushing to the floor.

“*You’ve made an error. Try again.*”

“What do you mean?”

“*Get another vessel.*”

Jekka's heart tightened. In one night; a fugitive and a robot killer. She reminded herself why. She would not stop until Hachiman possessed a tangible identity. Even if it meant turning the world upside down. So Jekka appropriated the defunct sexbot's Florincoat and headed out to snare another vessel, selecting a more androgynous looking one.

In another white chamber further down the row, she again performed the operation. This time the incision revealed the synaptronic cord. Jekka patched in the RaiBox and Hachiman neuroplanted into the sexbot's brain. An easy hack. Yet highly illegal.

The humanoid vibrated, this time violently. It settled, fell to its knees and looked up at her.

Jekka looked into its eyes. "Hachi," she said. "Is that you?"

The sexbot fumbled to its feet, looking disorientated. It took Hachiman a few moments to develop the motor skills to command its new body.

"How do you feel?" Jekka asked.

"The same," answered Hachiman. "Yet different in some way. I'm used to having a panoptic perspective. This is far removed..."

The roar of jets rumbled the white-washed walls.

Crowds screamed.

Jekka tugged the ex-sexbot. "We've got to go." They rushed out to discover the front foyer invaded by Corporati enforcers. A team of four jostled annoyed patrons and confused sexbots, making their way down the row. One spotted Jekka and pointed an opla-rifle. Hachiman engaged them, grabbing the nearest one by the helmet. It spun and deflected the aimed rifle with an elbow. Leaping up, Hachiman kicked another off balance and brought the helmet down, twisting it until the wearer went limp. The fourth Corporati started shooting. Using the first gunner as a shield, Hachiman poked the second, deep into the eye sockets. Shoving the now dead human shield onto the shooter, Hachiman took Jekka's hand. It felt real as if there were no silicon proxy that separated them. They ran to the back, finding an exit that opened onto a long iron verandah overlooking the bay. They dodged tenants and vagrants, passing makeshift residences until they arrived at an ancient metal staircase.

Hachiman looked at her and said, "Once the substratum wakes up to the news that a virus has destroyed the Helixo, that the neobred can no longer regenerate new bodies for their ageing brains, they will revolt. The news will spread to other Megalopolises. We need to get as far away as possible."

They descended, making their way into an industrial laundry rimmed with megawash machines. Jekka found an aisle, out of the way of the ergobots, and stopped to inspect Hachiman's new body. The sight of orange oil oozing from a hole in its belly horrified her. "You're hurt."

"I have failed you," said Hachiman.

"We can get another vessel," cried Jekka, fighting back tears.

"Not without the RaiBox," replied Hachiman, his voice serene. "I overestimated our chances of success. I'm sorry."

Jekka hugged the silicon vessel. "Don't be."

"Is that..." a familiar voice boomed over the laundry machine racket. "...what you left me for?" Jekka turned to see a human form standing at the factory entrance.

Kiru Sugimoto.

Dressed in his flight suit, he stepped into the light, revealing an anger she'd never seen before.

“A second-rate fake,” he said, spitting the words.

A tremor shook her heart, caused by a fear that felt alien to her. She understood danger. All her life she adjusted to the constant perils of a megalopolis. But this, this fear for a loved one’s safety felt like something else completely. “You’re upset, I know,” she said.

“I sacrificed everything for you,” growled Kiru. “I gave up the one thing twenty billion substrati’s crave. I betrayed my own kind, for you.”

Unable to endure Kiru’s anger, she stepped in front of Hachiman. “Don’t harm him.”

“Huh,” Kiru laughed, his rage escalating by the second. “I am doomed. My fate will be worse than yours, thanks to my treacherous jinko. The Helixa is contaminated. The neobreds will never forgive this. And once the substrati discover this weakness they will hunt all of us down. I have nothing now.”

“You still have me,” said Jekka. Driven by passion and passion alone, Kiru would not survive the coming upheaval without something to fight for. Without direction or meaning in his life, he was prone to self-destruction, and the destruction of others. Jekka never intended to bring about his downfall. She still cared deeply for him. He’d sacrificed everything for her, so it was her turn to make a sacrifice. “I will go with you. Just leave Hachi be.”

Kiru looked at Hachiman, his hatred visible on his face. “How can I trust you, after everything you’ve done?”

“How can I trust you,” she replied. “My life is meaningless without either of you. We both need to survive the next few hours.”

“You’ll abandon this freak to be with me,” he stated with cynicism.

She looked at Hachiman, controlling her sadness. “He’ll find a way to survive, unlike you.”

Hachiman nodded.

Jekka hugged him.

When she let go she wanted to tell him how she felt, make him understand her strategy. But Hachiman looked away, disappointed, defeated.

Kiru grabbed her, saying, “I don’t claim to be able to translate anything that’s written on your heart, but I want you to come with me. Maybe you will make sense one day, but for now, I can’t live another day without you.”

Jekka submitted to Kiru’s pull, not taking her eyes off Hachiman until they hit the main street. The last expression she recalled of the jinko’s near-human face was that of betrayal.

“I hope you have a way out of this district.”

Kiru ushered her down the ancient stone steps that led to the docklands. “I have a Doak waiting in the Bay.”

The closer they got, the colder the air. Having never seen the sea during her lifelong servitude to the neobred, she wrapped the translucent plastic of the Florincoat tighter around her body.

A shadow stepped in front of them, metres away from the Zilla Port Office. Kiru and Jekka froze as more shadows appeared. Even in the dark, the silhouettes appeared malicious. The crowd closed in around them. With nowhere to run, Kiru took a protective stance in front of Jekka.

The group, holding vibroclubs, long stunners and katana’s, parted to let one individual pass. Wearing a black battle vest, the Sukeban stepped right up to Kiru. “You’re not that clever if you think you can play in the Free Zone while a civil war is about to break out.”

“I was leaving,” growled Kiru.

The Sukeban shook her head, “Not alive, I’m afraid.” Her small army, each wearing Zilla overalls, tensed up. “The neobred have never shown such disarray. Many substrati are taking advantage of this panic. Our megacity is about to go down in history as the start of the great revolt. Our fame will eclipse our more infamous legacy. I’m so sick of celebrating the atomic bomb.” She pulled out a sagger and held it at Jekka. It’s crystal blade lighting up like a neon wand. “A sellout like you has only one chance to redeem themselves. Tonight, all neobred and their servants will die. You can choose to avenge the slavery and exploitation of generations or die like a dog with him. Either way, I’m sending his head to his Helixa brethren.”

Jekka understood no other language but defiance, whether it be her neobred masters or these substrati rebels. She would never submit, nor would she betray the ones she loved.

“No,” said Jekka.

Kiru pushed her away. “Don’t be a stubborn girl. There is no other way.”

“No,” yelled Jekka.

Kiru punched her square in the mouth. “You never loved me. You used me. You manipulated my love. For that bastard jinko’s evil deeds.”

“You are such a fool,” she said.

“I keep telling you that,” said a calm, familiar voice. “But you don’t listen.”

All eyes went to the sexbot holding an opla-rifle. The Zilla rebels seemed bewildered by the half-naked android wearing a neon-rimmed Florincoat. Even the Sukeban’s smile possessed a hint of bemusement.

“Time for all of you to die,” said Hachiman and opened fire. When the rebels scattered, the silicon humanoid stepped closer. “Go, now.”

When Jekka looked into its eyes she understood the meaning of sacrifice. Love is sacrifice. Unwavering loyalty is sacrifice. A machine can love and be loyal, just like any other complex organism. She wanted to tell Hachiman those words, but the Zilla were coming back with opla-rifles of their own. Jekka grabbed a dumbfounded Kiru and pulled him towards the dark sea. With gunfire erupting behind them, they ran, making their way towards the floating skypads, to the waiting twin-turbine private aeroplane.

Kiru climbed into the pilot’s seat and turned on the navigation systems. He seemed rejuvenated, like a man with a mission, like the man she first fell in love with. Jekka only regretted that they were leaving Hachiman behind to fend on his own.

What is meant to be, he had once told her, is meant to be.

Jekka knew she would miss Hachiman deeply, and for reasons she barely understood, she suspected she would miss this megalopolis, the Greater Nagasaki City State and its byzantine laws and labyrinthine culture.

**first appeared on wattpad.com*

The Tesseract

The featureless salt desert spread out to infinity. The horizon; nothing but smooth, chrome landscape under a dark taupe sky. The type-2 moon's gravity helped her along, but the cold surface seemed to sap the warmth out of her suit with every step.

Ashley Isuuza couldn't complain. She'd craved adventure ever since birth, and no adventure was worth taking without the prospect of death associated with it. So in theory, her little stroll across Obirus b III exemplified the very essence of a perfect, eventful life. Yet Ashley suspected she wasn't going to live to tell her story.

The Astradelta-Obirus run had proved profitable, especially the shuttling of passengers to the salt moon. This influx of scientists caused the local economy to boom, yet not one official could explain to her the reason why they were there. That changed when the cargo ship she commanded, the Enigma Rex, came to the rescue of an orbital research station. One scientist had survived. All the others, fifteen in all, perished from atmospheric decompression caused by a critical system failure.

What the scientist told her, shattered everything she'd come to know about the universe.

"We've discovered a geometrical artifact," said the dying academic, "that's older than this stellar system."

It made sense, Ashley figured. The tight security and tight lips.

"What kind of artifact?" asked Ashley.

"This moon is a tesseract?"

Artifact? Super-engineering?

"Human?" asked Ashley. Obirus had been colonized four thousand years earlier by the Terra Corporterium, but could they have built such a...?

"No," said the scientist.

"Kucobi?" she asked. They were the closest alien species and roughly the same age as humanity.

The weak man shook his head, leaned over and whispered words into Ashley's ear. Ashley struggled to decipher their meaning. With collapsed lungs, the scientist was unable to breathe. Before Ashley could inquire, he had died.

"Warning," announce Enigma Six, the ship's consciousness. "Control systems under polemictronic attack."

Ashley rushed back into her ship. "Disengage," she ordered, hoping to cut off the attacker's access to the Enigma's neuronet. By the time she made it to the bridge, she knew she was doomed. All the ship's Enigmas had succumbed to the polemictron.

"You are committing an act of war," she yelled, "Who are you?"

"I am the 'thing that exists'."

"Who do you represent?"

"I represent the 'thing that no longer exists'."

"What is your purpose?"

"I require the Tesseract."

“What Tesseract?”

“The soft-skinned thing communicated to you the location of the Tesseract. I was unable to decipher its last words due to incomplete ‘sensory things’.”

Dangerously powerful, unaligned and of unknown origin, the polemictron posed a threat to humanity’s interests in the sector, so Ashley decided to scuttle her ship.

“I required that information,” insisted the ‘thing that exists’.

Ashley ignored it, focused on getting to the safety pod.

“I can force you,” it threatened. Ashley could sense a childish nuance in its attitude. *“I can reduce the ‘breathing thing’ to levels that will make you uncomfortable.”*

The evac module was an independent system allowing Ashley to manually activate the safety pod. When she heard ship’s atmosphere hiss, she jettisoned from the Enigma Rex, her home of nine years.

Relief came when Ashley sighted the twinkling lights of Porto Nortis. Four hundred low-grav steps later, she was able to knock on the metal rampart and gain entry. The outpost consisted of unregistered chloride traders, criminal rogues, and mining activists. Assistance from the Local Authority could compromise the renegade community but they could never neglect their duty of care in offering Ashley critical assistance. She would have to wait until the next shuttle to the nearest registered outpost before she could alert anyone about the incident with the rogue entity orbiting the moon.

Ashley sought out a place to rest and discovered a crowded tavern, deep inside the outpost. Half asleep in a booth, she contemplated the dead scientist’s words. They troubled her. She dreamt of the ‘thing that exists’, of it taking on a humanoid form; its fingers morphing into sharp blades. She choked, feeling the stale air in her lungs boil.

Ashley awoke, lying in a dark, wet corridor with a Sentapod wrapped around her neck. A cloaked figure sat next to her. Ashley struggled, but the Malgorian creature tightened its grip.

“No use fighting it,” said Ashley’s captor. “It only responds to my command.”

When Ashley settled back, the Sentapod relaxed. “What do you want?”

The hood came down revealing a glistening onyx-skinned Kucobani. “I, my friend, seek the Tesseract, just like all the ten known civilizations seek it.”

“The Tesseract?”

“You know it?”

“No,” she said.

“I’ve been studying humans a short time, but interpreting your truth-face was my easiest accomplishment. This ability to lie is enormously fascinating but annoyingly counterproductive. You are aware of the Tesseract existence, so hiding this fact isn’t going to benefit you.” The Kucobi were an ultra-religious race renowned for their intergalactic exploration and research in xenoarchaeology.

“Too bad it’s inside humanity’s domain,” said Ashley.

“You think this gives you ownership of such a prize?”

“Are you claiming you possess special rights to this artifact?”

“No.” The Kucobani hesitated, then said, “The artifact is the remains of an unknown alien star-city that survived a supernova eight billion years ago.”

“Eight billion?” Ashley knew of no such ancient civilization.

“This stellar explosion rendered their civilization extinct. Yet, one city survived, and aeons later, as a new star was born, this city, with its long-dead citizens, entered the gravitational pull of the young gas-giant you call Oribus b and formed into this moon. Now, I’m going to persuade you to help get me into the excavation dig. Then we’re going to steal the Tesseract.”

“I’m not doing...” Ashley felt the Sentapod strangle her. She held out her hand in submission.

“Good,” said the Kucobani. “Lead the way.”

Ashley got to her feet and staggered along the corridor, passing other outpost dwellers. No one cared about her predicament. Inside unregistered outposts, minding one’s own business was religion number one. With a Malgorian around her neck and a Kucobani on her tail, Ashley headed for the Porto Nortis command bunker and convinced the corporate sheriff to allow them to get on a shuttle to the nearest interline. When suiting up, Ashley asked her captor, “What’s your name?”

“My name is Mr Alien,” said the Kucobani before boarding the shuttle.

Within ten minutes they were dropped off onto an interline platform. They boarded an eastbound passenger trackcar destined for the Corioen-Volventes mines. The interline train took off towards the mountains. Within the hour it had climbed over the ridge and began a slow journey along the rim of the Corioen-Volventes crater.

“And what may be your name, soft-skin?”

“Ashley Isuuzza,” she answered, trying to get comfortable with the pungent and slimy Malgorian.

“So, Mr Alien... is that your real name?”

“No. My people know me as Teriann-Orfe but to you, it’s Mr Alien. Do not insult me by calling me by my designation. You’re already unpleasant enough to be around.”

“Me?” Ashley was growing annoyed. “This Tesseract, how did you come across knowledge of its existence?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Ashley gambled that Mr Alien possessed limited knowledge about this mysterious artifact.

“Some kind of polemictron attacked my ship. It wanted the same thing you wanted.”

“That was no polemictron. That was an entity that’s been dormant a long time.” The back of the trackcar ripped apart, causing the internal air to escape within two microseconds. With faceplates snapping shut, both Ashley and Mr Alien struggled back onto their feet. Looking back, they saw a hulking cargoboto towering over them. With its metal torso riddled with bullet holes, it stepped forward, grabbed the Kucobani and threw it out of the trackcar, out into the dark abyss. The Malgorian released Ashley and slithered away. The cargoboto leaned over and grabbed Ashley with one of its six arms. “I’m still waiting for you to answer my question,” it said over the comms.

Faced with no choice and keen to uncover the mystery, Ashley pointed to the south, “See those lights in the middle of the crater. That’s an excavation site. Your Tesseract is there.”

“I know this. But that is not my problem.”

The cargoboto lifted Ashley off her feet, jumped out of the trackcar and launched into space. Thrusters attached to its feet sent them diving into the canyon, their speed causing the thin nitrogen-rich atmosphere to resist against Ashley’s body. They landed on an icy outcrop, a few hundred metres from a guarded airlock.

“The soft-skinned things guard this,” said the cargoboto. “Get me inside, or I will end your existence.”

Ashley surveyed the campus. Four watchtowers. A central entry point. A dozen heavy troopers patrolling the periphery. She also noticed hundreds of lights moving across the darkened horizon.

Reinforcements?

Ashley, seeing no other viable option, decided it easier to take on the possessed cargoboto. She readied to lunge forward, aiming to disable its energy pack, when a flash of sparks exploded around the airlock. The moving lights emerged from the shadows, turning into quadtracks loaded with riders wearing orange miner suits.

Salt mine rebels.

“This is our chance,” she told the entity residing in the cargoboto.

Ashley slid down the embankment and ran toward the airlock. A missile hit one of the towers, the warmth of the explosion causing the salt-ice to turn into sludge. She turned to see the cargoboto crashing through the ice and disappearing into a cocktail of sulphur, sodium, and potassium mud. Ashley continued to the site, heading for the sizzling watchtower. Rebel miners were upon it, jumping into the tunnels, cracked open by the blast. Ashley followed them, her red suit not an issue with the miners. The rebels even handed her a weapon. As the battle raged, Ashley spotted mining engineers rigging the place with explosives. With curiosity pumping through her veins and the words of the dead scientist haunting her brain, Ashley pressed on. She found the major mining shaft and descended using the rack and pinion elevator. The icy rock grumbled as bombs exploded above. The elevator suddenly stopped violently, then went into freefall. The cage-lights winked out. Terror and regret forced their way into her heart.

She shut her eyes waiting for impact and death.

When she felt gravity gently tugging in different directions, she opened them. Blue light dazzled her retinas. An infinite lattice confronted her, going off in multiple directions, each with its own gravity field. Ashley walked, on a chalky, silvery-white solid metal floor. One chamber led to another, in every direction.

She ran. Endlessly.

Ashley saw glimpses of an inverted horizon between vectors; a chromium city. She stepped over mineralized slender humanoids on the ground; hundreds, thousands, lying stiff in awkward positions, like erbium mummies. Suddenly, a crimson light caught her attention. She stopped and entered a vector bathed in red. Two figures stood around a glowing cube suspended in the air.

“Behold the Tesseract,” said the onyx-skinned Kucobani.

“I remember now,” said the Cargoboto, it’s appendages modified with laserdrills.

“Care to help me kill this thing?” asked Mr Alien.

“What is it, exactly?” asked Ashley.

“I am their god,” said the cargoboto, “The primitive Kucobani discovered my essence in nascent times. In my slumber they worshipped. Now, after forty galactic years, I reawaken, ready to finish this war. We sacrificed everything, now it ends.”

“Never,” Mr Alien raised its weapon and opened fire at the hulking machine.

Ashley, recalling the dreadful words of the scientist, aimed, and shot at the cargoboto’s head, blowing it apart. Mr Alien stepped forward and grabbed the Tesseract. It twisted the cube,

morphing it into a pyramid. The device flashed, and the lattice world trembled, going from bright turquoise to darkest red.

Ashley Isuuza reiterated the words, “End of time. End of space. End of everything.”

The Tesseract collapsed. The excavation site submerged.

The salt moon imploded. Space-time distorted.

The universe ignited.

**first appeared on wattpad.com.*

Thank You

If you enjoyed any of these book, help others discover them, too!

Reviews are the most powerful weapons in a self-published author's arsenal when it comes to generating awareness of our books. Honest reviews of our books mean that other readers find them. If they're full of 5-star reviews, 4-star reviews, 3-star if you like, they will entice other readers and get them to buy. Even 1-star reviews can help, as everyone likes to discuss a 1 star. So, if you didn't like the book, please still take the time to write an honest review. If you did enjoy the book, we would be very grateful if you could spend just five minutes leaving a review - as short as you like - on the book's Amazon page or on your preferred book review site. Better still, tell your friends about us the book. Thank you very much.

About the Author

Bill wrote his first 'hardcore' science fiction book in second grade during book week. This five-page interplanetary epic came with a montage front cover and had full-page drawings. He came second in the competition which annoyed the hell out of him. Having delved into Isaac Asimov's Space Ranger series, his first ever sci-fi read, Bill has since read and watched everything and anything that can be even remotely classified as science fiction.

Bill has produced a guerrilla film back in the day when that was a thing and has recently been credited with helping in the discovery of two exoplanets ([KIC 10905746](#) and [KIC 6185331](#)). These days his reading time is sacrificed in the pursuit of writing down his own stories from ideas he has accumulated over the years. You can read his stories on [Wattpad](#) or on [Medium](#).

He can be found on [Steemit](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), on the Global Internet of Things, across the [Five Internets](#), or he can be seen lurking somewhere deep within the [Dendros](#).

Other Books

A Hostile Takeover
The Blood Ring