

MORNING STAR

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[2]

It just happened. xxxxx

Our ship strayed from its course, hit the atmosphere of the planet and was torn up. We were in suspended animation, hibernating in pods over the nine-month journey home. Most of the pods did not eject when the ship broke up. xxxxxxxxhgfeufwafyugdewxxxxxx Three of us are alive.

xxxxfghuirtgdfxxxxxxxx The chances of anyone surviving are so xxxxxmall as to be impossible. If the ship had not collided with this planet, we should have floated on through space forever. That is the usual fate of off-course ships. It could be said that we are lucky. Those of us that survived.

The cause of ship error has not been established. xxxxhjgreswfihouihij

Breathable atmosphere [untested]

Suit malfunctioning.

No Astral Beacon. No recognisable star patterns. xxxxxxxguygreowrrthguriaasdosktijg. We don't know where we are.

xx

I was third to revive, so I became No. 3. The primary function allotted to me is to record events. All data is potentially useful, has the possibility to become information: a tool, a weapon. No.1 is nominally in control. He suggested we look for other survivors and we agreed.

Grass steppe stretches in every direction. The final descent of the pod had cut a scar into the grass that stretched for miles. We followed it back and searched in all directions: nothing. At her at them and more at world, who up  
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We returned to the pod. Silence. No Voices providing advice. Pod systems not functioning. We must be a long way from home to have no relay either from the Astral Beacon or from the Voices. Receivers are planted at birth, and even if we could not be pinpointed by the Galactic Mesh, the broadcast of the Astral Beacon was meant to be heard everywhere: a symbol of Mother's power resonating through space. I had never before been outside its range. Unable to read our co-ordinates, and without the guidance of the Voices, ee eventually had to talk, real time and acoustically.

Only two options merited discussion:

1. Stay with the pod
2. Leave it behind.

1. Should we assume [or hope] that there are other survivors further away, possibly with better equipment, who will come looking for us? Possibly, too, there maybe a rescue mission sent out when our ship did not return.

xxxxxxxxxjhgsjkkkdfihbhvsxbxxxxxxxxxx. XXXXXXXXXXXXjhknkjlNxxxxxx How likely this is, we don't know. Staying with the pod at least provides us with shelter. There has been good weather so far, but it cannot be assumed.

2. How long can we afford to wait? Forever? We have no natural resources, and no shelter besides the pod. Our suits do not have sufficient hibernation inducts to send us back into a coma to wait for rescue. We will run out of other supplies. My suit has warned me that I only have a week's worth of neural drugs left. It is slowly reducing my dosage in order to minimise the effects of coming off completely. We will soon have to breathe the air and drink the water. Staying by the pod, we will be doing nothing as our means of survival swiftly diminish. We cannot remain as we are indefinitely. Xxx At some point, we will have to move on.

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Simple choice as it seems, without the Voices to guide us, we feel uninformed, lacking adequate data, and our eventual decisiooon will be quite possibly wrong. It weighs heavily on all of usss/// xxxxxxf

Sleep is becoming more difficult. At night I am beginning to dream.

[3]

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...  
xxxxxxx] night, we lit a fire; it was something to look at ccccccvvvvvxyuwsg,,,,,,,,,

[No.1] “fffdsiyugsreejkkawhfffszdd it’s the best chance we have of being rescued.”

[No.2] “No one is going to rescue us.”

[No.1] “You don’t know that.”

Silence

[No.1 again] “You don’t know that.”

[No.2] “We don’t know where we are. We don’t know how long we were in hibernation. There’s no Astral Beacon. Maybe that’s because there’s no Astral Beacon at all. Maybe the Empire’s over. It could have finished thousands of years ago and we’d never know. You have to face that rescue is not going to happen.”

[No.1] “And if you’re right, how does it help us? What should we do that we’re not doing?”

[No.2] “We should do something. Not just wait. Not like we can’t do anything ourselves.”

[No.1] “What do you suggest?”

Silence. xxxxxxxxxxxsaefffffff

[No.2, eventually] “Anything. Move. Try to find what is here. You know, we might have to just live here, like there’s no way back, no empire to go back to...”

[No.1] “We will not countermand the basic survival orders. The Empire has survived thousands of years; it lives. We will do what we have to doooooo xxxxxx.”

Xggggggggggsos;reegserrppphg,,,,,oiejgsregg659nnnnn//

[No.2] “What we have to do? This planet could be anything. Anything. There are no Voices. We don’t have any orders. We aren’t going to get any. We don’t have any *superiors*. We don’t have to be robots. We don’t have to do what we’ve always done.”

[No.1] “We shall do what Protocol tells us to do. We do what we have to. We’ll establish a base. And wait.”

[No.2] “Protocol? Fuck protocol! Nobody is going to come. We’re all on our own. Don’t you understand that we can do anything?”

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No.1 pulled his gun on No.2, accusing him of treason. It is the only working gun we have. No.2 rescinded his remarks and I agreed to expurgate the record.

That wouldn’t happen back in the System. No.2 would be dead by now.

Ddddddddddxxxxxx

Tomorrow, we have agreed to leave the pod. If we do not, it seems one of us may end up killing the others.

Xxxxxthre6u809uyertyhedjrthhh

[4]

Fixxxxxed the voice log.

Gg

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Shgdoijthrt6665mlkk’jf;lgkfk

We have yet to see any animal life.

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Ccccccc

Ccx

X

[5]

The dreamsssss///f. I don't know if it is me. There had always been Voicesx, data constantly fed through to me, informing every move. Now this awwwfuking silence. But in the dreams I still seem to have no control. Xxxx. I do what I have to do.

That doesn't make it any better.

[6]

Every day the wind blows more spores up into streaming lines above the steppes. I watch them pass in huge clouds like swarming insectxxxxxxx///f

I am beginning to get pains in my stomach. Withdrawal. My legs hurt from walking, travelling over a plain that never seems to change. We haven't found anything that isn't the same. Xxxxddddddxxxxxxxxwhen I close my eyes I geett visions of collapsing buildings, ruined streets, bodies tumbled on top of one another. One after another these pictures bleed forward from my brainxf///, real as touching until I open my eyes again and they pale to ghosts.

The further we walk, the more the promise of finding anything seems to recede. Days of endless monotony, drugs slowly wearing off, the landscape dreamlike and my dreams more solid. vvvvvvdghhhhhhhhhhsaddddbbbbbbbbehind this grass steppe bombs still seem to fall, detonations like chains of blossom scattered through cities, ribbons of blood arcing from exit wounds. I feel familiar sensations rippling beneath my skin, electric lines of adrenalin and anticipation as my body remembers.

And the wind blows. And there is silence.

[7]

No. 1 seems to be acting strangely. Xx He shakes his head and mutters to himself. I have not mentioned my hallucinations, but am beginning to suspect they affect us all. My own visions leave me exxxxxxhausted, unable to speak and barely f///managing to keep note of the things about me.

No. 1 is responsible for the direction we take. He who continually pauses, hitting his head, mummmmmbling, not breaking our silence. We have foundnothing and it is possible he has been leading us in circles. My own suit, damaged and trying to preserve energy, has no magnetic bearings. We each haave no way of knowing if the others can tell the direction we are heading in. We could be walking repeatedly past the same points, chasing our ghosts.

I do not talk to No.2 about this: I do not trust him.

Xxx

Fdroijogggggggredsoirjoesgredgerssssz///

At night I try not to sleep. Always ythe same dreams. In these dreams I kill repeatedly, informed by Voices. These Voices repeatedly tell me that anarchy and deviation cannot be tolerated, that only an iron grip could prevent the human race from slithering into obliteration. Any alternative would bring destruction down on us all. That we had to ensure survival at any cost.

Every night is the same, only growing worse and seeming more real, blotting out the sound of the wind, punching a hole through this thin foreground and pullllling me bback into brrutal scenes that might be memory and might be fantasy. Xx I try to stay awake, watching the stars, but I cannot help being sucked through into dream.

I dream a thousand scenes, all different and yet the same.

///f

[8]

Fixxed the voice log. Again. Lightheaded. Sleep is not sleep is not restful. Uncontrolled thoughts in strange directions. Stomach pains. Hallucinations. Am hoping it will pass. No more drug doses.

xx

Clouds massed all of yyyyyyyesterday and towards nightfall the storm broke. We watched lightening play with a fickle hand across the fields, fires left in its wake, sound booming out in waves. It began to rain, at first just a few drops hissing into the grass, but building swiftly into a torrent. I could see almost nothing, stumbling forward with rain battering my visor, the deep gloom shot through with the bright reports of lightning. xx We pushed onwards, desperate for any kind of shelter. As night fell, with the storm still raging, we realised there was no point in us stopping. We may find some shelter otherwise we had lost nothing by pressing on.

We found the rock sometime before dawn.

We maaaade it out from a long way off; something massy and still in a landscape in which everything shifted: grass, wind, clouds, the lines of lightning stabbing downwards. Looming uneasily in my visor's infra red and brought into stark relief by the lightning, it appeared to be huge and [maybe] crudely dressed, possibly unnatural. No. 1 headed towards it without conferring, running wildly, falling over. I debated briefly with No.2 about the dangers or otherwise, shouting over the thundewww8fdghr, and decided to follow. No. 1 as he came closer removed his helmet and flung it away into the grass xx shouting something as he did so, his hair plastered against his forehead, his eyes glittering, his mouth working but any words I couldn't hear over the storm.

No helmet. You never remove your helmet, not unless.

Slowly, slowly we followed him, watching him as he circled the rock. Zzzdfihsugreds;gojdd. Wind and rain would sometimes obliterate our view, but it was always out there, ahead of us, coming closer. As we drew near we realised there were evenly spaced holes upon one face. Nine square holes, arrayed in a three by three square, with three of the holes containing what appeared to be little stones. I felt a chill sense of watching intelligence at work, alien logic, something deliberately and precisely formed and yet unintelligible. xx No. 1 reached out and removed one of these stones from its hole, holding it close in front of his eyes, stroking it with his fingers before carefully replacing it.

Another thing you do not do.

Lightening rained down about us, oblivious.

Up until this point, we had seen no evidence of animal life. And now suddenly we were confronted with these possible hints of sentience. I stared at the rock, the perfect square of the holes, the little stones. The more I stared, the more they seemed to lose their shapelessness and become almost familiar, like staring back at myself.

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It seemed logical to stop. After days of nothing, this could provide us with the answers to at least some of our dilemmas. If perhaps there were people, a lost colony maybe. Anything. 34553345//f I huddled at the base of the rock. No.2 joined me.

No. 1 I think prowled round the rock, talking to himself. I closed my eyes and fell into dreams.

By the morning, he was dead.

[9]

There wasn't much of No. 1 left. He seemed to have been dissected with care and skill. Cubes of meat and armour lay tumbled in the grass. No. 2 had removed his helmet and was kneeling, examining the remainzzz.

I had woken from sleep, or possibly a trance, it was difficult to tell. The pictures, the sounds and smells as I had watched myself act had seemed real. I woke to find my senses dull, less receptive. This light, this landscape seemed like something out of dreams, insubstantial and incomplete. Even the pain in my stomach seemed to have receded ////ffx

I asked No. 2 what had happened, but he didn't seem to know. Had he slept? Why had he removed his helmet? He seemed incapable of responding.

“vghki;lllhh huil hiiuihfvdc yuiii78 the air, it’s very sweet. It’s beautiful.”

I asked him again why he had removed his helmet. “We’re here, not there,” he replied, staring at me quizzically.

I kneeled down next to him to examine the remnants of the dead man. The dicing of his body had been very precise; the muscle and fat retained its shape, the neat straight lines cutting through bone and ligament and metal. Although I suspected No. 2 was responsible, I saw no way he could have performed such an operation.

No.1’s gun lay nearby, carelessly discarded in the grass. I took hold of it, trying to feign nonchalance. No.2 noticed, but did not mention it. He merely stared at me, a strange expression on his naked face.

I began circling the stone warily. There was no doubt in my mind that it's shaping must have been guided by some sentient force. The angularity, the indecipherable intent, the nine perfectly square holes. I stopped. There were only two stones in the holes.

“When,” I asked him, “you removed the stone last night, did you put it back?”

“Did I move it?” he looked at me suspiciously. “I don't remember.”

“You pulled one out,” I suddenly couldn’t remember who it had been: him, No. 1 or myself, “to take a look. I thought you put it back, but there are only two stones there now.”

He shook his head. “That was No.1.”

“So he took the stone, and now he’s dead?”

“Yes.”

“What are you saying? That the *stone* killed him?”

“I don’t know. What are you saying? That I did?”

I had taken the gun. My mistrust was evident enough. I didn’t answer.

“Why don’t you take your helmet off so I can see you?”

“We don’t know that it’s safe. We don't know anything about this world.”

“I don't know anything about you. xxxxxx And you’re hiding. What is that, some kind of power thing? Why?”

“I’m not hiding. It’s you who took your helmet off. In breach of every rule...”

“Is it? I don’t remember. Does that even matter here?” He frowned. “It’s not like this is the Empire.”

“We are the Empire.”

“So that’s why you have taken the gun? Are you going to kill me too?”

“Me? But - but I didn't kill No. 1.”

“Then,” he said, glaring at me intently, “who did?”

[10]

xx

We sat by the rock, face to face because neither trusted the other, caught in its gravity, entranced by the diced cubes of meat strewn nearby. No. 2 - technically in charge now - talked a lot. Most of it didn't make sense. Some of it did.

“Shouldn't there be flies or something? Something should want that meat. There should be flies... Or something.”

“Not every ecosystem is the same.”

“Every other place we have ever been. Anything we’ve ever killed. That’s what life does. It consumes its own.” He looked pointedly at the remains of No.1. “It feeds off itself. Any death shouldn’t go begging. The wind will carry the smell for miles.” He screwed up his face to sniff, a luxury denied me. My suit's olfactory sensors had been shut down as non-essential services. “Something should be heading this way. Something.”

“Maybe that’s just not how the things here work.” I nodded at the stone.

“Things? What things? Haven't you noticed? There’s no fucking things at all. No animals.”

It was true. Nothing in the sky, nothing underfoot in the long grass. No flies, no rodents. No creatures in the soil. No animals of any sort. I nodded at the rock again. “Somebody did that. And somebody took the stone.”

“Well, yeah, and what if they aren't alive? What if it’s only us?”

I stared towards the bloody cubes of meat/////ff “Then one of us did that.”

He nodded, and looked away.

[11]

It was possible he had done it without being aware of what he did. It was possible that I had. I found this second option unlikely. I hadn't taken off my helmet. I wasn't talking to myself. When I did speak, I made sense.

According to martial law, if I had good reason to suspect he had murdered a senior officer, I should kill him. The principles we lived under were meant to be applied anywhere, in any situation. Our culture survived by this rigid and universal adherence to the word of Mother.

I haven't enough justification, I told myself. And if I killed him, then what? Then it would be just myself, here alone. And if he killed me...?

There seemed to be no direct way to address the issue. So we sat and stared as twilight fell over us, the air hazy, luminescent with pollen. A darkness poured up slowly into the sky.

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“After all,” said No. 2 in what may have been an admission of guilt, “after so many, why are we worrying about one more?”

“He was your commanding officer.”

“Our commanding officer. Our.”

“Okay. Our. But he hadn't done anything wrong.”

“Are you mad?”

“He hadn't hurt you. He only did what he was told to. We all did.”

“What? We killed. Even though nobody ever did anything to threaten us. They hadn't hurt us...”

“What are you saying? That you did kill him?”

He looked at me tiredly. “I told you already: I didn't kill him. It just seems funny that after everything it should even matter. One more man. One more life. A killer. Somebody who didn't even have his own mind”

Ffffsapzzufeawe//f

“He did what he had to do. We all did.”

“And now we don’t. Or are we just robots? Aren’t we capable of anything else?”

“We have to hold together. Obey the same laws, do the right thing. How do you think things work? One stream of traffic goes one way, one goes the other. It’s harmony, people doing what they have to do so that everything works the best it can for everyone.”

“We might as well be dead. That’s fucking bullshit.”

“How else are we meant to live?”

He didn’t answer for a while. “Haven’t your drugs run out yet? Haven’t you started to remember?”

“I dream of things,” I said. “Whether they happened...”

He laughed. “Well, I remember. And what I remember aren’t dreams. They really happened. We were monsters. We were meant to set an example, meant to stop anyone ever supporting another insurrection. But people aren’t going to be stopped like that. They do it anyway. They believe whatever, however stupid. It’s in their nature. It’s in our nature. So what are we trying to hold together, eh, if it’s in our nature to be disparate? Are we trying to hold together something that we’re not capable of being? Something that’s in fact impossible? And if we are, the question begs why?”

“Because that’s also a thing we do. We try to for order, harmony. Look at music.”

“But what if the whole basis of that was a lie? What if it wasn’t ever a harmony? Of everyone, we should know...”

I struggled to recall the Voices in my head, remembering the words over the otherwise senseless pictures of slaughter. Men, women and children laying in heaps - heretics, deviants, dragging the finely-balanced course of the human race off kilter, towards chaos. I had always acted with the conviction that I was right. “We did what we did,” I recited slowly, “because we were holding an empire together. We were following Mother’s will, her plan for the salvation of this human race. Without everyone living correctly we would disintegrate. You cut out the bad to rescue the good... There can be no other possible explanation for what we did. Surely no one would just slaughter... It would be senseless...”

He laughed again. “It sounds so very honourable, doesn’t it? Do you still hear the Voices?”

“No.”

“Nor do I.”

There could be, I thought, any kind of bacteria. A filo-virus maybe, a hostile organism borne on this wind. Why were there no animals, but recognised plant life? If we dug here, by this monolith, would we find bones?

A part of me had already answered. But No. 2 was speaking again. “xxxxxghjressra and don't you think,” he was asking, “don't you think we are monsters? Completely grotesque, to do what we did.”

“We did what we were told. We were good soldiers.”

“We massacred thousands on the basis of a justification we could never prove ourselves.”

“Even if it was wrong, which I could dispute, we were drugged. It wasn't entirely of our own volition.”

“So what? Does that absolve you of any blame?”

“*They* put Voices in our heads. We were sent to do the killing but *they* had control of it.”

“Do you think that matters to the people we killed? Do you think people are going to look at us and say that? We aren't any less guilty. The act is done. You can't unmake that.

They. I had detected the accusation in my own voice. A hidden sect interpreting the will of mother: declaring war, changing the peace, defining deviance. They were the Voices who spoke to us; they pulled our strings and we danced. We did what we were told.

They told us we were saving the human race./

And because of what we had done, everything was meant to be better. More safe. More cohesive. Less... Cancerous.

I had never questioned their wisdom. Had never been afforded the luxury. They spoke for Mother, and there was no doubting her.

[12]

I almost felt I was waiting for events to conclude themselves. I didn't have any power to act. We couldn't just walk away and leave the crime of No. 1's death unresolved. Nor could we leave the one hint of sentient life we had been given. But equally, nor could we usefully do anything.

I walked round and round the stone, looking for anything in the long grass. A large plant had unfurled huge fleshy leaves. I had not noticed it before but it was possible, I suppose, that it had sprung up overnight. There was nothing else. I made up my mind twenty times to start digging, but never did. I was afraid.

No. 2 sat with his back against the rock, staring at a patch of space and following it as if it moved. He talked almost continually - not to me, but it was impossible not to listen. There was nothing else apart from the wind; just his voice, going on and on. I tried to understand, hoping it would give me some clue to the murder.

“You’re right, of course, its animals. It’s what we do. Everything that moves kills, whether it’s grass we kill or other animals. It’s the price for unbounded physical liberty. Something's gotta die.

“It’s not our fault, it’s just the way we are. It’s just what we have to do to survive. Where’s the wrong in that - unless you believe in some sort of higher moral order? And then what, considering we exist anyway? What higher moral authority would allow us to exist, and then also allow wiping us all out? Wouldn't you then be worse than us, we who only kill because we have to? What sort of moral order is that?”

He cocked his head. “What? Just die? Why - because you demand it? Well, that doesn’t make you any better than me. It makes you worse, in fact. You *want* me to die, whereas I’m only living. I don’t feel anything towards you.

“Of course I've killed. I’ve got to eat, haven’t I? And those other people, well, they’re only worth the same as me. Aren’t they?”

“Aren’t they?”

“Kill me but don’t claim any moral authority over it. It would only be for your own self-interested ends. Of course I don’t believe in a soul. How could I? We’re not even sentient. We crawl around doing what we are told - having to do what we are told, RNA and DNA and whatever else, separate streams of traffic to sxxxop the chaos, stand in line, everything fair or the use threat of violence to make it so. *Which can’t be fair*. I can accept what I’ve done. Nothing else is worth any more value than myself. It isn’t worth less either, it’s all matter, it’s all equal, but that’s what life has always been: a struggle, even handed and amoral in everything but sheer power. Anyone's point of view is purely theirs and purely meaningless, no more important than anything else...”

“So what,” I tried to interrupt, his eyes staring into space as his voice spilled on and on and on. I didn’t want any of his words to be true. “What would you have us do?”

His gaze snapped in to focus on my face. He seemed terrified, exultant. He looked at me with contempt. “Do?” he snarled at me. “Why, just what we’re going to.”

The sun was setting. I cradled the gun in my arms, lay down like a dog in the grass and went to sleep.

[13]

My dreams became increasingly coherent.

Oooooone in particular seemed to recur, each time with more detail, each time feeling less like something I could wake from.

We had been sent on a mission to one of the inner worlds. A cult had broken out among a section of the population: a god or prophet proclaimed, miracles performed. A Republic was created recognising nothing but the laws of the new religion. Negotiations with the rest of the Empire soon broke down.

The planet contained valuable resources and could not be destroyed. The infrastructure and means of production needed to be captured intact so that valuable mining and manufacturing would not be hindered. This meant no deployment of large-scale weapons. We would have to wipe out the cult floor by floor, building by building, city by city. x

In my dream I was climbing up the lower floors of a city block. Bodies lay everywhere. Shrapnel had torn through skin and left bloody canyons, bone splintered into flesh, severed limbs waving from strange angles. A child sat holding her head together, blood sliding down the bare skin of her arms, eyes dull with incomprehensible horror. I crossed the wreckage of a market place, spilled fruit like treasure scattered among the dust, flowers of broken glass lining the ground, a looped state broadcast accompanied by grandiose music and a relentless babble of promises. I must have paused too long: sudden gunfire erupted about me, men and women burst out from their hiding places behind shop fronts and market stalls, bodies spattered in the blood of their siblings, the filth on their cheeks knived by tears, and I watched them as they rushed towards me, reduced down to animal selves, a pain that pushed them on in hopeless vengeance. They managed to hit me with a wild spray of fire, munitions rocking my armour, dull impacts shuddering through my body. I had to take a step back, suit adjusting my drug levels to neutralise the pain, my foot accidentally planted upon a still body, a geography of laceration twisted beneath me. I stared down as it convulsed in fresh pain, mucus and blood and fatty clear fluid slipping out, it looked up with a dumb appeal, a desperate reaching out across the infinite space between us, charred claw of a hand pushed upwards.

I shot him first. Then two of the people rushing towards me. One was waving her bare fists, as if the rage that twisted her could pulp me. She crumpled hopelessly, far away, her stomach burst by the bullets I fired, entrails splattering out. As she died, she looked at them as if they didn't belong to her, as if they had no consequence. Then I turned to the others, each shot seeming to take an age, the minutae of the world around me teeming and changing, motes of dust, heaved breath, the tinyyyyyy muscular twitches in the faces of those who ran towards me, my own balance as I turned and fired, banal thoughts

drifting through my brain, calm voices telling me where to turn, when, when to fire. It took forever but was over in a few breaths, the spasm of bodies choking out their last, the corpses caught by the first bombardment in the act of buying fruit, talking to neighbours, reading broadcast boards in a script I could not decipher but which doubtless curled elegantly about familiar thoughts.

I had lingered too long. The Voices told me to move on. A lot remained to be done.

[14]

The life of a single human being has no value. Nobody's does. Those with power deal with ordinary lives in cavalier fashion. We are an infinite commodity; singularly, we don't matter.

If you have nothing left to live for, death at least can make you brave. I admired these people. They had hurled themselves at our vehicles, bombs strapped to them, not in hope of victory but as some kind of compensation. We could kill them, but we could never take from them that final act of desperate humanity. Self-sacrifice. I think their courage gave them an honour we lacked. To us, this was what we were told to do. To them, this had become everything.

Everything that was left to them.

[15]

Wind. Blowing on and on. After a while I seemed to hear voices in it. Singing. Messages half on the edge of understanding.

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xxxxx

The grass whispered. Blue sky hummed. The wind spoke.

I sat up and looked around. The same nothing. Another large plant seemed to have grown up overnight, extending large fleshy leaves about itself. I got up and began to walk around the rock, watching. Such vivid dreams, like placing my hand through the fabric of this world and finding it covered in the blood of dreams, having crossed into that other world.

Vision blurring and then righting again. Agonising cramps in my stomach. Standing still and not seeing anything as the air shimmered about me. Cold sweat not corrected by my suit. I looked up.

One more of the stones had been removed from the holes.

That left only one.

Next to the putrefying meat of No. 1 lay fresh remains, neatly dissected as before, cooling but not yet cold.

[16]

I inspected the meat again. There was little else I could meaningfully do.

The red bunch of muscle, once taut but now sagging slightly out of line; sheaths of fat; loose strings of sinew coiled in the flesh like parasitic worms. Neatly sliced bone, coagulating marrow, the lines of nerves, blood oozed from arteries, capillaries. Parts cupped in chunks of armour; I turned one over carefully, contents slopping out all over the grass. Standard issue armour. Which meant it had to be No. 2 or...

Or someone else had survived.

That, I thought, would be logical. Someone hiding from us. Someone there alone, picking us off one by one while the others slept. Someone perhaps from an earlier mission which had also crashed here. Or someone from another pod, or who had lain unseen when we searched for survivors.

Which still left the motive open. This place, I thought, doubling up with pain again. No drugs, no Voices, no Astral Beacon. In essence, away from Mother and seemingly unable to act correctly, the logical move would be to kill us all before we could betray the Empire, in thought more than deed. I wondered why I hadn't considered this before.

A patriot. Someone who had grasped the situation completely. It seemed to me more plausible than the idea that I had committed these murders without my own knowledge. That I had managed to kill my two seniors - no, that I had it even felt the desire to do this and then had dissected them so neatly.

With what?

"It's more likely," I said out loud, into the wind, which hissed and slithered in tongues across the grass.

For all my constant dreams of murder. Vivid scenes, more real than recollection, less dream than the ground below and the sky above and the meat in front of me. All those years not aware of what I was doing, guided by Voices through patterns of terrible logic, doing what I had to do. Hands twitching as I slept, killing thousands.

xx “it’s more likely,” I couldn’t tell if I had spoken out loud or not. If it was my voice. It sounded female. It hung in the air afterwards, a resonance of something that might not have been. “After all, if you had killed him, surely it must have been you who took the second stone from the rock. Surely it would still be here. Surely you could still find it.”

I started to doubt myself. “I seem to have killed so many. Maybe that’s just how it happens: I don’t remember. Maybe the Voices come back at night and maybe I just don’t remember.” 0

“xxxxxxxYou think you’re thee one doing this? Why?”

“Maybe I am. No. I don’t know. Nothing ever seems to make sense. It was easy when I was told what to do.”

“Search for the stone.” It was definitely another voice. Female. “Maybe that way everything will become more clear.”

[17]

She stood in the meadow watching me. She was slight, with black hair like a flag. She seemed concerned for me, and followed me at a little distance, but she didn’t speak to me again.

I did as she suggested. If I’m the only one left, I thought, what did it matter? Hunting through the grass, following my own footprints round and round. All the forensic evidence of myself, my balance, my movements, my method of searching, the areas I missed in a pattern of repeated mistakes. Going round and round in widening circles. If it had been me, if I had done it, what would I find anyway? The evidence of the other me, on the dark side of the rock, crouching like a wolf and hiding where I could never see?

What if it was the Voices? What if they were back, guiding me, whispering inside my skull, telling me the right thing to do? Perhaps I shouldn’t look.

And if I couldn’t find the stone? If it had gone? How far was I willing to search before I would possibly believe that? How far could a man travel in one night, I wondered. And could I know without doing it, without the possession that may have led me to run -

If I didn’t find it, it would not prove that I had not killed him. And yet if I found it...

Almost seeing it, an animal bounding through moonlit silver grasses, blood like black metal smeared across it.

A fantasist image. I shook my head, carried on furring through the long grass. I had time - or else I would be dead. I had time for nothing else. I searched as the sun dropped.

Searching through myself, the patterns of myself, the widening circles. Some reason why I shouldn't take off my helmet but the thought of the Voices, the fear of possession, plunged back out of the dream I had found myself in...

A sudden urge ripping through my nerves and I could bear it no longer, I pulled the seal and twisted, hearing the rush of real air, all the dangers and diseases and joys, pulled off the helmet and flung it in the grass as if it would become the stone I was searching for. Odour assaulted me - sweet smell of flowers, ripe grasslands, wind carrying distant promises. Fresh air scything against my cheeks, sudden movements and shifts, rushes of sensation into my nostrils and ears, the blast of unfiltered white noise, cold teeth, pollen nudging the back of my throat, unimagined tiny sounds hushing in from all directions.

I sat down and cried.

[18]

I slept that night with my head bared to the stars, listening to the siren call of radiation howling through space, the infinitesimal light bathing my body, the endless sighing darkness.

The Astral Beacon called me back through dreams, voices muttering in my head. I watched worlds explode, cities drown, attack ships drop like gruesome insect plagues across the shining faces of planets. We killed them all: eldritch telepaths worshipped as gods, anti-literate theistic agricultural colonies, intellectual elites, artists, factory planets, insurrectionaries. Endless threats to stability and order, to our children, our welfare, our commerce. We used self-guiding homing weapons to destroy cheap tenements on impoverished worlds, the value of life within set at nothing. Having started, it became impossible to judge the foe from the innocent: they will dress the same, talk the same way, have the same needs and desires. But one will kill, the other will walk away. If in doubt, we killed everybody. Killed whole streets begging for mercy, communities stripped of food and water, of the basic human necessities, of dignity. Needing only the money spent on keeping them down.

How else is the race going to survive, if we don't provide order? Will it regulate itself? I still couldn't be sure. Any experiment in freedom is always doomed to failure. We can't live in the world of our dreams.

I still don't think we were entirely wrong//

[19]

I woke up cold.

What if I was the murderer? What if every night I transformed, out of my own control again?

Irreversible neural patterns always leading me back to the same point, creating for me the world I had always known. Even here.

Even here.

The meat lay as before, slowly putrefying, strange tumours of fungal material erupting from the remains of No. 1. I shivered. It shouldn't have to come to this. We could have done anything.

The black-haired woman stepped out from behind the light of the sun, wreathed by the dawn. I felt – I don't know. I maybe felt glad of her as she picked her way through the grass towards me, hair streaminngn out in the wind. She wore bright silks that appeared woven from sun fragments, shimmering with ferocious early morning red.

“But you never can do anything,” she said, elegantly seating herself opposite me. Legs crossed, head slightly bowed. “You are what you are, and some things you cannot change. Even ignoring what has been programmed into you - and you are a poor, abused thing - just look at what you actually are. What your body has to do. You steal to survive, from other animals, from plants. You destroy. It's born into you. It's a part of you so fundamental it cannot be removed.”

“I can't help that.”

“Neither can a virus. It just does what it does.”

“I never wanted it to be this way. That's just the way of things.”

She smiled slightly at that and inclined her head. “It's sad, don't you think?”

“I never thought. There were Voices that told me all of the answers.”

“You believed them?”

“Maybe they were right. I don't know enough to say. We did what we were told. We did it because we were told it was right and we believed them. There are drugs. Our suits keep our systems balanced with drugs. You don't particularly question... Anything.”

“And now?”

I watched the grass whispering. I nodded at the slabs of meat. “Is that freedom?”

“It was their own free will.”

I shrugged. "Death is still death."

"Not necessarily."

"I don't believe in any sort of afterwards."

"We all understand at some level that there can be more than just...this."

Do we, though? I have no memory of myself before I became...this. I was designed, born, raised for the task I performed. I only know anything else through what I have seen within other people: the fear, fighting for food or clean water, struggling to gain mastery over the self, over life, the squalid background and the squalid dwelling, one of billions, chewing paan and sleeping in a rickshaw, waiting on the money of a casual lift to bring food or medicine or maybe enough drink to get sprawling drunk in a gutter by sunrise, seduced by easy dreams of the stories on the screen, images melting with desire, a dumb pain of constantly never having enough of anything, not understanding what happened and what went wrong. One man once said to me "I have a wife and children"; simple pride as well as fear and desperation and defiance, as if there was nothing I could do to stop him. I shot him; the hole became something in myself, the rumours of some other way that I would never be able to confirm.

"That would demand," I said to her, "imposing a false morality. Asserting that there is something better not just for you but for everybody else. Something that we should all live by, some means of imposing that." I spread my hands. "Here I am. That's what I have done. Now you're doing the very same; promising things you know that you can't deliver."

"You have to have faith. Nothing... nothing works otherwise. Nothing at all."

"I had faith in Mother, in the Empire. And now look."

"And now you are part of a different reality," she said softly. "Nothing is so absolute. What are you doing here – building an Empire? Making this world into you?"

"It was an accident."

"And now what? What else is left?"

I didn't answer.

"We offer you more than what you have. We promise, if you like. But you can't cross over unless it is done of free will."

I felt cold. Staring at her features. She was beautiful, oddly familiar, like a figure from a dream. "You mean that the other two, they *wanted* to die?"

“They passed through. They wanted to join us.”

To join them. I stared at the two large, fleshy plants, feeling sick. The one stone; pebble or soul, hard man-material, a baleful bald eye among the empty shelves. “Bodies return to meat,” I said, kneeling down by the remains of my two companions. Dark purples, clotted reds, blanched yellow scum, white tubers erupting out of flesh, blackened bone edges and slops of cranial material. “Brains die, no oxygen, no movement of blood, no more electrical patterns, all those pictures of memory and imagination. It all goes; we’re nothing else. There’s nothing to transfer, no gate for our souls or whatever to cross. We’re ashes, rotting earth.”

I could not believe her, could not believe the inference she had made. *That they wanted me to join them.* She was lying. Had to be. I felt my stomach contract and had to fight not to be sick.

She got up and circled the rock, slowly, deep in thought. Her hair and her bright silks blew out in the wind, brushing the rough slab of stone. Her eyes did not leave the rough shaping of its surface. A slight trace of her remained behind in the grass, a barely perceptible circle. The single pebble glared at me, index of a mysterious crime I was now committing alone.

She nodded at the two plants. “What we offer is *peace*. Do you know that? Not moving, not fighting, not struggling. Our hunger is satiated every day by the sun, the rain. It has been this way for...*millennia*. We don’t count; I don’t know. We can love you. After all you have been through. What else can I do? You can only trust me or...”

I looked around me and understood the small, slightly embarrassed gesture she made.

“There must have been animals here.”

“Maybe. Once.”

“They built it?”

She laughed, very beautiful, the sound spreading out in ripples. “Why do you need to know?”

“Because it is linked to...” I thought of it here, the one mystery against the plains of bobbing grass, the sky, the storms. “It’s linked to everything. Did they pass through it? Did they build it as a trap, or have you just used it as one?”

“If there is a trap, you bring it with you. You didn’t have to stop.”

“And if we hadn’t?”

She looked at me, her eyes filled with a deep and complex tragedy. “You did.”

We did. It was indisputable; indisputably animal. I got up and walked. She followed carefully. She was, perhaps, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, clothed in morning hope. The grass swayed. Trails of spores caught the light and turned silver, drifting in streams towards the horizon. The sky burned overhead, deep and endless. I realised I was crying.

“I never wanted this. The killing, the Voices. Being here. I never wanted it.”

She still wore a sorrowful expression. “We know. It isn't your fault. We know that. But we can love you anyway.”

“I've never before been asked to make a choice. Just as for the first time I'm free you ask me to give it up. Did you kill all the animals? What happened? It had to be an animal that built this.”

She didn't answer. Possibly, she couldn't. Possibly, despite her words, she didn't understand what had happened, all that time ago.

Perhaps the animals left, two by two, thinking they went to a better place and leaving behind a world perfected by their absence.

“And I'm really the last? The other two,” looking at the plants, “have joined you?”

“Yes.”

“And it isn't a trick?”

She shook her head, smiling. “There is no trick.”

[20]

And if I refuse her?

I want to believe her. She waits here now for my final decision, staring at me through black eyes like moons. Like she knows.

All I have, all I can refuse her, is my consent. I have nothing else to keep, nothing else to give. I look up towards the unknown stars of home, hidden by the daytime sky.

A point of light, and nothing more.

And I imagine opening my arms, letting it come. Feeling my body ripped apart, a terrible force unleashed from the rock, skin separating, bone sliced, blood sluicing out in waves, white pain melting everything. Wondering if there is anything beyond.

